

"Sometimes it gets really intense": Refining the variable context of adjectival intensification

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Variationists sometimes adopt a type of methodological founder principle, whereby the first authors to study a variable propose constraints that are replicated and reified by subsequent scholars. Reconsidering such constraints can nuance our analyses (see, e.g., Walker & Meyerhoff's (2006) reinterpretation of the "following grammatical category" constraint for copula deletion).

We propose a similar reinterpretation of the *variable context* for a variable diagnostic of rapid sociolinguistic change (Ito and Tagliamonte 2003; Van Herk and OIP 2006; Tagliamonte 2008; Lealess et al. 2009; Barnfield and Buchstaller 2010): the intensification of adjectives (1).

- (1) a. He's **right huge**. (Molly, 3f)
- b. Oh, yes, she's a **very good** baker. (Robert, 1m)
- c. Sometimes it gets **really intense**. (Evan, 3m)

Since Ito & Tagliamonte (2003), researchers have defined the variable context as the full range of intensifiable adjectives (e.g., *red* and *cool* are in, *hand-carved* is out), whether overt intensification occurs or not. We argue that this is appropriate to study intensification as a whole, but not the *choice* of intensifier. Deciding to intensify is a different discourse/pragmatic process than choosing among intensifiers. Thus, studies of intensifier choice should take as their variable context only *intensified* adjective. Otherwise, true effects can be masked by the preponderance of non-intensified tokens (typically over 60%).

We illustrate with data from two corpora of rapidly changing language: spoken Labrador Inuit English (N=1399, 20% intensified) and written online data (N=9441, 34% intensified). Comparing results for frequent intensifiers highlights the differences between contexts. In Labrador, *very*, *pretty* and *real* have the same constraints in both runs, though the relative ordering and weight change, while *right* and *really* show different significant factors. In online data, *really*, *so*, and *very* show changes in ordering and weight. In both cases, the inclusion of zero forms obscures important social and apparent time effects.