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# From vogue words to lexicalized intensifying words: the renewal and recycling of intensifiers in English. A case-study of *very*, *really*, *so* and *totally*

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## Introduction

- 1 The purpose of this paper is to investigate the renewal of intensifiers in English over time and the consequences of such a renewal process. Building on Partington [1993], Tagliamonte [2007], Tagliamonte & D'Arcy [2007], Rissanen [2008], Mendez-Naya [2008] and Bordet [2014] and [2015], it is assumed that intensifiers are popularised because of their intensifying force. According to Bussman [1996: 22] or Herwig [1998], those adverbs that are selected to become intensifiers generally belong to the subcategory of adverbs of manner. Through frequency of use and over time, intensifiers tend to lose their intensifying force. That is when the renewal process occurs. This process promotes other adverbs, be they newly created adverbs or already existing ones, to the rank of intensifiers. Some adverbs of manner therefore take on new functions and develop new uses and senses in contexts in which they would not naturally occur. Occasionally, a newly created intensifier may become the most frequently-used one until it loses its intensifying force and needs to be replaced again by other more expressive forms.
- 2 The renewal process that I have just described does not merely concern the replacement of once-popular adverbs by newer, fresher ones. It also seems to impact on language register through a recycling process of existing intensifiers. Indeed, 'older' intensifiers are not entirely replaced by newer, more expressive intensifiers as one might think at

first glance. ‘Older’ intensifiers remain in use, but they are assigned new functions and they are employed in different contexts.

- 3 My assumption is that intensifiers that have recently emerged such as *totally* tend to bear on adjectives or other parts of speech belonging to colloquial language, and as such they tend to be used by younger speakers or at least by speakers who want to appear young to the hearer. Indeed, many studies have shown that intensifiers tend to be popularized mostly by the young. (See Bauer & Bauer [2002]; Paradis & Bergmark [2003]; Tagliamonte & D’Arcy [2007]). On the contrary, adverbs that developed into intensifiers a long time ago such as *very* tend to modify adjectives or other parts of speech belonging mostly to the standard or formal registers. I therefore posit a correlation between the intensifying force of an adverb and language register.
- 4 The first part of this paper will deal with the causes of the renewal process. I will briefly present those intensifiers that were most frequently used at some point in their development. The second part of this paper will be devoted to the presentation of the corpus I used for my study. Finally, in the last part, I will analyze the uses of the four most frequently used intensifiers of the 21<sup>st</sup> century while attempting to show that there is a correlation between the register and the intensifier that is used.

## 1. The renewal of intensifiers

- 5 Intensifying adverbs generally derive from adverbs of manner and are most likely to belong to the semantic fields of quantity and size, reality and unreality, fright and disgust, power and violence, value and truth, mental diseases, uniqueness and upper and outer location (see Lorenz [1999] and [2002], Claudi [2006] and Bordet [2014] and [2015]). It is worth noting that all these semantic categories refer to more or less ‘intense’ extralinguistic notions and/or the high – sometimes absolute – degree of a property. All four adverbs under scrutiny may be linked to the semantic fields mentioned above.
- 6 It has been established that intensifiers emerge thanks to their high intensifying potential, which can lead to an increased frequency of use (see Lorenz [1999] and [2002], Claudi [2006] and Bordet [2014] and [2015]). Yet, almost as soon as a given intensifier has gained popularity due to its intensifying force, the said intensifying force begins to decline because it is perceived as less expressive. Therefore a suitable adverb needs to be found to replace the intensifier that was the most frequently used. Another explanation could reside in the fact that intensifiers are popularized by young speakers who experiment with language to find the latest trendy expressions, which contributes to the feeling of being part of a group, a phenomenon also known as ‘ingroupness’. With the rise of its frequency of use, a given adverb will be used by a wider range of speakers and not only by younger speakers. As a consequence, they can no longer be used by a specific group, i.e. young speakers. This results in a loss of trendiness and appeal for the young who will search for another more expressive word to use within their group until it becomes popular and spreads again to other groups of speakers. Following Pinker’s “euphemism treadmill” [2008], I chose to name this phenomenon the ‘intensification treadmill’, which leads all popular intensifiers to be replaced by other adverbs and to be recycled for other purposes. In other words, the most popular intensifiers originated as vogue words that experienced such popularity that they became lexicalized as intensifying adverbs before losing their intensity and their appeal so that they had to be renewed.

- 7 Before going any further, it may be necessary to explain why I consider that intensifiers have undergone a lexicalization process insofar as they are mostly existing adverbs that develop into intensifiers.
- 8 If the current most common intensifiers were not initially used as intensifying words but as mere adverbs of manner, I posit that, as they started to be used as intensifiers, the meaning of those adverbs of manner expanded so they could be used in contexts in which they would not normally occur. As they gained in popularity, they began to be resorted to more and more frequently and their newly developed intensifying value was adopted into the lexicon. Indeed, the *Merriam Webster Unabridged Dictionary* [2014] corroborates this theoretical stance, for the dictionary displays two distinct entries for each adverb of manner that has developed into an intensifier: one devoted to its use as an adverb of manner and one devoted to its use as an intensifier. As such, I argue that the intensifying value of an already existing adverb of manner may be considered as the result of a lexicalization process, the term 'lexicalization' being used in its broadest sense, i.e. adoption into the lexicon.<sup>1</sup>
- 9 Mustanoja [1960] retraces the evolution of the renewal of the most frequently-used intensifiers from the 14<sup>th</sup> century to the 20<sup>th</sup> century. I reproduce the chronology he established below:
- 13<sup>th</sup> century: *well*
  - 14<sup>th</sup> century: *full*
  - 15<sup>th</sup> century: *right*
  - 16<sup>th</sup> century: *pretty*
  - From the 16<sup>th</sup> century to the 19<sup>th</sup> century: *very*
  - 20<sup>th</sup> century: *really*
- 10 The study I have conducted gives insight into the most frequently-used intensifiers of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Indeed, if *really* was still the most frequently used intensifier at the beginning of the century, it was quickly replaced by *so* (Bordet [2014] and [2015]; Tagliamonte & Roberts [2005]), which itself might be replaced by *totally* in the foreseeable future.
- 11 This particular study will focus on the four most frequently-used intensifiers of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, i.e. *very*, *really*, *so* and *totally*, with occasional references to other formerly frequent intensifiers to illustrate my point when attempting to highlight the correlation between the renewal of intensifiers and the variations in register.

## 2. Presentation of the corpus and method used

- 12 Before I explain the results I obtained from the data I analyzed, I shall introduce the corpus from which I extracted the data for the present study. I based my work on all 9 seasons of the American TV series *How I Met Your Mother* (henceforth *HIMYM*). The conclusions drawn at the end of this paper will therefore apply to American English. Further studies using appropriate data would be necessary to determine if the same conclusions could be applied to other varieties of English.
- 13 I chose this TV series as source material for several reasons. Firstly, *HIMYM* displays remarkable longevity totalling 9 seasons over 9 years, which is quite rare for a TV series. Choosing this particular sitcom ensured enough source material to obtain relevant and coherent data. Secondly, the characters are all between the age of 20 and 40.<sup>2</sup> Since

intensifying words are generally used and created by young people (Tagliamonte & Roberts [2005]), I expect to find data confirming this hypothesis. The fact that the series ran for 9 years should also be an indicator of any evolution in the use of intensifiers, be it the replacement of a frequently-used intensifier by a more expressive adverb, the rise of a newly created one, or a variation in the use of intensifiers as the characters grow older. Thirdly, sitcoms have an oral and humorous nature. Indeed, intensifying words are mostly used in spoken discourse (Tagliamonte & Roberts [2005]) and conveying humor is one of their several functions (Bordet [2014]). Let us also note that intensifiers are firstly created orally before being used in written speech – if they are at all. As Brinton [1996: 33] states, speakers tend to display more subjectivity in spoken discourse. Bordet [2014] and [2015] as well as Xiao & Tao [2007: 241] have shown that one of the defining characteristics of intensification was subjectivity. As a consequence, I believe that this kind of media is particularly relevant for the study of intensification.

- 14 While it may be argued that the source material is fictional English, Tagliamonte & Roberts [2005: 280] explain that they conducted similar studies on both authentic and fictional corpora belonging to the sitcom genre (*Friends*) and the results they obtained were highly similar:
- 15 The *Friends* data exhibit almost the same overall rate of intensification as similar studies of contemporary English, and the same intensifiers occur most frequently: *really*, *very* and *so*. [...] Moreover, in *Friends* the once primary intensifier, *really*, is being usurped by *so* [...]. Taken together, these findings support the claim that media language does reflect what is going on in language and may even pave the way for innovation.<sup>3</sup>
- 16 Building on their study on the TV series *Friends*, which aimed to show that *really* was the most frequently used intensifier, my aim is twofold: I intend to investigate the renewal of intensifiers and confirm the assumption that *really* has already been replaced by another intensifier in terms of frequency of use.
- 17 Even if the present study will only deal with a restricted number of intensifiers, i.e. those that are most frequently used in contemporary American English, there is a wide variety of intensifying devices at work in English (see Bordet [2014]; Bordet & Jamet [2015]), most of which cannot be processed automatically by using software. Even the adverbs commonly used as intensifiers can take on several functions such as adjunct of manner or discourse marker. It was only after a close scrutiny of the context that I was able to classify them under one category. Therefore I had to sort through the data manually and decide whether adverbs such as *really* or *so* were used as intensifiers or as mere discourse markers, which is a function that they developed after being frequently used as intensifiers<sup>4</sup>. I analyzed 208 episodes of 22 minutes each, which amounts to approximately 80 hours of recorded speech material and 678,794 words<sup>5</sup>.

### 3. A closer look at the four most popular intensifiers of the 21<sup>st</sup> century: *very*, *really*, *so* and *totally*

- 18 The table below shows the number of times the adverbs under scrutiny occur in each season:

**Table 1: Number of occurrences found in the corpus**

	<i>Very</i>	<i>Really</i>	<i>So</i>	<i>Totally</i>
Season 1	39	101	144	60
Season 2	44	141	156	54
Season 3	42	130	125	48
Season 4	42	142	123	33
Season 5	47	138	168	36
Season 6	32	154	140	41
Season 7	25	151	149	30
Season 8	37	127	123	35
Season 9	44	142	150	43
<b>Total</b>	<b>352</b>	<b>1226</b>	<b>1278</b>	<b>380</b>

- 19 Even if there is a difference of only 52 occurrences, as Tagliamonte & Roberts [2005] had predicted, the frequency of use of *so* is now higher than that of *really*, which makes *so* the most frequently-used intensifier of this century. *Really* is therefore relegated to the second position, which makes it the second most frequently-used intensifier. *Totally* ranks at number 3 and seems to be on the rise<sup>6</sup>. It may be a potential candidate for the replacement of *so* if its use continues to expand. *Very* has the fourth highest frequency of use, but it is not as high as the frequency of use of the adverb *so*.
- 20 As adverbs, intensifiers are typically used to modify adjectives, but they may also be used to modify other parts of speech such as other adverbs or verbs. In a different study (Bordet [2014]), I showed that intensifiers are subject to a grammaticalization process. The less grammaticalized items tend to be used rather freely while the most grammaticalized intensifiers exhibit restrictions and constraints in syntactic mobility. They also tend to occur in a wide variety of contexts before undergoing restrictions in their distributional patterns as I shall explain in the following subsections devoted to each adverb under scrutiny.

### 3.1. *Very*

- 21 In the corpus I used for this study, *very* and the other adverbs I intended to analyze tend to be used mostly with adjectives expressing opinion or appreciation. They convey the speaker's opinion and subjectivity. Let us note that *very* in particular has reached an advanced stage of grammaticalization and lexicalization. As such, it may be seen as a function word as Bolinger [1972: 28] confirms: “[i]f there are function words, *very* is surely one of them”. Some scholars, such as Stoffel [1901: 33], go as far as saying that *very* is an *empty word*:

It is easy to see that a word which at so early a period was on its way to become an “empty” word, was especially adapted for being used as a colourless intensive.

- 22 Lorenz [2002: 146], does not use the word *empty*, but according to him, *very* has completely lost its original semantic contents causing it to become an intensifier devoid of meaning:

*Very* has undergone full delexicalization: it has lost all of its modal, truthaverring meaning and has retreated to its present-day function as prototypical booster of adjectives (and adverbs).

- 23 This statement seems to be overreaching. If *very* has indeed lost part – maybe most – of its original semantic contents at first glance, making it now impossible to retrieve the notion of ‘truth’ that was previously to be found in the adjective when it is used as an intensifier, I do not consider it as an empty word even if it is used as a grammatical marker.
- 24 Even if the notion of ‘truth’ cannot be perceived at first sight, I put forward the hypothesis that it may be retrieved in all its uses, maybe not in its literal sense but certainly on the metadiscursive level. While *very* has apparently lost the most part of its semantic contents through the grammaticalization process, it has gained some functional properties as well as the intensifying potential proper to intensifying words, even if the high frequency of use led its intensifying force to wane over time, which itself paved the way for the rise of *really*, whose intensifying force was perceived as stronger. That is why *very* is now merely used to refer to ‘high degree’ and not to ‘very or extremely’ high degree<sup>7</sup> which would require the use of more expressive and more intense adverbs as the following examples taken from the corpus tend to confirm:

(1) Lily: The brides are *very* stressed before a wedding. Well, of course, I was under control. HIMYM S04E05

(2) Ted: No, no, no, it’s just... Well, you’re married and we’ve been drinking and I was worried we might... This is a *very* bad idea. HIMYM S03E12

(3) Holly: I loved that he called me right away. It’s *very* romantic. HIMYM S04E21

- 25 In these examples, the notion of truth may not be obvious at first glance. However, I posit that notion of truth is still attached to each occurrence of *very* insofar as it may be retrieved on the metadiscursive level as the following gloss of example (1) shows: The brides experience a high level of stress and I assure you that this statement is true. Such a gloss was always possible with all the occurrences of *very* I analyzed. The concept of ‘hiding-highlighting’ borrowed from cognitive linguistics may be useful to explain the phenomenon at work in the use of intensifiers. Indeed, I put forward that all uses of *very* carry two interpretations and that the original meaning may be retrieved but has shifted to the metadiscursive level and is therefore less perceivable at first glance (*hiding*), while the intensifying force is prevalent (*highlighting*).
- 26 As far as intensity is concerned, all three examples display a high degree of the quality expressed by the adjective that is modified by the adverb. However, a higher degree could be expressed if another, more intense, adverb was to replace *very*, as the following examples illustrate:

(1’) Lily: The brides are *really* / *so* / *totally* stressed before a wedding. Well, of course, I was under control.

(2’) Ted: No, no, no, it’s just... Well, you’re married and we’ve been drinking and I was worried we might... This is a *really* bad idea.

(3') Holly: I loved that he called me right away. It's really / so / totally romantic.

- 27 Replacing *very* by other adverbs entails a change in intensity and therefore demonstrates that *very* is not an 'empty' word devoid of all meaning. It has merely lost part of its intensifying potential and is now restricted to the expression of moderately high intensity, which would correspond to what Quirk *et al.* [1973] name *boosters*, whereas *so* or *totally* would fall under the category of *maximizers* according to their classification.

### 3.2. Really

- 28 As the second most frequent intensifier in contemporary American English, numerous occurrences of *really* are to be found in my corpus. Since it is a relatively recent intensifier, it is assumed that the use of *really* should be relatively constraint-free and that it should occur in a wide variety of contexts. The corpus analysis confirms this hypothesis as *really* is found to occur in front or medial positions, modifying adjectives, adverbs, verbs, prepositional groups, whole propositions as well as the discourse itself in some cases. The fact that *really* is so widespread is a sign of relatively advanced grammaticalization which may result in increased constraints and loss of semantic contents if the grammaticalization process keeps running its course.
- 29 According to Defour [2012], the use of *really* as an intensifier derives from the adverb of manner and dates back to the 16<sup>th</sup> century. From an adverb which originally referred to actual facts perceptible in the extralinguistic world, *really* evolved to denote a high degree of reality (and by extension a high degree of truth) and developed metadiscursive uses, just like *very*, as the following examples illustrate:

(4) Barney: I know Robin was never *really* married. HIMYM S02E09

(5) Charity: Why don't you recite your favorite passage of scripture?

Ted: That's a great idea, Charity. But, *really*, I don't know. I mean how do you choose your favorite passage? It's the Bible; there's so many... great ones... That one from Pulp Fiction's pretty cool. HIMYM S02E11

- 30 In (4), *really* may be replaced by *actually* because it expresses a certain degree of reality, whereas in (5), *really* may be interpreted as a metadiscursive comment even if both interpretations may coexist.
- 31 As far as its intensifying force is concerned, Loewenberg [1982] wrote that *really* was a "signal for hyperbole", which suggests that in the 1980's, *really* had retained all of its expressive potential. Later, Labov [1984] noted that *really* was "one of the most frequent markers of intensity in colloquial conversation", thus signaling an increase in its uses and highlighting that it belonged to the colloquial register. I shall come back to this point in the last subsection of this paper devoted to the issue of variation in register depending on which intensifier is resorted to.
- 32 Following Tagliamonte & Roberts [2005] *really* has replaced *very* historically in terms of frequency and intensity. It is therefore assumed that *really* has kept a higher intensifying force than *very*, even if it has itself been recently replaced by *so* (see following subsection). The following examples extracted from the corpus confirm this hypothesis:

(6) Barney: Hey, guys, what up?

Robin: Barney, where have you been?

Ted: Yeah, we're-we're *really* sorry about that.

Lily: Yeah, so sorry. But seriously, what was up with the tape? No, no, stay.

HIMYM S01E15

(7) Robin: I had a *really* great time tonight. HIMYM S01E01

- 33 In (6), *really* is used to modify the adjective *sorry*. It may very well be substituted by *very* (We're *very* sorry about that) but Ted's being sorry would be lessened because the intensifying force of *very* is not felt as strong as that of *really* from a semantic point of view. Indeed, the speaker resorts to *really* to make his apology sound more heartfelt to show the depth of how sorry he feels. As Benzinger [1971] and later Burridge & Bergs [2016] state, 'humans are natural born exaggerators and hyperbole is a major driving force behind semantic change'. The reasons for exaggerating may range from the need to convey one's emotions as accurately as possible, the need for catharsis, the desire to be understood or to be humorous, to the need to convey a specific ethos of oneself.
- 34 Interestingly, Lily's line also expresses an apology but she uses *so* which has an even stronger intensifying force than *really*, as if to insist on how sorry they both are, which could not have been conveyed by the mere use of *very*. In (7), *really* modifies the adjective *great*. Using *very* in this context would sound unnatural (??I had a *very* great time)<sup>8</sup> most likely because of the semantics of *great*, which in itself refers to a rather intense quality. There are plenty of other similar examples in the corpus. Therefore, it seems to suggest that intensifiers are subjected to semantic constraints. Indeed, a given intensifier may only be used to modify an element that refers to a notion or a quality of lesser or equal intensity. Provided that the function of intensifiers is to boost or enhance a notion or a quality, it is only logical that the semantic contents of an intensifier should refer to more 'intense' notions or qualities than the element it is supposed to modify.
- 35 On a scale of intensity going from the lowest degree to the highest degree, *really* thus seems to be placed higher up than *very* without reaching the highest point – *totally* would be used for that purpose. *Really*, just like *very*, would therefore belong to the class of *boosters* according to Quirk *et al.* But the main semantic difference between the two intensifiers lies in the fact that *really* is used to express a type of intensity that is slightly stronger than that expressed by *very*.

### 3.3. So

- 36 As I have pointed out, both the frequency of use and the intensifying force of *really* have already begun to decline. The direct consequence lies in the emergence of *so* as the most frequent intensifier of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. If *really* was deemed "colloquial" by Labov [1987], this is all the more true of *so*, which is often used by younger speakers.
- 37 *So* derives from old English *swa* which either meant 'in this way', or 'to that extent'. Just like all the other adverbs that became intensifiers, the first uses of *so* expressed manner. According to Tagliamonte & Roberts [2005: 369], the first attested instance of *so* used as an intensifier dates back to 1837.<sup>9</sup>
- 38 Since the use of *so* as an intensifier is relatively recent compared to the other intensifying adverbs I have discussed, it should exhibit few syntactic constraints and it should be found in a wide variety of distributional contexts. According to Bulgin *et al.* [2008], *so* cannot modify attributive adjectives.<sup>10</sup> It can only modify predicative adjectives and other parts of speech. As for the semantic constraints, Bulgin *et al.* report that there are none, which can be explained by the fact that, unlike *very*, *so* is used to express a very high degree of intensity.

- 39 Bulgin *et al.* [2008: 108] also point out that the use of *so* as an intensifier is deemed colloquial by some dictionaries such as *The Merriam-Webster Dictionary of English Usage* [1994] or the *Random House Unabridged Dictionary* [2005]. For Tagliamonte [2007], resorting to *so* as an intensifier is “trendy”: “[T]he television scenario in which the actors are performing champions a trendy expressive style.” This is in keeping with the relatively recent development of *so* as a popular intensifier and the penchant of the young for trendiness.
- 40 As for the intensifying potential of *so*, it generally denotes a higher degree than *very* or *really* do, as the following examples illustrate:

- (8) Girl: I am *so* drunk. When I’m this drunk, I go crazy! *HIMYM* S01E18
- (9) Lily: Baby, baby, I was *so* worried about you. Why didn’t you call me?  
 Marshall: I tried, baby. All the circuits were jammed. But wait, there’s more.  
 After party number four, I figured you guys went to party number five. And  
 so I went there, too, and it is awesome. I want to cry, it is *so* awesome. We  
 have to go there. *HIMYM* S01E11

- 41 In (8), *so* expresses a high degree of drunkenness. Let us underline the presence of *this* used to modify *drunk* in the following utterance. Consequently, if it is theoretically possible to use *very* or *really* to modify *drunk*, it would not be adequate in this particular context because neither would convey the idea of a sufficiently high degree of intensity. In (9), Marshall tells Lily that he has been to an “awesome party”. In this case, the semantic contents of ‘awesome’ seems to require the use of *so* over other intensifiers such as *very* or *really* for the same reason I explained when I discussed example (7). Contrary to *very* and *really*, *so* belongs to the category of *maximizers* according to Quirk *et al.*’s classification (1973), which explains why *so* is the preferred intensifier to modify elements that carry intense semantic contents.

### 3.4. Totally

- 42 *So* has just replaced *really* in terms of frequency and my hypothesis is that it will be replaced sooner or later by another intensifier when its intensifying potential starts to wane. Although there is no way of predicting which intensifier will take its place, I suggest that *totally* may be a potential candidate insofar as it expresses maximal degree and its frequency of use is increasing among young speakers.
- 43 Consider the following examples:

- (10) Barney: It’s because you were *totally*, *totally* lame back then. *HIMYM* S03E16
- (11) Ranjit: Don’t hold back. This divider is *totally* soundproof. *HIMYM* S09E01
- (12) Ted: Sorry, I *totally* got that wrong. *HIMYM* S03E17
- (13) Robin (to Ted): You’re always correcting people.  
 Marshall: You *totally* do that. *HIMYM* S03E308

- 44 In (10) and (11), *totally* reinforces the adjectives *lame* and *soundproof* to their maximum and therefore expresses the highest possible degree. In (12) and (13), interestingly, *totally* modifies the predicate which shows that its uses are expanding and that it is not restricted to the modification of adjectives. As I pointed out earlier, this may be seen as a sign that a process of grammaticalization has begun, even though it is not as advanced as it is for older intensifiers which are subjected to syntactic constraints.

45 I have attempted to show that intensifying adverbs are constantly renewed when they are no longer felt to be expressive enough by analyzing the distributional context in which they occur. However, this does not seem to be sufficient to explain why and how intensifying adverbs that once were highly popular continue to be used in other contexts. I posit that there is a correlation between the intensifying force of adverbs (or the lack thereof), and the variations in register. In order to confirm this hypothesis, it is necessary to investigate criteria such as the situation in which these intensifiers are used, as well as the age/origin of the speakers who resort to those intensifiers. Such criteria will be discussed using examples from my corpus in the following and last subsection of this paper.

#### Variations in language registers

46 A closer look at the distributional context shows that the intensifiers under scrutiny are not used with the same types of adjectives, as the table below shows:

Table 2: Co-occurrence of *very*, *really*, *so* and *totally* with adjectives in the corpus

	<i>Very</i>		<i>Really</i>		<i>So</i>		<i>Totally</i>	
1	Good	16	Good	37	Sorry	112	Cool	8
2	Important	14	Nice	22	Glad	38	Fine	7
3	Bad	11	Sorry	17	Good	38	<b>Awesome</b>	6
4	Happy	8	Great	16	Bad	36	Different	4
5	Nice	8	Hard	15	Hard	35	<b>Hot</b>	4
6	Expensive	7	Bad	12	<b>Sweet</b>	27	Lame	4
7	First	7	Long	12	Long	26	Rad	3
8	Simple	6	Happy	10	Great	25	Right	3
9	<b>Sweet</b>	6	Cute	9	Happy	25	New	2
10	Close	5	Important	9	Excited	23	Okay	2
11	<b>Hot</b>	5	<b>Hot</b>	8	Funny	21	Psyched	2
12	Romantic	5	<b>Sweet</b>	7	Nice	19	Silent	2
13	Special	5	Funny	6	Cool	18	<b>Sweet</b>	2
14	Well	5	Stupid	6	Fast	17	True	2
15	Attractive	4	Cool	5	Cute	16	Affectionate	1
16	Big	4	Excited	5	Stupid	15	Amicable	1
17	Hard	4	Weird	5	<b>Awesome</b>	14	Annoying	1

18	Long	4	Big	4	Romantic	12	Disgusting	1
19	Small	4	Crazy	4	<b>Hot</b>	10	Boring	1
20	Casual	3	Creepy	4	Far	9	Calm	1

47 I selected the twenty adjectives that co-occurred most frequently with *very*, *really*, *so* and *totally*. I used bold characters to highlight adjectives that co-occur with all four intensifying adverbs and italics to highlight adjectives that only co-occur with *so* and *totally*.

48 The results show that even if *very* and *really* tend to modify adjectives denoting emotions or judgements (*good*, *bad*, *nice*, *happy*, *sorry*, etc.), those emotions or judgements appear to be rather moderate. Furthermore, those adjectives usually belong to the formal or standard registers while *so* and *totally* tend to co-occur with adjectives or other parts of speech belonging to colloquial language (*cool*, *awesome*, *hot*, *lame*, *rad*, *psyched*, etc.) and denoting more intense feelings or judgements. Consider the following examples:

(14) Robin: Oh, hey, Simon. Great show. You guys still rock.

Simon: Yeah. They *totally dug* my bass solo. Man! Why can't I always feel this alive?! *HIMYM* S03E16

(15) Marshall: Robin cancelled her date...

Ted: What? She was *totally psyched* for it like an hour ago. *HIMYM* S05E17

(16) Bob: Good to meet you. Sorry I'm late. I just got off the phone with my parents.

Ted: Parents?

Bob: They were *totally on my case*: "What are you gonna do with your life? You're forty-one." and I'm like, "Chillax, snowboarding is a legit career. You ought to be stoked I found my bliss." *HIMYM* S03E09

49 Examples (14) to (16) are particularly relevant to confirm my hypothesis of a correlation between the use of newly created intensifiers, their intensifying force and the age/origin of the speakers. In each example, I underlined lexical elements pertaining to informal language, which tends to confirm that *totally* is mostly used in informal contexts. In (14), Robin is invited to a rock concert and she meets her former high school boyfriend, a musician, on whom she still has a crush. In this particular scene, she behaves like a teenager and not like a grown woman. It is therefore not surprising to find evidence of her 'regression' in her speech. In example (16), the use of *totally* displays the same particularities. Bob is a 41-year-old man and yet he behaves and talks like a teenager. He resorts to abbreviations (*legit*), to the word formation process known as 'blending' (*chill + (re)lax* → *chillax*) and to the informal adjective 'stoked' defined as "completely and intensely enthusiastic, exhilarated" by the *Urban Dictionary*.

50 It is also worth noting that according to the table above, some adjectives (in bold) may be used with all four intensifiers. What is striking, when taking a closer look at the use of the adjective 'hot' for instance, is that its meaning will differ according to the intensifier that modifies it as the following examples show:

(17) Waitress: Careful. The plate is **very** hot. *HIMYM* S01E21

(18) Ted: You got me a hooker. A **really** hot hook – A hooker! *HIMYM* S01E19

(19) Ted: Okay. No. See, look, that all sounds good, and we'll still be friends and move on, but... did he have to be **so hot**? The guy's an Adonis. *HYMYM* S03E01

(20) Barney: She's **totally hot** and really fun. *HYMYM* S03E04

- 51 In (17), *hot* is used to refer to the notion of 'heat' quite literally. In examples (18), (19) and (20) *hot* displays a shift in meaning. Indeed, it is used to refer to the degree of beauty of a person and this use is rather colloquial. While it would not be impossible to use *very* to modify *hot* when it refers to someone's beauty, it is not the case of the occurrences found in our corpus. *Very* is mostly used to modify *hot* when it itself modifies a noun belonging to standard language, while *really*, *so* and *totally* may collocate with a more colloquial use of *hot*.
- 52 This tends to support the idea that there is a correlation between the use of intensifiers and language registers as well as the idea that intensifiers that have lost their intensifying force over time through overuse are recycled to be used in more standard registers. The link between the type of intensifier used and the language register is therefore quite obvious and confirms the assumption I initially formulated.

## Conclusion

- 53 The present study has shown that the renewal process of intensifiers does not merely involve the emergence of newer, fresher intensifiers and the disappearance of older intensifiers whose semantic content is no longer perceived as sufficiently expressive to remain the most popular intensifiers. The waning of the semantic contents of these intensifying adverbs is directly linked to the high frequency of use, which itself causes the loss of their intensifying force. The loss of expressivity leads to the recycling of intensifying adverbs. The formerly highly intense, popular adverbs do not merely cease to be used, but they are restricted to more formal contexts and therefore may occur in written speech while the newly created adverbs tend to be used in informal contexts by younger speakers who wish to affirm that they belong to a specific social group through the use of 'fashionable' expressions. When these expressions are used by other groups, their frequency of use increases, but at the same time they lose their intensifying force and their appeal to the younger speakers, who will create newer, fresher terms, which causes the cycle of the intensification treadmill to start all over again.

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## NOTES

1. Most frequently-used intensifiers are also considered as having undergone a grammaticalization process. I will not be discussing this particular point in this paper, but I argue that the development of intensifiers pertains to both a lexicalization process and a grammaticalization process, which are seen as complementary. See Bordet [2014] for a detailed explanation.
2. According to Tagliamonte & Roberts [2005], the influential groups in the creation and spread of new intensifiers rank between the ages of 18 and 35.
3. My emphasis.
4. According to Traugott [1995; 2012], the development of discourse markers is closely linked to the grammaticalization of adverbs. This phenomenon is referred to as pragmatization and involves a great deal of subjectivity. In a different study Bordet [2014], I have shown that intensifiers that have reached the most advanced stages of grammaticalization tend to undergo a pragmatization process and are used as discourse markers.
5. I used the scripts and corrected them manually when necessary. While it may be argued that the scripts do not take the oral dimension into account, it was a deliberate choice to leave the

phonological dimension aside for this specific study, which concentrates on the semantics of intensifiers as well as on their distributional properties.

6. The slight decline of its use over the last three seasons may be explained by the fact that the characters have grown older. Indeed, most occurrences are found in the speech of younger speakers or speakers who wants to come across as young and trendy.

7. The various degrees of intensity I recognized are based on Quirk *et al.*'s [1973: 214-220] classification of intensifiers which can be divided into the following subcategories according to their semantics: *emphasizers (definitely)*, *maximizers (completely)*, *boosters (very)*, *compromizers (kind of)*, *diminishers (partly)*, *minimizers (hardly)* and *approximators (almost)*.

8. It may also sound unnatural because "very great" is generally used to refer to the size of something.

9. *So* was obviously used before, even in Old English, but not as an intensifier. The use of *so* as an intensifier is thought to derive from the correlated structure *so...that*, in which the THAT proposition had been erased. See Bulgin *et al.* [2008] for further detail on the emergence of *so*.

10. *So* is in complementary distribution with *such (a)* which can only be used to modify attributive adjective. Let us remind the reader of the fact that *such* is etymologically linked to *so* since it is a combination of *swa (so) + like*. See Bordet [2014] for a detailed explanation.

## ABSTRACTS

This paper investigates the renewal of intensifiers in English. Intensifiers are popularized because of their intensifying potential but through frequency of use they lose their force. That is when the renewal process occurs and promotes new adverbs to the rank of intensifiers. This has consequences on language register. "Older" intensifiers are not entirely replaced by fresher intensifiers. They remain in use, but are assigned new functions in different contexts. My assumption is that intensifiers that have recently emerged tend to bear on parts of speech belonging to colloquial language, while older intensifiers modify parts of speech belonging mostly to the standard or formal registers. There seems to be a correlation between the intensifying force of an adverb and language register.

Cet article étudie le renouvellement des intensifieurs en anglais. Ces derniers gagnent en popularité de par leur force intensificatrice intrinsèque mais ils perdent plus ou moins rapidement cette force à cause d'une fréquence d'utilisation relativement élevée. C'est à ce moment-là qu'intervient le phénomène de renouvellement qui va promouvoir de nouveaux adverbes au rang d'intensifieurs. Ceci a des conséquences sur le registre de langue. Les intensifieurs les plus « anciens » ne sont pas pour autant entièrement remplacés par de « nouveaux » intensifieurs considérés plus expressifs. Ils perdurent, mais se voient attribuer de nouvelles fonctions dans différents contextes. Le postulat autour duquel s'organise cet article est le suivant : les intensifieurs nouvellement créés tendent à modifier des éléments du discours appartenant au registre familier, tandis que les intensifieurs plus anciens tendent à modifier des éléments du discours relevant du registre standard ou soutenu. Une corrélation semble exister entre la force intensificatrice d'un adverbe et le registre de langue dans lequel celui-ci est employé.

## INDEX

**Mots-clés:** intensification, intensifieurs, renouvellement, registre de langue, lexicalisation

**Keywords:** intensification, renewal, lexicalization, intensifiers