

# Very jolly and really wild: Development in Victoria English intensifiers

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This paper quantitatively examines variable usage of intensifiers—adverbs that give force or emphasis—in a corpus of Victoria English. In this pilot study, intensifier tokens from speakers born between 1879 and 1990 were collected and analyzed. The data comprises of 510 adjectival heads, as in *It was a really interesting conversation* (CL41m/1970), of which 44.3 per cent were intensified. Overall distributions are presented for *very*, *really*, *pretty*, *quite*, and *so*. For the two most frequent intensifiers, *very* and *really*, multivariate analyses show that *very* is favored by the oldest speakers, while *really* shows an increase in preference among the middle aged and youngest speakers. The fact that, over time, *really* shows greater diffusion across semantic adjective types and syntactic structures seems to point at progression in its delexicalization process, confirming previous findings for this lexical intensifier (e.g. Ito & Tagliamonte, 2003).

*Keywords: intensifiers; delexicalization; very; really; Victoria English*

## 1 Introduction

Variationist sociolinguistic attention to the intensifier system in vernacular speech is increasing, as it is suggested that the fastest and most interesting developments in semantic change take place with intensifiers (Ito & Tagliamonte, 2003, p. 257; Peters, 1994, p. 269). Intensifiers are often described as degree words that scale a quality up (Bolinger, 1972, p. 17). As such, they are essential for “the social and emotional expression of speakers” (Ito & Tagliamonte, 2003, p. 258). Intensifying linguistic elements owe their capacity for rapid change to the fact that, in this part of grammar, meanings are in continuous development (Stoffel, 1901, p. 2), which is partly due to the speaker’s desire to increase emphasis or expressivity in order “to caption the attention of their audience” (Peters, 1994, p. 271). Examining speakers’ use of intensifiers over time thus provides valuable insights into processes of language and change within the speech community.

## 2 Theoretical background

### 2.1 Intensifiers

Previous literature describes different but oftentimes overlapping definitions for the linguistic category of intensifiers. Bolinger (1972, p. 17) describes an intensifier as an adverb of degree, or “any device that scales a quality, whether up or down or somewhere between the two”. However, within the category of degree words, a common distinction is typically made between intensifiers and downtoners. Whereas intensifiers scale a quality up, downtoners place the meaning of the clause element they modify at the lower end of the scale (Bolinger, 1972, p. 17). As a result, downtoners diminish or minimize the meaning of the modified adjective (Nevalainen & Rissanen, 2002, p. 360). The current study is concerned with intensifiers (1a-b) and excludes downtoners (1c-d) from the discussion.<sup>1</sup>

- (1) a. And you’re like I’m *pretty* sure that didn’t happen. (CA21f/1990)
- b. He just laid it over me and he gave me a *damn* good licking. (Joseph Douglas Hunter/1881)
- c. It’s also just *kind of* terrifying to write a letter in German. (VM23m/1988)
- d. Your bed had to be made every day and so I grew up in a *fairly* strict household. (GK52m/1959)

Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech, and Svartvik (1985, p. 591) describe an overarching category of *amplifiers*, and distinguish within this category *boosters*, placing an adjective higher on a scale (2a) from *maximizers*, denoting the upper end of a scale (2b).

- (2) a. We had some *very* famous single scullers in our day too. (WLB Young/1873)
- b. The buildings are *completely* restored so it’ll feel like you’re in like Paris or somewhere. (VM23m/1988)

Consistent with previous variationist literature (Ito & Tagliamonte, 2003; Tagliamonte, 2008; D’Arcy, 2015), the current project regards both boosters and maximizers as intensifiers, as they both scale up the meaning of an adjective.

### 2.2 Delexicalization

In informal conversation, speakers use intensifiers to express their evaluative and emotional remarks on events in order to capture and hold the attention of their audience (Peters, 1994, p. 271). McCarthy and Carter (2004, p. 15) argue that

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<sup>1</sup> Examples were collected from the Diachronic Corpus of Victoria English (DCVE) and the Synchronic Corpus of Victoria English (SCVE); see §3.1 for details.

intensification, which can also function to (over)emphasize or exaggerate, is a fundamental characteristic of informal conversation. Labov (1985, p. 43) defines the intensity signaled by degree adverbs as “the emotional expression or social orientation toward the linguistic proposition” of the speaker (Labov, 1985, p. 43). Intensifier development is a continuous, ongoing process, in which new forms are constantly needed, because the older words do not adequately express speakers’ ideas (Stoffel, 1901, p. 2). If a certain intensifier is used for a longer time by more and more speakers, it becomes too familiar to speakers and they feel that the strength of the intensifying element decreases. Speakers will then look for other intensifying words that have a stronger meaning and are therefore more able to express their emotions (Ito & Tagliamonte, 2003, p. 258). The constant development of degree words can therefore be explained by the speaker’s need to “achieve expressivity” (Lorenz, 2002, p. 143). Over time, intensifiers become less original and new incoming forms that are better capable of expressing speakers’ emotions will be preferred (González-Díaz, 2008, p. 221).

The development of expressive newcomers in the intensifier system, as lexical forms develop adverbial properties, can be understood in terms of delexicalization, a common process of grammaticalization (Ito & Tagliamonte, 2003, p. 261). Partington (1993, p. 183) describes delexicalization as “the reduction of the independent lexical content of a word, or group of words, so that it comes to fulfil a particular function but has no meaning apart from this to contribute to the phrase in which it occurs”. Thus, through this process, the original meaning of the word weakens as speakers use it increasingly frequently as a linguistic element that marks intensification (Tagliamonte & Roberts, 2005).

Delexicalization generally occurs in four steps. The process starts out with a word with ‘semantic context’. Oftentimes, this lexical item has a modal use, reporting speakers’ opinion about the truth conditions and sincerity of their words, like *really* in (3a) (Ito & Tagliamonte, 2003, p. 261; Partington, 1993, p. 181). The original meaning of the word may weaken over time, so that the word is also used for emphasis while still maintaining its modal use, such as the sentence adverb in (3b) (Ito & Tagliamonte, 2003, p. 261). Finally, when the lexical item is used increasingly frequently in the attributive position, in the last step it comes to be used as an adverb that conveys intensification of predicate adjectives, having lost its original lexical meaning and context (Ito & Tagliamonte, 2003, p. 261), (3c).

- (3) a. *Really*, I could hear her thinking. (Partington, 1993:182)  
 b. Aw, don’t rub it in. Ah fell awfu’. I do *really*. (Partington, 1993:182)  
 c. When the horsetail is *really* hot, wrap it up... (Partington, 1993:182)

Partington (1993, p. 182) explains that delexicalization is “a synchronic as well as a diachronic phenomenon”. Thus, the three stages of delexicalization are attestable by the same speaker in the same conversation, reflecting the rapid and dynamic process of delexicalization. Furthermore, lexical variability within a speaker is a signal of language change: when different lexical intensifiers are found in the same

stretch of discourse, this reflects “the coexistence of older and newer layers in the process” (Ito & Tagliamonte, 2003, p. 261).

Lorenz (2002, p. 144) explains that the more delexicalized an intensifier becomes, the less it will be limited by lexical restrictions, and thus the more it will increase in frequency. The occurrence of an intensifier is restricted by the syntactic structure in which the modified adjective is embedded and the semantic type of the modified adjective (Ito & Tagliamonte, 2003, p. 261). Following this, the more delexicalized an intensifier becomes, the more it will collocate with a wider spread of semantic adjective types and in various syntactic structures. The linguistic predictors of semantic type and syntactic function thus serve as indicators of the range in which speakers use a particular intensifier: if it occurs with a wide range of semantic adjective categories and syntactic types, it is versatile and generally accepted, while less accepted intensifiers only collocate with a limited number of syntactic structures and adjectival categories.

From the moment that a lexical item has undergone delexicalization and takes on intensifying readings, its expressivity weakens over time and it will have to compete with other established as well as incoming forms in the intensifier system. In this competition, an intensifier can be iterated (e.g. *very very* tall) or co-occur with another intensifier (e.g. *very really* careful), resulting in increased expressivity or hyperboles (Méndez-Naya, 2017, p. 252).<sup>2</sup> These two instances of double intensification can be viewed as manifestations of the linguistic process of accretion. In this process, combinations of seemingly redundant linguistic elements compensate for the loss of expressivity of individual lexical items (Méndez-Naya, 2017, p. 268). While iteration has emphasis as its main function, co-occurrence also plays a role in grammaticalization and is “particularly salient in periods of instability when the competition of intensifiers is at its height” (Méndez-Naya, 2017, p. 249). Thus, iteration and co-occurrence are related to different processes of change within the intensifier system. An example of one such change in meaning within the English intensifier system is the grammaticalization of the lexical items in the co-occurrence *all the whole*, which preceded and supported the development of the noun-intensifier *whole* (Ghesquière, 2014, p. 165). Méndez-Naya (2017, p. 268) concludes that accretion manifested by co-occurrence plays an important role in the development of new grammatical structures in and the attraction of new lexical forms to the intensifier system.

### 2.3 Social factors correlating with intensifier use

Previous studies have demonstrated various correlations of social variables such as gender and age with both the frequency of intensification and the frequency of individual forms. Intensifier use has long been associated with women (Stoffel, 1901, p. 101; Jespersen, 1922, p. 249). Stoffel (1901, p. 101) calls expressions such as *It is so lovely* “purely feminine expressions” and claims that *so* was typical for

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<sup>2</sup> While well-established intensifiers such as *very* are commonly used in iterations (e.g. *very very happy*), repetition of less grammaticalized intensifiers (e.g. *?crazily crazily happy*) appears unacceptable (Méndez-Naya, 2017, p. 252).

women's language. Stoffel (1901, p. 101) argues that women "are notoriously fond of hyperbole" and that, as a result, it was women who developed the frequent use of intensifiers. However, intensifier use is also thought to correlate with women's tendency to discuss emotional topics, in which intensifiers serve to increase expressivity (Tagliamonte & Roberts, 2005, p. 284). Jespersen (1922, p. 249) goes so far as to suggest that women's preference for hyperbole makes them leaders of the change of intensifier forms over time. Furthermore, the need for hyperbole and intensification is often associated with teenagers and young speakers (Paradis, 2000, p. 157; Tagliamonte, 2008, p. 362).

Tagliamonte and Roberts (2005, p. 297) confirm that *so* is characteristic of female speech, but they argue that the degree of emotionality of the dialogue is a critical factor, as the males in the study used more *so* when discussing emotional topics as well. Furthermore, Tagliamonte (2008, p. 383) observes that in Toronto, Canada, despite the highly diffused and delexicalized character of *very*, this intensifier is subject to a sex difference among the oldest speakers in the corpus, with older female speakers using it more frequently than the males. However, over time *very* goes through a rather steep decline in both sexes and has to make way for incoming intensifier forms (Tagliamonte, 2008, p. 383). For *really*, sex differences fluctuate for over time, with women using *really* much more frequently than men, particular in the youngest age groups. While these findings support the view that women are often leading in intensifier change, the results for incoming forms in the youngest age group seem to contradict this hypothesis. Among younger speakers, a remarkably clear pattern is visible whereby young males prefer *pretty* over *so* and are thus leading in its use (Tagliamonte, 2008, p. 388).

#### 2.4 Development of intensifiers in North American English

Tagliamonte (2008, p. 364) argues that rapid changes, which develop over a relatively short period, should leave their trace in the language of a speech community. The way to tap into those changes is by viewing them from the apparent time construct. Apparent time studies observe speakers of different ages at the same time and interpret findings as temporal, which enables researchers to make inferences about linguistic behaviors of different age groups (Chambers, 2003, p. 212). If, for example, an intensifier form is used more frequently by younger speakers than by older speakers, the apparent time construct allows us to hypothesize that this form is a newcomer in the intensifier system (Tagliamonte, 2008, p. 364). Thus, analyzing intensification in Victoria English from an apparent time perspective also allows us to infer the trajectories of the individual lexical forms within the system of intensification of the speech community.

Previous apparent time studies have documented developmental trajectories of specific intensifiers. The most recurrent finding is that *very*, having widespread collocations and being highly delexicalized (Partington, 1993, p. 183), is used most by older speakers, while among younger speakers it has become less popular and is making way for other forms. For example, Tagliamonte (2008, p. 385) observes a strong upward trajectory of *really*. Lorenz (2002, p. 154) explains that in order

for *really* to reach the same frequencies of use as *very*, it will have to progress in the delexicalization process by losing its modal meaning of ‘truth’ and by merely functioning as an intensifier. Only then will *really* become a prototypical intensifier that is used in a greater variety of semantic and syntactic contexts (Lorenz, 2002, p. 154). For Toronto English, Tagliamonte (2008, p. 373) observes “advanced delexicalization” for *really*, with no frequency differences between attributive and predicative structures among the youngest speakers. Regarding semantic type, Tagliamonte (2008, p. 380) finds that while the oldest speakers use *really* for a limited number of semantic types, among the youngest speakers *really* collocates with more semantic categories.

Beside the rapidly increasing frequencies of *really* in Toronto English, Tagliamonte (2008) observes a similar but less extreme upwards trajectory for *so* and *pretty*. Tagliamonte (2008, p. 379) finds that *so* was more frequent in everyday American English at the beginning of the twenty first century than it was at the beginning of the twentieth century. Tagliamonte and Roberts (2005, p. 296) describe the same trend that they found in an intensifier analysis of the television show *Friends*, claiming that if language in the real world is the same as the language in *Friends*, “*so* is the new favorite in American English, surpassing the once primary intensifier *really* in North America”. Regarding the spread of *so* across semantic adjective types, Tagliamonte (2008, p. 379) observes that while the oldest speakers limited their use of *so* to only four of the seven adjective types, the youngest speakers use *so* across all adjective types.

Although *pretty* can function as a downtoner in some contexts and varieties (see Nevalainen & Rissanen, 2002); Biber, Johansson, Leech, Conrad, Finegan, & Quirk, 1999), Tagliamonte (2008, p. 370) regards *pretty* as scaling the meaning of the adjective up in Toronto English, be it with less force than other intensifiers. For the Toronto community, results show a steep increase of *pretty* from oldest to youngest speakers, reflecting the rapid change. Regarding the degree of delexicalization of *pretty* in the community, Tagliamonte (2008, p. 374) observes “an advanced profile” among all age groups, with *pretty* occurring in attributive structures as well as in predicative structures across all speaker generations.

The following hypotheses are put forward by Ito and Tagliamonte (2003, p. 262) and are tested here:

- i Correlation of intensifiers with particular linguistic contexts can be related with their degree of delexicalization.
- ii Correlation of intensifiers with social factors tap into the social evaluation of the particular intensifier within the community.
- iii Examination of I and II may enable us to track the interrelationship between linguistic and social factors in language change.

### 3 Data and methods

To test these hypotheses, this study conducts a pilot project in a large collection of vernacular speech materials, and operationalizes quantitative variationist methods to capture, holistically, the local system of intensification over time.

#### 3.1 The Victoria English Archive

The analysis in the current study is concerned with Victoria English, a variety of Canadian English as represented by four corpora within the Victoria English Archive. The current project includes data from the Diachronic Corpus of Victoria English (DCVE; D'Arcy, 2011-2014a), consisting of oral histories from the University of Victoria Archives and the British Columbia Archives, and data from the Synchronic Corpus of Victoria English (SCVE; D'Arcy, 2011-2014b). This latter collection contains the speech of 162 local Victorians, obtained through sociolinguistic interviews that were carried out in 2011 and 2012. The corpora include speakers of different ages, sex and social and educational backgrounds. Together, the DCVE and SCVE contain “133 consecutive years of local English, reflected in just over 300 hours of casual speech” (D'Arcy, 2017, p. 44). Because of the casual nature of the speech and the stratification of sex, age and educational background of the speakers, the Victoria English Corpus provides a suitable means for examining language variation in a local context.

#### 3.2 Selection of speakers

As a pilot study, a carefully constructed subsample of the Victoria English Archive (VEA) is required. 18 speakers were selected on the basis of their age at the time of recording and their sex. To capture patterns of intensifier use in (apparent) time, participants were divided into three age cohorts, as outlined in Table 1.

Table 1. Subsample of the Victoria English Archive

<i>Birth year cohort</i>	<i>Age at Time of Recording</i>	<i>Corpus</i>	<i>Males</i>	<i>Females</i>	<i>Total</i>
1870-1890	73-91	DCVE	3	3	6
1940-1960	51-70	SCVE	3	3	6
1970-1990	21-41	SCVE	3	3	6
<b>Total</b>					18

#### 3.3 Procedure

When speakers talk about their life experiences and tell personal stories, they use their most casual language, as this style elicits the least amount of attention to speech (Tagliamonte, 2012, p. 27). Furthermore, emotional language is common

in casual speech; intensifiers are relatively frequent. The first parts of the interviews in the VEA were often not yet concerned with stories but with introductions in which the interviewer did most of the talking. Thus, for data extraction, the first hundred words spoken by the interviewee were excluded to ensure that the analysis would cover those parts of the interview that were more vernacular. From this point, thirty tokens were extracted from each speaker and coded for the social and linguistic predictors. Statistical analyses were carried out in GoldVarb X (Sankoff, Tagliamonte, & Smith, 2015), a multiple regression tool designed for descriptive and inferential statistics of variable linguistic data.

### 3.4 Circumscribing the variable context

In variationist sociolinguistics, the envelope of variation is circumscribed so as to isolate the locus of variability and set aside invariant contexts. Application of the principle of accountability (Labov, 1972) is also critical, such that all possible contexts of intensification are extracted from the data. In other words, “every variant that is part of the variable context, whether overtly realized in a system or not”, should be accounted for (D’Arcy, 2015, p. 457). This means that the current project includes instances where intensifiers were overtly realized as well as those where they are not but are licensed to occur. Isolating the ‘zero contexts’ can be a complicated task, but a comprehensive circumscription of the variable context ensures that all variants in the variable context will be uncovered.

To isolate the variable context for intensifiers, we first need to determine the linguistic structures in which they occur most frequently. Bäcklund (1973, p. 279) reports that intensifiers collocate most frequently with adjectives and therefore have the quintessential function of adjectival modification (D’Arcy, 2015, p. 458). Thus, following previous studies of intensifiers in North American English (Ito & Tagliamonte, 2003; Tagliamonte, 2008), the proposed study is concerned with adjectival heads only. Within this linguistic category, only those sentence constructions that could be intensified are considered tokens. Thus, a token with the adjective *hard* as in (4a), is included, but not with adverb *hard* (as in 4b).

- (4) a. It was just me and my grandma and it was *really* hard to lose her that way. (GK52m/1959)  
 b. Since I moved back to Victoria we’ve been trying *really* hard to get that relationship back. (GK52m/1959)

Furthermore, the analysis includes only contexts that permit intensifiers and excludes those that do not. Therefore, a token such as (5a), in which the speaker talks about the *kinds* of jobs, not the *degree* of oddness, is excluded. Along the same lines, (5b-c) are excluded because, respectively, the degree of poorness and newness are irrelevant.

- (5) a. He was in London and just doing *odd* jobs when he saw a ship in the Thames loading. (WLB Young/1873)



- b. My *poor* brother had the marks for ages. Bitten all over his face. (Roberta E. Robertson/1871)
- c. Buildings are being torn down and *new* ones replacing them. (MD71f/1940)

Other sentence constructions in which intensifier use is not permitted are those that contain comparatives, superlatives and other constructions (6a-b). Constructions involving the lexical items *too* and *so* in which their function is other than intensification (6c-d) are also excluded.

- (6) a. I've always been *more* mature for my age. (FF31m/1980)
- b. The *funniest* part is I remember every year standing in front of the corner grocery store [...]. (GK52m/1959)
- c. We thought *so* much of them *that* everybody chipped in and bought [...]. (WLB Young/1873)
- d. Wow this is *too* great not *to* share. (MV61f/1950)

The analysis is concerned with affirmative tokens alone; negative contexts such as (7a-b) are excluded. Ito and Tagliamonte (2003, p. 264) explain that intensifiers in negative contexts do not have the same boosting or maximizing meaning as is expressed by intensifiers in affirmative contexts. For example, 'not very old' in (7a) does not mean the negation of being very old; instead, it means that the speaker was relatively young. Therefore, 'not very old' has the same meaning of a downtowner. Similarly, in (7b) the speaker is not saying that she very much did not like Victoria, but instead she is saying that she moderately disliked Victoria. However, tokens such as (7c-d) are included because the adjectival head is not immediately under the scope of negation:

- (7) a. She was there for a period when we were not *very* old like ten or eleven. (CA21f/1990)
- b. They tried but in this area, so close to the water here, it's not *very* good. (EM61m/1951)
- c. She said she didn't know there was *so* many different animals. (Catherine Maclure/1890)
- d. It's not Victoria where it's Ø hard to find a place to live. (VM23m/1988)

This circumscription of the variable context provides a consistent framework for extracting individual tokens and ensures that the analysis of lexical intensifiers as well as the zeroes can be replicated in future studies. In the analysis, I test for the contribution of linguistic predictors as well as social factors of speaker age and sex to determine the relative importance of these predictors in apparent time.

### 3.5 Linguistic predictors

This analysis incorporates three linguistic predictors sourced from the literature: double intensification, adjective type, and adjective function.

Whereas intensifiers can occur on their own to ‘scale up’ the meaning of an adjective, speakers can also iterate or combine them with other intensifiers to further increase their meaning. Previous studies on intensification (see Méndez-Naya, 2017) distinguish between repetition of the same intensifier or *iteration*, as in (8a), and *co-occurrence* of two different lexical intensifiers, as in (8b).

- (8) a. Oh some *very very* good food stores oh some excellent food stores.  
(WLB Young/1873)
- b. I was *so very* bored with fourth grade level. (CA21f/1990)

As outlined above, the current study is concerned with intensifiers that modify the meaning of adjectival heads. Therefore, the semantic type of the adjective that is being modified is a linguistic predictor. The examples in (9) illustrate the semantic categories as constructed by Dixon (1977) that are commonly used in research on intensifiers (e.g. D’Arcy, 2015; Ito & Tagliamonte, 2003).

- (9) a. *Dimension (e.g. big, large, small, long, short)*  
Life was opening up in a *very big* way. (Lottie Bowron/1879)
- b. *Physical property (e.g. hard, soft, heavy, hot, rough, sweet, sick)*  
I’m not very tall but I’m *quite* beefy. (MB70m/1941)
- c. *Color (e.g. red, blue, black)*  
It was *really really* red yesterday. (example taken from Tagliamonte, 2008, p. 377)
- d. *Human propensity and/or emotion (e.g. jealous, happy, kind, clever)*  
They were *quite* stumped as to why I was there. (MV61f/1950)
- e. *Age (e.g. new, young, old)*  
I remember thinking that she was *super* old. (RT41f/1970)
- f. *Value (e.g. good, bad, proper, perfect, interesting, important)*  
It was *very* interesting for us to see all those European cities.  
(Catherine Maclure/1890)
- g. *Speed (e.g. fast, quick, slow)*  
I was *pretty* slow and I didn’t really like it. (MD71f/1940)
- h. *Position (e.g. right, left, near, close, far)*  
Shotbolt’s drugstore, which was *very* close to Government Street.  
(Joseph Clearihue/1887)

Adjectives that could not be assigned to these categories were grouped together as ‘other’. These adjectives are often concerned with characteristics of a person that are not physical properties or human propensities as described by Dixon (*wealthy, English*), or describe characteristics of abstract concepts (“the economy is so

unsettled”, “they had a very rough time”), often embedded in a predicate structure introduced by ‘it’ (“it’s very difficult for me”, “it was really frustrating”).

The third linguistic predictor is the syntactic function of the intensifying adjective. The spread of an intensifier across functional types provides insight to its stage of delexicalization (Ito & Tagliamonte, 2003; Lorenz, 2002; Partington 1993). In an earlier stage, the intensifier occurs mainly in attributive contexts (10a), whereas it occurs in predicative ones in the last stage of delexicalization (10b):

- (10) a. Everybody had *a hell of a* good time too. (WLB Young/1873)  
 b. They were *very* religious. (MV61f/1950)

Having defined the social and linguistic predictors, we can now turn to the distributional and multivariate analyses.

## 4 Results

### 4.1 Overall distribution

Table 2 reports the overall distribution of intensification in the subsample. The original extraction phase resulted in 540 tokens. Closer examination of the individual speakers revealed that one female in the oldest age group was an outlier: she accounted for more than half of the occurrences of *so* in the cohort. As a result of this anomalous pattern, she was excluded from further analyses, resulting in a total of 17 participants and 510 tokens. Table 2 reports these results, where the overall frequency of intensification is 44.3 per cent (nearly identical to the 45.7 per cent when all speakers were included). This rate is relatively consistent with that reported by Tagliamonte (2008) for Toronto English (36.1%).

Table 2. Overall distribution of intensification in the VEA

Total N = 510			
<i>Intensified</i>		<i>Not intensified</i>	
%	N	%	N
44.3	226	55.7	284

### 4.2 Intensifiers

The question is, what is the distribution of individual forms within this aggregated set of results? The distribution by lexical intensifier is given in Table 3. The majority of forms are highly infrequent in the dataset. Therefore, the main intensifiers are reported individually while those that occurred fewer than ten times each (e.g. *awfully*, *absolutely*, *super*) were categorized as ‘other intensification’. Not one speaker used only a single intensifier; all speakers exhibited variation,

using at least three different variants. Thus, the findings support the hypothesis of diachronic change and synchronic competition (Ito & Tagliamonte, 2003, p. 261).

Table 3. Distribution of intensifiers by lexical item (Total N = 510)

Lexical item	%	N
<i>very</i>	19.8	101
<i>really</i>	7.8	40
<i>pretty</i>	4.7	24
<i>quite</i>	3.1	16
<i>so</i>	2.9	15
other intensification	5.9	30
zero intensification	55.7	284

The most frequent intensifier by far is *very*, accounting for nearly 20 per cent of the data. The second most frequent form, at 7.8 per cent overall, is *really*. Frequencies for *pretty*, *quite* and *so* are below 5 per cent. With 4.7 per cent of representation in the data, *pretty* rapidly follows *really* and is the third most frequent intensifier in Victoria English. This finding supports Tagliamonte's (2008, p. 370) observation that *pretty* is one of the most frequent intensifiers and that it is characteristic for North American speech in the twentieth century. *Quite*<sup>3</sup> and *so* occur with around 3 percent of all intensified adjectives. This is a small dataset, but on the basis of a previously documented upward trend for *so* (Tagliamonte & Roberts, 2005, p. 280; Tagliamonte, 2008, p. 369), we predict that frequencies for *so* will be higher in the youngest age group when more Victoria English speakers from the late 1990s are added to the analysis. The question is, how do the data distribute across time and across speaker groups, and what effects from the linguistic predictors obtain? It is only through careful examination of the patterns in the data that the hypotheses outlined in §2.4 can be addressed.

Only 17 tokens of double intensification are found in the data. Similar to findings for Present-Day English documented by Méndez-Naya (2017, p. 252), the analysis shows that iteration of intensifiers (e.g. *very very nice*) (N=12) is more common than co-occurrence (e.g. *so very bored*) (N=5). These Ns are too low to include double intensification as a factor in further analyses. Therefore, from this point forward, the iteration tokens are included in the lexical category of the iterated intensifier, and the co-occurrence tokens are included in the category of *other intensification*.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> While *quite* is a downtoner in British English (Ito & Tagliamonte, 2003, p. 278), in North American English it is used as an adverb that intensifies an adjective.

<sup>4</sup> Despite the low frequency of double intensification, analysis of the tokens with iteration and co-occurrence may provide insight into the development of the forms that were

The analyses in the following sections concentrate on the intensifiers that account for more than 5 per cent of modifiable adjectival heads: *very* and *really*. It is these forms that will be subjected to multivariate analysis. For the less frequent intensifiers —*so*, *pretty*, and *quite*—overall distributions will suffice, as the small token numbers render significance testing problematic (see, e.g. Guy, 1975).

### 4.3 Speaker age

Tagliamonte (2008, p. 371) argues that intensifier patterns develop rapidly, with change occurring in short periods of time. Therefore, by comparing frequencies of lexical intensifiers between the different age groups, changes in frequency of lexical intensifiers in Victoria English over time can be uncovered.

As illustrated in Table 5, the oldest participants use intensifiers the most (51.3%), while the middle age group uses intensifiers the least (38.9%). Intensifier frequency in the youngest age group lies in between (44.3%). Overall, these findings seem to counter previous assumptions that intensifiers are more frequent in speech of younger speakers than in that of older speakers (Paradis, 2000; Tagliamonte, 2008). However, the results in Table 4 show an increase in the youngest age group (b.1970-1990) compared to the middle one (b.1940-1960).

Table 4. Distribution of intensification in Victoria English by speaker age

Birth year	%	N
1879-1890	51.3	150
1940-1960	38.9	180
1970-1990	43.9	180
<b>Total N</b>		510

combined. Iteration with *very* (e.g. *very very* tall) is most frequent among the oldest speakers (N=4) and declines in the middle (N=2) and youngest age groups (N=1). Together with the rise of *really*, iteration with *really* (e.g. *really really* fun) is isolated to the middle-aged (N=1) and younger speakers (N=1). These results seem to support the view that iteration can function as increasing established forms ‘as their frequency increases, grammaticalization progresses and their pragmatic force weakens’ (D’Arcy, 2015, p. 475). Co-occurrence of different intensifiers (e.g. *so very* bored, *pretty damn* tough) (N=5) is found more in the older cohort (N=3) than in the middle-aged (N=1) and younger one (N=1), contrasting with D’Arcy’s (2015, p. 475) findings in New Zealand English. The individual lexical intensifiers in the co-occurrences are highly variable and consist mostly of less established intensifiers, confirming Méndez-Naya’s (2017, p. 51) findings; no specific patterns of co-occurrence emerged.

Patterns of intensifier change become visible when frequencies of individual intensifiers are regarded according to speaker age. The temporal trajectories for the five most frequent intensifiers in the data are demonstrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1 reveals that *very* is the majority form across almost the entire period, however, the nature of the distribution changes over time. For older speakers, *very* is by far the main intensifier, accounting for over one third of all intensified adjectives, aligning with Tagliamonte's (2008, p. 361) observation that *very* is the most frequent intensifier among older speakers of North American English. In the oldest age group, all intensifiers other than *very* are minority variants. *Very* drops remarkably in the middle-aged speakers, remaining the most frequent form but competing robustly with *really*, *pretty* and *quite*. Only among younger speakers does it lose its majority status and is there a robust layering of competitors.

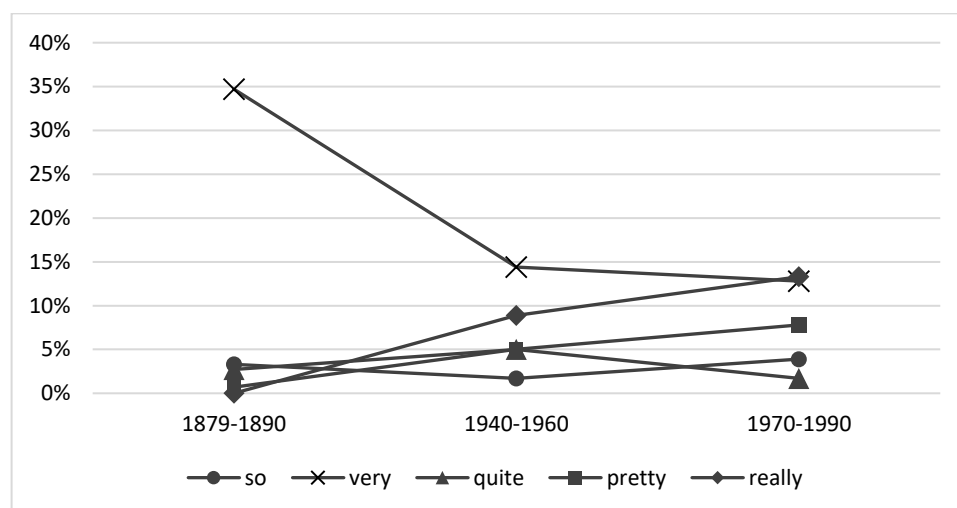


Figure 1. Overall distribution of main intensifiers by birth year

Considering that *really* is hardly attested among the oldest speakers, born in the late nineteenth century, this intensifier increases rapidly over time; among the younger speakers it reaches the same frequency as *very*. Overall, our findings for *really* and *very* in the current analysis support the suggestion that *very* as an intensifier is becoming less popular (Tagliamonte, 2008, p. 261) in English, while the incoming form of *really* is favored more strongly over time.

Tagliamonte (2008, p. 361) also found that *so* and *pretty* are increasing. In Victoria, the frequency of *pretty* is rising slowly but steadily from around zero percent in the oldest age group to nearly 5 per cent in the youngest age group. Indeed, it leads both *quite* and *so*, which have frequencies of around 3 per cent among younger speakers. In contrast with previous work, the frequency of *so* is fairly stable over time: the younger speakers in this sample seem to use *so* as often as the older speakers, with a decrease in frequency in the middle age cohort. The opposite trajectory is found in Toronto English, in which *so* is also a 'minor

variant’, but it is most frequent in younger speakers between 13 and 29 years old and less frequent in the speakers over 50 years old (Tagliamonte, 2008, p. 372). Again, it needs to be noted that the frequencies for *pretty*, *quite* and *so* are low, and that adding more speakers in future analyses might generate more robust trajectories.

#### 4.4 Speaker sex

Table 5 demonstrates that the females in the sample intensify more frequently than the males. Although previous studies (Ito & Tagliamonte, 2003; Stoffel, 1901; Jespersen, 1922) have reported associations between the frequency of intensifiers with speech of females, a multivariate analysis (not shown) comparing the frequency of intensified tokens between males and females in the current study shows that the effect of sex on the total number of intensified tokens is not significant ( $LL = -349.267, p = 0.18$ ).<sup>5</sup>

Table 5. Distribution of intensification in the VEA by speaker sex

Sex	%	N
females	47.5	240
males	41.5	270
<b>Total N</b>		<b>510</b>

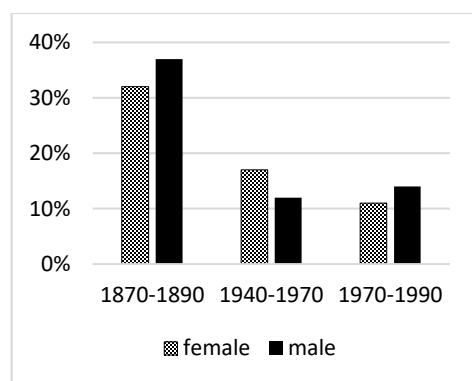


Figure 2a. Distribution of *very* across sexes and age cohorts

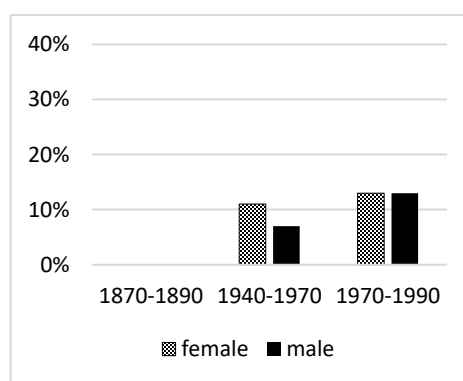


Figure 2b. Distribution of *really* across sexes and age cohorts

<sup>5</sup> Future analyses of these materials should include the predictor of emotionality of the adjective (cf. Peters, 1994; Tagliamonte & Roberts, 2005). Exploring this property of the intensified adjective will provide insights for the question of whether women’s suggested ‘fondness’ (Stoffel, 1901, p. 101) of intensification is a result of their tendency to discuss more emotional topics than men.

As they occur relatively frequently, *very* and *really* can be examined more closely in terms of how they pattern across sex and age groups. Figure 2a shows that, for *very*, differences in frequencies between men and women are not stable between age cohorts. The males in the sample use *very* more often than females in the oldest and youngest age group, while the middle-aged females use more *very* than the males in that age cohort. The apparent time trajectory for females is a steady decline in frequency of *very*, whereas for males *very* declines only in the middle age group after which the rate of *very* fluctuates only slightly and appears to be effectively stable. These results contrast with Tagliamonte's (2008, p. 385) findings in Toronto English, that show that, overall, women used more *very*.

For *really*, the middle-aged females start out with higher frequencies than the males of the same age (Figure 2b). There is a larger increase of *really* in the youngest group for the males than the females, resulting in the same frequencies of *really* in the youngest speakers. Again, these results contrast with patterns of *really* in males and females of different age groups in Toronto English, where women between 20 and 30 years old use *really* much more frequently than their male counterparts (Tagliamonte, 2008, p. 384). Lastly, the data presented in Figures 2a and 2b seem to support the hypothesis that women lead linguistic change: they part with *very* more steadily than men and start out with higher rates of the incoming form of *really* than their male counterparts.

#### 4.5 Semantic type

Table 6. Overall distribution of intensifiers by semantic type of the adjective

Semantic type	%	N
speed	100	3
other	73.9	46
age	64.3	14
physical property	62.5	24
human propensity	52.1	90
position	44.3	7
value	38.4	245
dimension	23.5	81
color	0	0
<b>Total N</b>		<b>510</b>



As Table 6 demonstrates, intensifiers are found with all semantic adjective types as described by Dixon (1997), except for the semantic adjectives of color. This does not mean that the intensifier system of Victoria English does not allow adjectives of color to be intensified; rather, no tokens were encountered during the extraction phase. Note also that although they appear to be frequently intensified, the semantic categories of speed and position are infrequently attested in the sample. As such, the overall distributions in Table 6 should be interpreted cautiously. The main observation is that all categories are subject to intensification, as predicted.

As we have seen in Figure 1, *very* is declining in frequency while *really* is increasing. In order to analyze the diffusion of these two most frequent intensifiers, we will now turn to the distribution of *really* and *very* across the different age cohorts and semantic types.

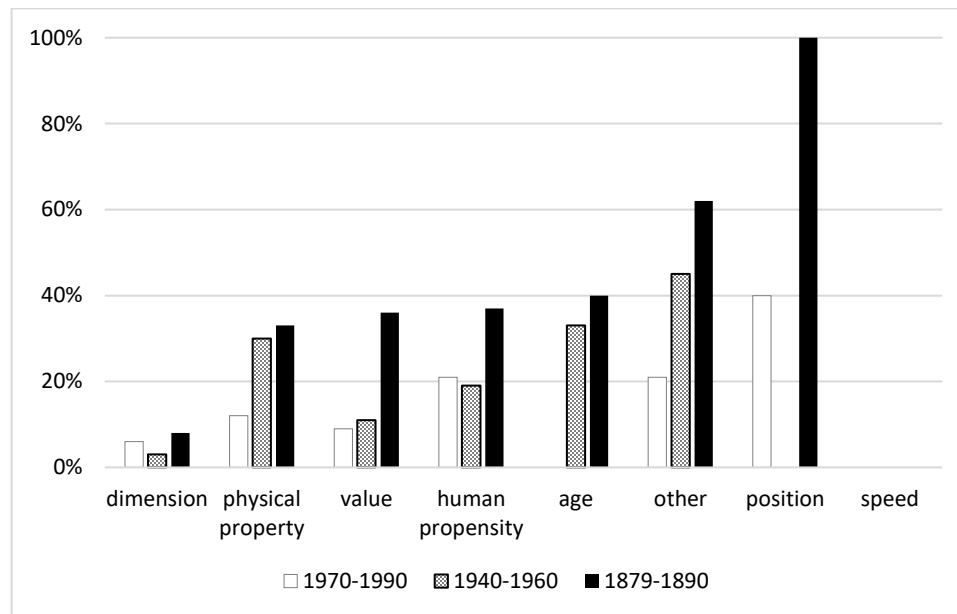


Figure 3a. Distribution of *very* by semantic type of the intensified adjective

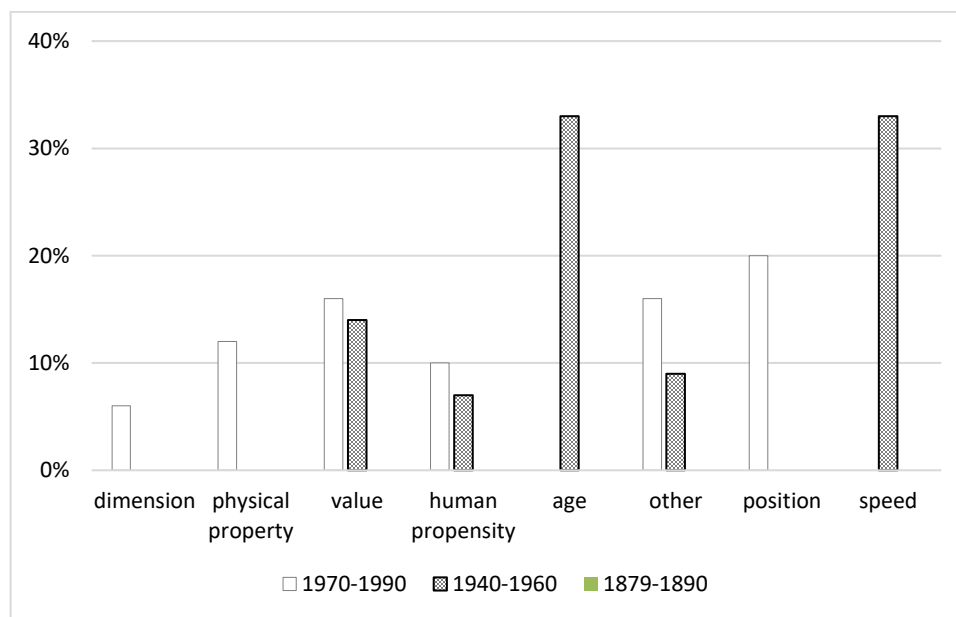


Figure 3b. Distribution of *really* by semantic type of the intensified adjectives

Figure 3a displays the use of *very*. Within the semantic categories of the adjective, the different age groups show remarkable stability: the three different age groups all use *very* and do not limit intensification with *very* to specific semantic adjective categories. The wide spread of *very* despite the great decrease in frequencies among youngest and middle speakers reflects its established position in the language (Tagliamonte, 2008, p. 379). Furthermore, the internal ranking in frequencies of the different age groups is stable: within each semantic type, the oldest age group uses *very* the most and the youngest age group uses *very* the least.

Figure 3b demonstrates the occurrence of *really* across semantic adjective types. While there are no occurrences of *really* in the oldest speakers, the middle age group uses *really* with five of the semantic types, and the youngest speakers shows the largest diffusion of *really* by using it with six of the semantic adjective types.<sup>6</sup> This suggests that *really* is becoming more general and delexicalized as it collocates more widely among younger speakers.

<sup>6</sup> Note that the youngest speakers use neither *very* nor *really* with adjectives of age. A closer look at the data reveals that six tokens of age adjectives are found among this age group, of which three tokens are intensified. The intensifier forms that the younger speakers prefer for modification of age adjectives preferred are the minority variants *so*, *pretty* and *super*.

#### 4.6 Syntactic type

Table 7. Intensification in Victoria English according to syntactic type

Syntactic type	%	N
predicative	55	276
attributive	31.5	234
<b>Total N</b>		510

Table 7 shows that adjectival heads in predicative structures are intensified more often than those in attributive structures, which has been documented in previous linguistic studies as well (Ito & Tagliamonte, 2003, p. 272; Tagliamonte, 2008, p. 374). Ito and Tagliamonte (2003, p. 272) even go so far as to suggest that all intensifiers are preferred in predicative rather than attributive positions, and our findings for *very* and *really*, shown in Figures 4a and 4b, seem to support that hypothesis.

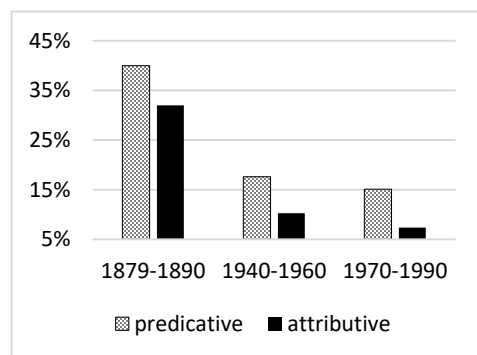


Figure 4a. Distribution of *very* by age and syntactic type of predication

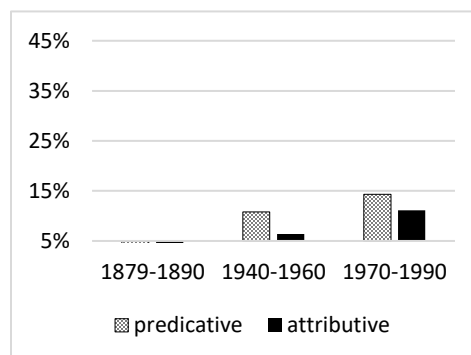


Figure 4b. Distribution of *really* by age and syntactic type of predication

Similar to what Ito and Tagliamonte (2003, p. 272) find for York English, the difference between the two syntactic types is greater with *very* than with *really*. Younger speakers have a strong preference for predicative types when intensifying with *very*, while for older speakers this preference is weaker. Note that the preference for a predication type in younger speakers is largest for *very* and considerably smaller for *really*. This finding indicates that over time, *really* has become more grammaticalized in Victoria English, which aligns with findings by Ito and Tagliamonte (2003, p. 276) for York English. Tagliamonte (2008, p. 373) observes a similar pattern for Toronto English, arguing that *really* in younger speakers seems to have reached the final phases of delexicalization, while in older speakers *very* shows this ‘advanced delexicalization’.

#### 4.7 Multivariate analysis

The following sections discuss the relative contributions of the different social and linguistic predictors to the probability of intensification with *very* and *really* in the Victoria English data. Because the other intensifiers (*pretty*, *quite* and *so*) are found in less than 5 per cent of all adjectival heads in the data, the current paper does not discuss the multivariate analyses for these lexical items.

Table 8. Predictors affecting the probability of *very* and *really* in Victoria English

	<i>very</i>			<i>really</i>		
<b>Input</b>	.161			.091		
<b>Significance</b>	0.000			0.096		
<b>Factors</b>	<b>FW</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>FW</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>N</b>
<i>Age</i>						
1879-1890	.72	34.7	150	-	0	n/a
1940-1960	.44	14.4	180	[.45]	8.9	180
1970-1990	.37	12.8	180	[.54]	13.3	180
	<i>range</i>	35				
<i>Speaker sex</i>						
female	[.50]	18.3	240	[.53]	12.2	180
male	[.50]	21.1	270	[.47]	10.0	180
<i>Semantic type of adjective</i>						
position	.83	42.9	7	[.64]	16.7	6
other	.76	38.8	49	[.60]	13.3	30
physical property	.62	25	24	[.36]	5.6	18
human propensity	.60	23.3	90	[.47]	8.5	71
age	.53	21.4	14	[.51]	11.1	9
value	.50	18.4	245	[.63]	15.0	167
dimension	.18	4.9	81	[.17]	1.8	56
speed	-	0	n/a	[.81]	33.3	3
	<i>range</i>	65				
<i>Syntactic function of adjective</i>						
predicative	.52	20.5	278	[.51]	12.7	228
attributive	.47	19.0	232	[.48]	8.3	132
	<i>Range</i>	5				
<b>Total N</b>			510			360

#### 4.7.1 *Very*

The multivariate analysis in Table 8 reports the contributing factors to the probability of *very* and *really*. The external factor of speaker age is selected as a significant and strong contributor to the frequency of *very* (range of 35). With a factor weight of .72, the older age groups have a significantly stronger preference for *very* than the younger speakers, who tend to disfavor *very* (FW= .37). Predictable from Figure 2a, speaker sex does not have a significant effect on the occurrence of *very*.

Both linguistic factors tested in this analysis are selected as main effects. The multivariate analysis confirms that *very* occurs in a wide range of semantic adjective types. As the category of speed adjectives has too few tokens, this semantic type is added to the ‘other’ semantic types category. Although there are only 7 tokens of position adjectives, this semantic type strongly favors intensification with *very*. Adjectives of physical property, human propensity, and other semantic adjectives favor *very* as well. With factor weights of .53 and .50, age and value adjectives are marginal for *very*, neither favoring nor disfavoring this intensifier, while the semantic adjective type of dimension (FW= .18) strongly disfavors *very*.

The second internal factor, syntactic function of the adjective, is also significant but has a considerably smaller range than the semantic type (respectively 5 and 65). *Very* is favored slightly more in predicative (FW = .52) than in attributive (FW = .47) structures, supporting Ito and Tagliamonte’s (2003, p. 276) claim that intensifiers are preferred with predicative adjectives. To conclude, the multivariate analysis confirms Tagliamonte’s (2008, p. 373) suggestion that *very* is diffused into a wide range of adjectival categories and thus entrenched in North American English. Furthermore, the analysis confirms the patterns that were discussed on the basis of the overall distributions for the effect of age and syntactic function on the probability of *very*.

#### 4.7.2 *Really*

For the analysis of *really*, the data from the oldest speakers, where no tokens of *really* are attested in the dataset, were removed from the multivariate run. The results show that no factors significantly contribute to the probability of *really* in Victoria English<sup>7</sup> (Table 8).

The results show that the middle-aged group seems to prefer intensification with *really* more (FW= .54) than the youngest age group (FW= .45). A comparison between these frequencies and that of the oldest speakers points to the fact that *really* as an intensifier is a newcomer in Victoria. On the basis of similar findings

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<sup>7</sup> The overall distribution of *really* across speaker sex and age suggest a possible interaction between these predictors. However, elimination of speaker sex from the multivariate run demonstrates a non-significant effect of speaker age on frequencies of *really* ( $LL = -124.674, p = 0.18$ ).

for *really* in Toronto English (Tagliamonte, 2008, p. 384), we argue that the current study captures the first stages of the diffusion of *really* among the Victoria English speech community and that adding more speakers to the dataset in future analyses will support this hypothesis. Regarding speaker sex, the direction of the effect in the multivariate analysis shows that females seem to use more *really* than males. This is consistent with previous findings (Tagliamonte, 2008, p. 384) and the general hypothesis that females are leading in intensifier change. However, the difference in frequencies of *really* is only visible in the middle age group, and ceases to exist among the youngest speakers.

Regarding the semantic type of the adjective, Table 8 shows that some semantic types have a stronger preference for *really* than others. While speed, position, value and age prefer intensification with *really*, adjectives of dimension and physical property disfavored this. Although Ito and Tagliamonte (2003, p. 276) claim that intensifiers are generally favored in predicate structures rather than attributive structures, for *really* the difference between the two predication types is not as evident in the current study.

## 5 Discussion and conclusion

Our results demonstrate that the preference for particular lexical intensifiers and their frequency is changing in the Victoria English community. Similar to findings for Toronto English (Tagliamonte, 2008) and York English (Ito & Tagliamonte, 2003), *very* and *really* are used to intensify the majority of the adjectival heads in Victoria English, however, rapid changes are taking place in the frequency and diffusion among the population studied here.

Although lofty rates of intensifiers are often associated with the language of young speakers (Paradis, 2000; Tagliamonte, 2008), results of the current study do not fully support this hypothesis. The most evident difference between older and younger speakers is found in their preference for the type of lexical intensifiers. Preference for *very* is waning in younger speakers, while *really* is hardly ever found in the oldest speakers but is steadily making its way up in middle aged and younger speakers. In the youngest speakers, *really* and *very* reach the same frequency. These findings confirm patterns of increasing preference for *really* and decreasing use of *very* found in Toronto English (Tagliamonte, 2008, p. 361) and seem to point to *really* as the new favorite in Victoria English. Following Tagliamonte's findings (2008, p. 361), we predict that the magnitude of this upward trajectory of *really* becomes even more visible if speakers of a younger generation are added to the analysis in future studies.

Speaker sex does not have a significant effect on the probability of *very* or *really* in our sample. However, the distribution of *very* across sex and age cohorts shows that women are more stable in gradually parting with *very*, while the males show a less steady but still declining trend. Furthermore, distributions for the incoming form *really* show that middle-aged women started out with higher rates than their male counterparts. These findings seem to support the hypothesis that women lead intensifier change (Jespersen, 1922, p. 248). More generally, findings

for age and speaker sex in the current study support the hypothesis that “correlation of intensifiers with social factors can be taken to tap into the social evaluation of particular intensifiers within the community” (Ito & Tagliamonte, 2003, p. 262). Due to low token numbers, the current study is not able to uncover the social evaluations of the more recent incoming forms in North American English, that of *pretty* and *so*. Therefore, we suggest that more data be added in future studies in order to examine whether the pattern in Toronto English, of young males preferring *pretty* and young females preferring *so* (Tagliamonte, 2008, p. 388), can be uncovered in Victoria English as well. These studies should consider the emotional value of the adjective (Peters, 1994, p. 101; Tagliamonte, 2008, p. 381) as a relevant factor in the discussion of possible sex differences in intensifier use.

The mechanisms underlying change of *very* and *really* in Victoria English can be understood in terms of the delexicalization process of both variants. *Very* is decreasing in frequency, but even in the youngest speakers, who rarely use it, it still collocates with a wide range of semantic adjective types and in both predicative and attributive structures. For *really* to become as entrenched in Victoria English and as delexicalized as *very* already is, it will have to reach similar frequencies across the different semantic and syntactic contexts. We observe that diffusion across semantic types in the middle-aged and youngest age group is already relatively large and the youngest age group does not seem to prefer *really* in one syntactic structure over the other, indicating advanced steps in the delexicalization process. Therefore, we argue that the trajectories for *very* and *really* in Victoria English support the hypothesis that the degree of delexicalization of an intensifier can be inferred from their collocation patterns with particular linguistic contexts (Ito & Tagliamonte, 2003, p. 262).

Beside the new incoming lexical forms, double intensification as a tool of increasing meaning of the individual intensifiers is rare but present in the data. Frequencies of iteration and co-occurrence in the data are similar to those found in previous studies on Modern English (D’Arcy, 2015; Méndez-Naya, 2017), suggesting that certain patterns in double intensification can be found across different varieties of English. Therefore, future studies could take a closer look at double intensification as a means of increasing the intensifying force of a single intensifier, the delexicalization processes of the single intensifiers that are combined, and the height of the competition with other intensifiers.

Frequent, diffused and long-time use of intensifiers will lead to a weakening of their force and the speakers’ need for stronger forms that boost emotional intensity. The Victoria speech community welcoming new forms, such as *really*, into their intensifier system, and decreasing their use of more entrenched intensifiers, such as *very*, is therefore part of an ongoing process of language change. Tagliamonte (2008, p. 392) even goes so far as suggesting that “the waxing and waning of intensifiers is actually a requisite of the feature for the speech community”. Tracking the ways in which linguistic and social factors interact in language change can therefore provide valuable insights into the current trends of intensifiers in Victoria English.

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