

PRAGMATIC SIGNIFICANCE OF INTENSIFIERS IN YOUTH SPEECH

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Abstract

This paper examines the pragmatic function of intensifiers within contemporary youth discourse, moving beyond their traditional role as mere degree modifiers. It explores how young speakers apply these linguistic elements to negotiate social identity, project subjectivity, and enhance the emotional intensity of their interactions. By analyzing both spoken and digital language patterns, the research highlights how youth serve as catalysts for linguistic evolution, continuously adapting intensifiers to meet the expressive demands of peer-group communication. The findings suggest that the usage of intensifiers is driven by social context, group affiliation, and a pursuit of lexical creativity. Ultimately, this paper underlines the role of intensifiers as essential pragmatic tools that reflect the dynamic, creative adolescent communication in the modern digital age.

Key words

Intensifiers, youth speech, pragmatics, sociolinguistics, discourse analysis, expressivity, digitally-mediated communication.

Introduction

Intensifiers are lexical units that serve to heighten the degree of a quality, state, or action being assessed in speech. Primarily combining with adjectives and adverbs, they enhance the subjective evaluation of communicative situations, as well as the emotionality and pragmatic impact of discourse. In the English language, intensifiers are considered crucial speech elements used to make both written and oral communication more expressive, while amplifying the speaker's perspective and attitude toward the content conveyed. According to Allerton, intensifiers represent a specific type of modifier, which corresponds to the category of degree adverbs. This constitutes the most widespread semantic type of intensive units.

Intensifiers are generally classified into two categories: amplifiers (which strengthen the meaning) and downtoners (which soften the meaning). Amplifiers serve to scale up the assessment of a quality or state, whereas downtoners serve to reduce or mitigate the intensity. Semantically, amplifiers are further subdivided into two main groups: maximizers (e.g., absolutely, totally, completely, entirely, utterly) and boosters (e.g., very, terribly, really, tremendously). Maximizers express the absolute level of intensification, indicating the highest degree, while boosters indicate a high level of a quality without necessarily reaching the absolute threshold.

Meaning-intensifying forms have been at the center of numerous studies due to their relative instability and susceptibility to rapid semantic shifts. Tagliamonte notes that "by their



very nature, intensifiers cannot remain stable for long, as their efficacy depends on their novelty. Consequently, if they are overused in speech, they lose their impact." Therefore, they can be considered one of the most constantly evolving areas of language. Once an intensive form loses its effect through frequent repetition in speakers' discourse, it is replaced by another.

Scientific observations testify to the processes of competition, change, and recycling among intensive devices. These processes have persisted from Old English to the present day. For instance, the intensive lexeme "swiþe" which was widespread in ancient times, was replaced by units such as "well" and "full" by the 14th century. Later, these units were superseded by "right" and "most".

Methodology

This study employs a mixed-methods research design, integrating both quantitative corpus-based analysis and qualitative discourse analysis to examine the pragmatic significance of intensifiers in contemporary youth speech. The methodological framework is structured into three primary stages: data collection, classification, and functional analysis.

Results

In sociolinguistics, youth language has long been recognized not as a degraded form of standard speech, but as a dynamic laboratory for linguistic innovation. Among the various features that characterize contemporary youth discourse, intensifiers — lexical items used to boost the emotional or semantic force of an utterance stand out as particularly fluid and multi-functional. While traditional grammar often views words like really, so, and literally purely through the lens of semantic amplification, empirical evidence from spoken corpora reveals that their primary utility among young speakers is deeply pragmatic. Rather than simply operating as modifiers of adjectives or verbs, intensifiers in youth speech serve critical social, cognitive, and structural functions in everyday interaction.

From a linguocultural perspective, the replacement and renewal of intensifiers are closely associated with the phenomenon of "linguistic fashion." Newly emerging intensifying forms in communication often gain rapid popularity due to their novelty. However, as a result of excessive use, they gradually lose their semantic force and expressive impact, eventually yielding their place to other emerging forms. Tagliamonte notes this phenomenon in her research and attempts to account for it. According to her observations, this process is linked both to the internal dynamics of language change and to the role of youth speech in the construction and expression of social identity.

The intensifiers employed in youth discourse function not merely as grammatical markers of degree but also as important pragmatic resources for expressing subjectivity and emotional involvement. While intensification serves to enhance vividness and expressiveness in both spoken and written communication, within youth communities it acquires an additional social significance, functioning as a marker of group affiliation and identity.

Discussion

Anna-Brita Stenström presents her observations on intensifiers in youth speech in her research. Analyzing the functional and pragmatic characteristics of intensive devices in teenage

language based on corpus materials, she interprets them as linguistic tools inherent to youth subculture. She cites lexemes such as "very," "absolutely," "well," "enough," "right," "bloody," and "fucking" as the most frequent intensifiers. Furthermore, comparing their frequency of use in communicative processes from a gender perspective, she notes that they appear significantly more often in female speech than in male speech. In communication, women tend to use intensifiers like "really," "totally," and "very," whereas men prefer to use "extremely," "completely," "absolutely," and "well."

- Was Lottie there?

- Actually no that was the night she was really pissed off because, erm people were paying more attention to me than they were to her. I don't know why it's because I decide that I'm gonna be really outgoing and I really do and I was really loud and really boisterous and she's quite resigned like that and she thought I shagged off with me, and then like I was doing, there was this really good looking bloke.

The conversation excerpt between two teenage girls taken from the COLT corpus materials presented above demonstrates how active the intensifier "really" is.

One additional characteristic of young people's speech is that the intensifier "enough" (sufficient/quite) does not follow the grammatical rule of appearing after the adjective it modifies. Instead, it is placed before the adjective:

- Come upstairs and listen to the tape? Blinding tape! Do you wanna hear it?
- Can't be bothered.
- Come on Cliff listen. It is funny down here.
- Nah. It's better you got them speakers. It is enough funny man I'm telling ya! Come upstairs, play on the hi-fi.
- But Wendy said enough bad things about me.
- Kieran is enough quite.

The intensifier "really" is not only the most frequently used device in youth conversation, but it also functions as a highly multifunctional pragmatic unit. Specifically, it serves as a tool within discourse to express the speaker's stance, signaling evaluation, doubt, disbelief, or an emotional response to the conversational content. In dialogues, "really" links back to the preceding utterance and acts as a reactive device, thereby facilitating turn-taking. In such instances, its purpose is not to amplify semantic meaning, but rather to manage conversation.

Callum: They said we're not allowed to see each other anymore.

Sephy: Really? And they think that's just going to stop us?

Mina: Some things don't need explaining.

Michael: Really? How are we supposed to understand them then?

In the excerpts above, taken from modern English young adult literature, the lexeme "really" expresses the speaker's attitude and serves as a pragmatic bridge to transition into the subsequent response or explanation.

In addition to the aspects mentioned, "really" also functions as a staller (a time-gaining device) in youth speech interaction. When a speaker finds themselves in an emotionally complex



situation or struggles to organize their thoughts, “really” appears alongside pauses and repetitions to ensure the continuous flow of speech. In doing so, it reduces the cognitive load and mitigates conversational delays.

- I was just really... really not expecting him to say that, you know, and I just stood.
- I really... I really don't know what I'm supposed to do anymore.

The use of the lexeme *right* as an adjectival intensifier in English youth discourse is likely to have developed under the influence of American English. According to information provided by the *Oxford English Dictionary*, this usage is described as “chiefly characteristic of American English.” Nevertheless, it can also be observed in contemporary youth communication in Britain. In the COLT corpus, this usage appears in the following examples:

- It was right embarrassing.
- We'll have a right old piss-up.
- Have a right good laugh.

Such examples are typical of spoken and informal discourse, where *right* functions to intensify the adjective or adjective phrase that follows it while simultaneously expressing the speaker's subjective attitude. Quirk and his colleagues, in their analysis of this linguistic phenomenon, note that this usage remains relatively restricted and non-standard.

The lexical item *pure* also occurs in numerous contexts within the COLT corpus. It is recorded a total of 1,054 times, corresponding to a frequency of 6.7 occurrences per 1,000 words. Therefore, *pure* may be classified among the highly frequent intensifying devices used in youth discourse.

From a grammatical perspective, *pure* is traditionally categorized as an adjective. However, in youth speech this lexical item actively performs an intensifying function. For this reason, it may also be regarded as a discourse-pragmatic element. In communication, it appears in the following forms:



- We sound pure stupid on that.
- I was in a pure bad mood with him.
- He is pure stupid.
- It is pure madness.

Conclusion

The use of intensifiers in adolescent speech serves important communicative functions. Young speakers employ intensifiers such as “really,” “so,” “totally,” and “enough” to emphasize meaning and express their feelings more vividly. These linguistic choices are not mistakes but deliberate strategies used in peer communication.

First, intensifiers function as identity markers in youth speech. By using non-standard forms like placing “enough” before adjectives, young speakers signal their membership in peer groups and distinguish themselves from adult speakers. This linguistic variation is a meaningful choice that reflects group identity.

Second, intensifiers demonstrate the communicative skills of adolescent speakers. Young people use intensifiers to show emotional intensity, build connections with friends, express sincerity, and manage social interactions. The way intensifiers are used reveals how speakers feel about what they are saying in groups.

Moreover, intensifiers help create unity among peers. The shared use of these language patterns creates a common linguistic code that strengthens group bonds and sets youth speech apart from adult communication. This linguistic distinction marks social boundaries and expresses independence.

In conclusion, intensifiers in youth speech play a central role in how young people create meaning, build identity, and manage relationships. Studying these patterns shows us how language works in real life and how it changes over time. Understanding intensifiers in youth speech helps us appreciate the creativity and complexity of how adolescents communicate.

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