REVIEW

Claudia Claridge, **Ewa Jonsson and Merja Kytö**, *Intensifiers in Late Modern English: A sociopragmatic approach to courtroom discourse* (Studies in English Language). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024. Pp. xxiv + 330. ISBN 9781108428668.

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This book addresses a notable gap in the literature on the historical use of intensifiers in the history of the English language. While several studies have examined the use of intensifiers in Old and Middle English, early historical periods lack the sociolinguistic metadata necessary to carefully unpack the social factors contributing to the variation. Studying courtroom records in Late Modern English, however, offers a unique opportunity to examine how our social world and experiences, as well as pragmatic needs, influence(d) language use. Through twelve carefully crafted chapters, this book offers valuable insight into the use of intensifiers through the lens of the *Old Bailey Corpus* (OBC, covering a time depth of approximately 200 years, 1720–1913; Huber *et al.* 2012). The information gained about the relationship between language and power is this book's vanguard, with intensifier choices reflecting hierarchical societal roles and structures. By examining the sociopragmatic correlates of intensifier use in Late Modern English, this work offers a vital contribution to intensifier scholarship and historical sociolinguistic research in general.

Beginning with a cleverly positioned pun, chapter 1 'pleads the case' for (i) the need for additional empirical work on the use of intensifiers in Late Modern English, and (ii) the amenability of courtroom records as an appropriate data source for studying this linguistic variable. After discussing research which suggests that intensification is largely a dialogic phenomenon, occurring more frequently in spoken as opposed to written discourse, the authors introduce how the Old Bailey court records are uniquely positioned to study how intensifiers were used in oral conversation in Late Modern English and how sociopragmatic factors may have influenced, conditioned or constrained their use during this period. The sociopragmatic annotation of the *Old Bailey Corpus* allows for an analysis of how interlocutor power, pragmatic needs and social forces influence language use. The introductory chapter (pp. 1–8) lays out the central research questions of the book that relate to intensifier frequency, choices, distributions, collocations and sociopragmatic influences.

Chapter 2 lays the theoretical and methodological foundations (pp. 9–34). After a careful description of the data, the chapter discusses the rationale for using courtroom

proceedings as a proxy for studying oral language in historical periods. With no access to sound recordings, speech-based texts offer a window into historical spoken language. While using speech-related texts as a proxy for the spoken language of historical periods is not new (e.g. Culpeper & Kytö 2010), the inferences this book makes about the use and distribution of intensifiers in spoken language in Late Modern English are currently unmatched.

Chapter 3 (pp. 35–63) reviews the status quo of research on intensifiers, outlining terminology, taxonomies and classifications. Importantly, the authors differentiate *amplifiers*, 'which scale upward from an assumed norm' (e.g. *very*, *really*, *so*), and *downtoners*, which scale 'downward from an assumed norm' (e.g. *a bit*, *kinda*, *somewhat*). The former can be further categorized into *boosters*, which 'denote a high degree, a high point on the scale', and *maximizers*, which 'denote the upper extreme point on the scale' (Quirk *et al*. 1985: 590). These definitions set up the structure of the following three chapters which are devoted to different scalar types: chapter 5 'Maximizers' (pp. 90–119), chapter 6 'Boosters' (pp. 120–62), chapter 7 'Downtoners' (pp. 163–94). In the latter part of chapter 3, the authors motivate the use of the *Old Bailey Corpus* by discussing research which suggests that intensifiers occur more frequently in spoken language than in written language (Xiao & Tao 2007), in narrative discourse than in non-narrative discourse (Brown & Tagliamonte 2012) and in emotional and attitudinal language (Biber 1988). The authors emphasize the significance of using intensifiers in judicial language: in legal settings 'one's life can be at stake' and 'every word may count', thus intensifiers may play an important role in mediating power.

In chapter 4 (pp. 64–89), the authors delineate the corpus and the methodological approach adopted in this work. The *Old Bailey Corpus* contains sociolinguistic metadata about the role of the speaker (e.g. defendant, judge, lawyer, victim, witness), the speaker's gender (male, female) and social class (higher, lower), factors which are crucial for historical sociopragmatic research. Methodologically, the authors adopt a lexeme-based approach, which is common in traditional corpus linguistic research. The authors search for intensifiers in the corpus based on a list of attested intensifiers and calculate intensifier frequency by comparing how often intensifiers occur every 100,000 words. Results from the distributional analysis of intensifiers reported in this chapter indicate that boosters were more common than maximizers, and both boosters and maximizers were more common than downtoners. These findings corroborate my own crosslinguistic work on intensifiers in present-day Germanic languages (German: Stratton 2020a; Norwegian: Stratton & Sundquist 2022; see also Stratton 2020b for English). Together, this body of work suggests that, generally, speakers feel a greater need to amplify their speech than to moderate it, perhaps motivated by social pressures and forces and the perpetual need to impress and persuade interlocutors as opposed to dissuasion and the need to take possible stances of nonchalance and indifference (Stratton & Beaman 2025). In the context of the courtroom, the authors offer the plausible explanation that downtoners may occur less frequently in judicial settings because of the communicative situation and functions.

The authors also provide some thought-provoking evidence that lower-class speakers may have used maximizers less frequently than higher-class speakers, perhaps showing how power in the real world is encoded in language use.

Chapters 6, 7 and 8 turn to the analysis of specific intensifier functions. *Perfectly* is shown to be the most frequent maximizer which increases over time, *very* is reported to be the most frequent booster, and is by far the most frequent intensifier, and *a little* is reported as the most frequent downtoner but decreases over time across the corpus. Interestingly, the results suggest that maximizers and boosters occur more often with adjectives and adverbs, the former being more frequent than the latter, whereas downtoners modify prepositional phrases most frequently, followed by verbs, then adjectives, then adverbs. These findings suggest that intensifiers exhibit different syntactic functions, pointing to the significance of semasiological research on linguistic variables of this kind.

Chapter 8 offers a deep dive into the factors influencing intensifier use in the corpus ('Multivariate analysis', pp. 195–211). Using data from a tremendously large number of speakers, a multivariate analysis suggests that (i) intensifiers overall decreased over time, specifically boosters, and (ii), next to the variable time, speaker role had the largest effect on intensification, showing how power influences language use. Maximizers were used more frequently by defendants and least frequently by witnesses and victims. One possible interpretation (*my own*) is that because witnesses and victims are not in a position of power, they are less likely to reach the endpoints or the upper end of the scale of amplification, whereas speakers in a position of power may feel more comfortable reaching these upper-end limits.

Chapter 9 'Intensifiers across time' (pp. 212–29) takes a diachronic perspective and chapter 10 'The pragmatics of intensifiers' (pp. 230–62) unpacks the effects of speaker role (e.g. defendant vs. victim). The findings from this work are contextualized with broader work on intensifiers in chapter 11 ('The sociolinguistics of intensifiers', pp. 263–87). Various studies have found that women tend to use boosters more frequently than men, a finding that is corroborated by intensifier proportions in the *Old Bailey Corpus*. However, the reported results suggest that men may use maximizers more frequently than women, but since class and gender are intricately linked, it is not beyond the possibility that the reason men use maximizers more frequently than women is that men are more likely to be in positions of power (e.g. lawyer, judge), and the findings appear to suggest that social class correlates with more frequent maximizer use. However, the authors counter this hypothesis, reporting that these two factors were teased apart in the statistical modeling (pp. 281–2). In their concluding remarks, the authors write that some of the general trends that have been reported on gender and class in modern work on intensifiers are largely true in the historical data too. One such finding is that men use downtoners more frequently than women relative to the respective amplifier use, a finding corroborated in my crosslinguistic work on intensifiers. As we argue in Stratton & Beaman (2025), perhaps the decision for men to use downtoners over amplifiers reflects societal hierarchies, norms and expectations – factors that appear to fluctuate in weighting across a speaker's lifespan.

In their concluding chapter, the authors revisit their original research questions and summarize that:

(i)   boosters were the most frequent category of lexical intensification,
(ii) 90 percent of intensification was achieved through ten intensifiers,
(iii) *very* was the most frequent booster and most frequent intensifier,
(iv) scalar function correlates with the targets of modification (boosters and maximizers modify adjectives and adverbs most frequently, whereas downtoners modify prepositional phrases more often),
(v)   men and women use different types of intensifiers,
(vi) class intersects with the frequency of maximizers.

This book provides a welcome and seminal take on the use, conditioning and functions of intensifiers in Late Modern English in a way that is currently unmatched by any body of published research on intensifiers in this period. Readers can learn about different intensifier types, their functions and how their use changes over time. They learn about how intensifier choices interact with social and pragmatic forces. In my view, the finding that the speaker role (e.g. defendant vs. victim) influences the types of intensifiers used (e.g. maximizers vs. boosters) offers a unique contribution to the study of language and power. Moreover, by studying language through the lens of the *Old Bailey Corpus*, this book provides a methodological contribution beyond the study of any specific linguistic variable and can be shelved among other influential and innovative sociohistorical works.

My only criticisms of this work relate to the methodology. As the authors point out in chapter 4, this work adopts a 'lexeme-based' approach to the study of intensifiers, which means the authors searched for the intensifiers in the corpus and subsequently measured frequency (relative frequency) based on normative measures (i.e. how often each intensifier occurs by 100,000 words). While this approach is common in corpus linguistics, most researchers in the variationist tradition would argue that this method presupposes which intensifiers existed, as the analysis of intensifiers in the data assumes that researchers do in fact know the full range of extant intensifiers. While, admittedly, these assumptions are often predicated on a large body of scholarly work and documentation, approaches of this kind promote what Kohnen (2007) calls 'hidden manifestations'. Put differently, other undocumented intensifiers may remain in the data but are not uncovered due to the methodological approach of preselecting which intensifiers to investigate. Researchers in the variationist tradition also generally challenge text-based/lexeme-based approaches to measuring frequency (cf. Stratton 2020c). By measuring frequency by 100,000 words, the analysis assumes the number of words in a corpus is the envelope of variation, suggesting that each time speakers utter a word represents an opportunity when speakers could use intensifiers. In contrast, in the variationist tradition, frequency is based on the number of times a variable (here, intensifier) occurs in a specific context (e.g. adjectival contexts). Therefore, measuring frequency by occurrence per 100,000

words could theoretically affect any claims made about men and women and their respective intensifier frequency; men may have had more opportunities to speak than women, for instance. However, the authors did acknowledge this constraint and endeavored to address this challenge by using negative binomial regression analysis and including in the model an offset with the log of the speakers' word count, which enabled them to account for differences in intensifier rates despite some speaker variability.

Different methodological traditions are nevertheless a crucial part of the empirical discipline known as linguistics. An advantage of the 'lexeme-based' approach adopted by the authors is the tremendous 'bird's-eye view' of the myriad contexts in which intensifiers can occur (e.g. adjectival, adverbial, verbal, etc.). The decision to adopt text-based, lexeme-based or variationist approaches when studying language variation and change is a methodological question that is simply beyond the scope of this book, and I commend the findings that the authors have been able to unveil as a product of their methodological approach. As the authors rightly point out, by restricting the analysis of intensifiers to a specific variable slot (e.g. adjectival), various other intensifiable contexts fail to be accounted for, which in turn could limit an overall understanding of intensification in general. The lexeme-based approach has certainly allowed the authors to shed light on the differing syntactic functions that various intensifiers had in Late Modern English in a way that may have been unfeasible in the variationist tradition.

In short, intensifiers continue to attract scholarly attention and provide valuable insights into how our social world and pragmatic needs influence language use. This much-needed work offers an invigorated perspective on the social and pragmatic forces operating on intensifier use and bridges a gap in scholarship on historical intensifiers in the history of English. This book lays the groundwork for future research on the historical sociolinguistic patterning of intensifiers and provides new insights into the factors influencing language variation and change more generally.

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