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A linguistic phoenix: The recycling of *very* in Ontario English

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Abstract
For seven years in a row (2016 through 2022), we carried out a project with two goals. One was to train undergraduate students in sociolinguistic interviewing; the other was to catch change among English intensifiers. We expected to find an innovative variant, maybe either *so* or *super*. However, the incoming form we identify is *very*. We propose that, after a long decline, *very* became unusual enough to gain novelty value and be available for recycling. This surprising finding emerges clearly from our fine-grained, real-time data across two registers (speech and instant messaging) despite dozens of different student interviewers and two years of pandemic conditions. The cohesive patterns attest to the fundamental orderliness of language, even in phenomena such as English intensifiers that are characterized by constant, rapid change.

Keywords: intensifiers; Canadian English; linguistic change; pedagogy; real time; computer-mediated communication

Introduction

English intensifiers are a mainstay of the variationist canon, as they are frequent, easy to spot, and prone to rapid change (Barnfield & Buchstaller, 2010; Brinton & Arnovick, 2006:441; Tagliamonte, 2008). They may be localized to a region or a social network (Aijmer, 2018b; Barnfield & Buchstaller, 2010; Bauer & Bauer, 2002; Macaulay, 2006; Mustanoja, 1960; Peters, 1994; Rickford et al., 2007; Waksler, 2012), show a sensitivity to style and register (Aijmer, 2018a; Beltrama & Staum Casasanto, 2017; Brown & Tagliamonte, 2012; Waksler, 2012; Xiao & Tao, 2007), and/or produce short-term fads (Barnfield & Buchstaller, 2010; Macaulay, 2006). Any variety of English will have a large assortment of intensifiers (Peters, 1994:271; Tagliamonte, 2008:390), but there is no guarantee of cross-varietal parallelism in either the inventory of intensifier forms or the constraints operating on them, or both (Barnfield & Buchstaller, 2010;

Bauer & Bauer, 2002; Tagliamonte, 2008). They therefore encapsulate the dynamic but patterned nature of human language in general (Weinreich et al., 1968).

We harness these properties of English intensifiers to run a real-time, cross-modal study of language change embedded in hands-on pedagogy. For each of seven sequential years (2016 through 2022), we trained upper-year undergraduates at the University of Toronto taking LIN351 (*Sociolinguistic Patterns in Language*) in conducting sociolinguistic interviews, following Labov (1970, 1971), as well as Poplack (1989), Tagliamonte and Hudson (1999), Van Herk (2008), Denis et al. (2019), and Gardner et al. (2021). Since intensifiers are highly accessible to undergraduates and tend to engage their interest, at least two previous class projects in sociolinguistics have focused on this variable (Van Herk, 2008; Vaughn et al., 2018). We combine this premise with a longitudinal element, as well as a cross-register design. Each student enrolled in LIN351 did two separate interviews with a single person, one orally (i.e., spoken) and one using computer-mediated communication (CMC). In the cases where individual students granted permission, we retained their data in the Sociolinguistics/Language Variation and Change Laboratory at the University of Toronto. The combined dataset—the LIN351 21st Century Corpus—affords a high-resolution look at linguistic change as it unfolds in real time in English, both spoken and online.

This paper is organized as follows. We first review major findings about English-language intensifiers, with a focus on the varieties of modern English where intensifiers are best studied (British and Canadian English). After that, we describe our methodology and the pedagogical components of the data collection, followed by the hypotheses for the real-time perspective. This is followed by the data analysis and interpretation, then the conclusion.

Background: Intensification in English

Adverbial intensifiers that modify adjectives can be divided into *amplifiers* and *downtoners* (Bauer & Bauer, 2002; Bolinger, 1972; D'Arcy, 2015; Ito & Tagliamonte, 2003; Quirk et al., 1985:445-446, 589-591; Stoffel, 1901; see also Labov, 1984b). Amplifiers increase the degree of the modified adjective, while downtoners decrease it.[1] Amplifiers can be divided into *maximizers*, which denote the largest possible extent (*entirely, absolutely*, and *completely*) (Claridge et al., 2021), and *boosters*, which increase the degree only somewhat (*very, really*, and *so*) (Barnfield & Buchstaller, 2010:256; Ito & Tagliamonte, 2003:258).

Diachronically, intensifiers undergo quick turnover (Barnfield & Buchstaller, 2010; Bauer & Bauer, 2002; Ito & Tagliamonte, 2003:257; Méndez-Naya, 2003; Peters, 1994:269; Quirk et al., 1985:590; Stoffel, 1901). Since novelty helps convey amplification, new intensifiers come along regularly (Ito & Tagliamonte, 2003:257; Peters, 1994:271; Tagliamonte, 2008:391). Conversely, established amplifiers wear out and their meanings become eroded (D'Arcy, 2015; Ito & Tagliamonte, 2003:257; Stoffel, 1901:2; Tagliamonte, 2008:391). Amplifiers that have become over-familiar are often replaced, either with new intensifiers or with recycled older ones that have lived on at low frequencies (Barnfield & Buchstaller, 2010; Buchstaller & Traugott, 2006; Stenström, 2000; Tagliamonte, 2008). This means that synchronically, intensifier

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systems show layering of newer and older forms (Barnfield & Buchstaller, 2010; D'Arcy, 2015; Ito & Tagliamonte, 2003; Tagliamonte, 2008).

Historically, the intensifier *very* is attested as far back as the late 14th century (Breban & Davidse, 2016:238); once it became established, it dominated the English intensifier system until the middle of the 20th century (Barnfield & Buchstaller, 2010; Ito & Tagliamonte, 2003:260; Palacios Martínez & Núñez Pertejo, 2012). Since then, across varieties of English, *very* has declined while *really* has increased. This trajectory has been reported in both northern and southern England (Barnfield & Buchstaller, 2010; Ito & Tagliamonte, 2003; Lorenz, 2002; Palacios Martínez & Núñez Pertejo, 2012), as well as New Zealand (Bauer & Bauer, 2002; D'Arcy, 2015) and the province of Ontario, Canada (Tagliamonte, 2008; Tagliamonte & Denis, 2014).

Intensifiers are known to be sensitive to register and are usually found to be more characteristic of speech than writing (Biber et al., 1999:564-569; D'Arcy, 2015:451; Labov, 1984b:61; Xiao & Tao, 2007). Sub-registers of written language may also diverge in terms of how intensifiers pattern (Xiao & Tao, 2007:247), especially in CMC (Tagliamonte, 2016).

Many studies of intensifiers focus on the language of teenagers or young adults (Bauer & Bauer, 2002; Macaulay, 2006; Palacios Martínez & Núñez Pertejo, 2012; Paradis, 2000; Stenström, 1999, 2000; Tagliamonte, 2016), and some studies of British English have found that young people had a higher rate of overall intensification (Ito & Tagliamonte, 2003:265; Palacios Martínez & Núñez Pertejo, 2012; Xiao & Tao, 2007:253). Amplifiers have also long been associated with women. As Ito and Tagliamonte (2003:260) pointed out, Stoffel (1901) attributed the use of amplification largely to women; Jespersen (1922:250) proposed that women lead changes in amplifiers; and Lakoff (1973, 1975) suggested that intensifiers are a cornerstone of women's usage along with hedging (though see D'Arcy, 2015:464-465). Empirical results are mixed. Some studies of contemporary British English have found that women use more intensifiers than men (Fuchs, 2017; Stenström, 1999), but Ito and Tagliamonte (2003) reported no gender effect in the spoken English of the city of York. Cross-register studies may identify an interaction between gender and register; for instance, Xiao and Tao (2007) found that in the British National Corpus, women used more intensifiers than men in writing, while in speech there was no effect.

Our study, analyzing the outcome of an iterative pedagogical exercise, serves two objectives. The first is pedagogical and will be described in the methodology section. The second has to do with the analysis of the accrued data, focusing on the intensifiers of young adults in and around Toronto and the social and/or linguistic factors that affect the rates of use of leading intensifiers. While we also take gender and register (speech or instant messaging [IM]) into account, the primary aim of the empirical study is to capture rapid change unfolding across a narrow slice of real time. If intensifiers change very quickly, we can reasonably expect to find a change in progress in seven years of data. As Barnfield and Buchstaller (2010:255) highlighted, two studies in the literature have uncovered change in intensifiers over a mere eight-year span: Tagliamonte and Roberts (2005) found the use of *so* on the television sitcom *Friends* correlating with the show's popularity, while Macaulay (2006)'s young adults in Glasgow retreated from the intensifier *dead* in favor of *pure*. Therefore, our goal from

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the outset of the project in 2016 was to catch change unfolding among intensifiers in Ontario English. Specific hypotheses follow after the description of our methodology.

Methodology

The pedagogical design

The data in this study were collected by a subset of students enrolled in Linguistics 351 (LIN351: *Sociolinguistic Patterns in Language*) between 2016 and 2022 at the University of Toronto.[2] LIN351 introduces variationist theory and practice and is aimed at upper-year undergraduates who have already completed an introductory sociolinguistics class. Three of the four homework assignments that we designed for LIN351 train the students in hands-on variationist methods: conducting sociolinguistic interviews, transcribing, extracting, and coding.[3] Each year, we began by emphasizing ethical necessities (see also Schilling, 2013; Tagliamonte, 2006; Van Herk, 2008) and having students practice interview techniques (Labov, 1984a). After that, every student found one person to interview twice, once via speech (the SP interview) and once via IM (the IM interview). The interviews were each required to be 30 minutes or longer. To avoid a conflation of register (SP or IM) and the temporal order of the interviews, we counterbalanced the order such that half of the class would conduct the SP interview before the IM one, and the other half would do the opposite.[4] Either way, to mitigate the chances that the second interview would merely rehash the first, we asked the students to conduct the interviews at least 48 hours apart.

The SP interview was meant to be conducted face-to-face, with the other completed online using synchronous IM.[5] The SP interview was required to be audio-recorded using a common media filetype (e.g., .mp3 or .wav); the IM interview could be recorded on any hardware/software, but students were informed that the full transcript would have to be copied and pasted into a basic text document (.txt).

All of the students were required to sign a standardized consent form, which they submitted in advance and which we checked before allowing them to proceed with data collection. After the interviews, each student submitted their sound recordings and text records. For the SP interviews, they transcribed 20 minutes from any portion of text other than the beginning. For the IM interviews, they were required to add line numbers. Students also submitted interview reports (with demographic information and descriptions of how the interviews had gone) and lists of pseudonyms. Finally, the students extracted and coded the intensifiable adjectives in their data and used a *Microsoft Excel* template to code each token for the linguistic and social factors that had been discussed in class and in tutorials with the teaching assistants (TAs). For the final homework assignment each year, the teaching team pooled the data from that year only, conducted some basic distributional analyses, and asked the students to examine the tables and graphs and do some analysis and interpretation of their collective findings.

Adjustments and limitations

Minor changes in method occurred over the duration of the project. The first year focused on L1 Canadian English speakers, but after that, the sample was expanded to include both L1 and L2 speakers of English from a larger mix of nationalities and

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Table 1. Subsample of the LIN351 21st Century Corpus: individuals ($n = 88$) by year of birth

Year of birth	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003
Individuals	2	4	5	12	9	19	10	13	9	3	2

origins. Given this change, we altered the interview report to collect more information about the linguistic background of the individuals. For the first five years, we tried to balance the sample, at least in terms of binary gender categories.

The final two years of data collection (2021 and 2022) were complicated by the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2021, LIN351 was taught entirely online; in 2022, it was offered in a hybrid fashion, with in-person lectures and online TA-led tutorials. Students in 2021 and 2022 were permitted to conduct their spoken interviews either in person or via *Zoom*. We also allowed electronic submission of all of the paperwork. Given a higher rate of interviewee withdrawals, we also relaxed attempts at balancing the sample design by binary gender.

We refer to the whole set of data collected by the students between 2016 and 2022 as the LIN351 21st Century Corpus. The amount of data from each year varies for two independent reasons. One is that enrollment numbers in LIN351 fluctuated from year to year; we had everything from a few dozen to nearly 100 students. The other is that the proportion of students who granted permission for their interview materials to be archived also changed, especially as the ethics review process by the Delegated Ethics Review Committee (DERC) became more stringent over the years and shifted toward an opt-in model rather than an opt-out one. Regardless, we archived only data from students who gave us permission to do so.

Subsample of the LIN351 corpus used in the present study

Given our goal of tapping linguistic change in real time, we focused on individuals with common social characteristics: between the ages of 16 and 23 years, L1 English speakers, and either born and raised in Canada or brought there before the age of 6 years (see Chambers, 1992; Tagliamonte & Molfenter, 2007). Given these parameters, the data for analysis comprises 88 individuals. Per self-reported labels for gender, 52 are female, 34 male, and 2 nonbinary/other. In practice, almost all the individuals turned out to have spent most or all of their lives in the province of Ontario, but a small proportion have lived elsewhere in Canada.

Table 1 shows the 88 individuals in the subsample divided by year of birth (YOB), binned into three categories: 1993 through 1996, 1997 through 1999, and 2000 through 2003.

Hypotheses

The youngest individuals in the Toronto English Archive (TEA, collected between 2002 and 2006) as investigated by Tagliamonte (2008) were born in 1990 and 1991. They have an intensifier system dominated by the incoming *really*, which accounts for more than 20% of intensifiable contexts. *Very*, having declined in apparent time, joins *so* and

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pretty at rates below 5% each. The oldest individuals in our study were born in 1993, so we anticipate that they will show similar rates of these four intensifiers.[6]

We expect to catch evidence of a new incoming variant in the intensifier systems of the younger individuals in our study. Which variant might this be? The leading candidate is *so*. In the first TEA corpus collected between 2002 and 2006, *so* was secondary but increasing, with a female lead (Tagliamonte, 2008). Just a few years later, in casual CMC registers among local teenagers between 2009 and 2010, "[b]y far the most common intensifier is *so* (13.7%) [while] *really, pretty*, and especially *very* occur at much lower frequencies" (Tagliamonte, 2016:20).

Another contender for an incoming intensifier in Ontario English is *super*. In the TEA, it is just one of "innumerable rare forms" (Tagliamonte, 2008:390; see also Waksler, 2012). Aijmer (2018b:75) suggested that *super* "is quickly and dramatically increasing in frequency" in both American and British English—though Vaughn et al. (2018:306), using perceptual data from undergraduates in the United States, cautioned that *super* might be passé there.

Therefore, if we find an incoming *so* in the LIN351 21st Century Corpus, we expect the change to be led by women; if the incoming form is any other intensifier, we cannot straightforwardly predict a gender effect. While women lead most linguistic changes (Labov, 1990, 2001:284, 306-309), it is unclear whether this would be true of the intensifier system of Ontario English. Evidence for a female lead associated with the major innovation *really* is only partial (Tagliamonte, 2008) and may be limited to non-narrative contexts of conversation (Brown & Tagliamonte, 2012).

In terms of register (SP versus IM), the design of the methodology allows us to test whether, for this variable, informal CMC keeps pace with changes to the spoken language, as predicted by Tagliamonte (2016:5). As long as IM is functioning as a casual register, we expect the IM intensifiers to act like SP ones. While linguistic change generally emerges in spoken (or signed) registers before formal writing (Pintzuk, 2003), we anticipate that colloquial CMC will behave in tandem with speech.

Extraction and coding

Following Ito and Tagliamonte (2003) and Tagliamonte (2008, 2016), we extracted all potentially intensifiable adjectives, whether or not they had an intensifier modifying them. Adjectives without intensifiers are plentiful, which means that proportions of any given intensifier rarely exceed 25% of the whole variable context. While some studies opt to exclude the bare adjectives and focus on intensified contexts only (Barnfield & Buchstaller, 2010; Rickford et al., 2007; Van Herk et al., 2015), we include the unintensified adjectives for the sake of comparability with the earlier studies of Ontario English (Tagliamonte, 2008, 2016; Tagliamonte & Denis, 2014). This consistency in methodology means that we can compare the overall intensification rate over time and establish whether it is stable or changing.

As noted, the pedagogical design had the students extracting and coding tokens from their own data. However, putting them together resulted in a patchwork of hundreds of slightly divergent sets of choices. To ensure a streamlined methodology, we used a script written in *Python* (version 3.9.1) employing the *spaCy* package (Honnibal & Montani, 2017) for part-of-speech tagging that extracted all of the adjectives in

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Table 2. Intensification rate by binary gender and register (*note*: this excludes two nonbinary individuals due to small token counts [$n = 13$ combined])

Gender; register	Not intensified (*n*)	Intensified (*n*)	Intensified (%)	Total *n*
Women; speech	684	436	38.9	1120
Women; IM	341	174	33.8	515
Men; speech	315	176	35.8	491
Men; IM	253	117	31.6	370
Total	**1593**	**903**	**36.2**	**2496**

the LIN351 corpus. All intensifiers—amplifiers and downtoners alike—were included across both attributive and predicative contexts. Adjacent words and phrases likely to be intensifiers were tentatively labeled as such by default; otherwise, the tokens were coded Ø. Finally, we filtered the hits to reflect the subsample of individuals, checked the tokens one by one, removed non-intensifiable contexts (as per Ito & Tagliamonte, 2003), ensured that intensifiers and zeroes had all been accurately identified, and finished coding the linguistic and social factors manually (most of which go unaddressed here because they did not turn out to be relevant to the variation or to the main findings). This methodology yielded 2,509 tokens of intensifiable adjectives from 88 individuals interviewed by LIN351 students between 2016 and 2022.

Results and discussion

Overall intensification rate

Nine hundred ten tokens were intensified for an overall intensification rate of 36.3%. While this is similar to the 36.1% amplification rate reported by Tagliamonte (2008:367) for individuals in Toronto from 2002 to 2004, there are two points of divergence. One is that we have included downtoners, which represented 3.2% of the tokens, while Tagliamonte (2008) found a similarly low rate of downtowners and grouped them with non-intensified contexts. The other difference is that the 2008 study is based on speech alone, rather than both speech and CMC. Our SP data on their own yield an intensification rate of 38.0%—though this still includes downtoners. Regardless, an overall intensification rate in this range supports the notion of a baseline for Canadian English that is higher than that for British English, as represented by York at 24% (Ito & Tagliamonte, 2003).

Intensification rate by social factors

Table 2 differentiates the intensification rate by gender and register. There are main effects for both, but no interaction. As per some earlier reports, women use more intensifiers than men (Fuchs, 2017; Jespersen, 1922; Stoffel, 1901; Stratton & Sundquist, 2022). There are more intensifiers in speech than in IM; this matches the findings of cross-register studies of intensifiers by Biber et al. (1999) and Xiao and Tao (2007).

As diachronic stability in the intensification rate is unlikely (Barnfield & Buchstaller, 2010; D'Arcy, 2015; Ito & Tagliamonte, 2003; Tagliamonte & Denis, 2014), Table 3 investigates intensifier use by the YOB of the individuals in the data. The trajectory

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Table 3. Intensification by year of birth (binned)

Year of birth	Number of individuals	Not intensified (*n*)	Intensified (*n*)	Intensified (%)	Total *n*
1993 through 1996	23	373	243	39.4	616
1997 through 1999	38	722	386	34.8	1108
2000 through 2003	27	504	281	35.8	785
Total		**1599**	**910**	**36.3**	**2509**

Table 4. Individual intensifiers with ≥10 tokens each, with the two additional options (rarer intensifiers and zero tokens) included for context

Intensifier	*n*	%
really	206	8.2%
so	167	6.7%
very	162	6.5%
pretty	110	4.4%
super	55	2.2%
kind of	40	1.6%
just	25	1.0%
too	22	0.9%
a little	14	0.6%
quite	10	0.4%
such	10	0.4%
other intensifier	89	3.5%
zero tokens	1599	63.7%

shows a small decrease from the first cohort to the subsequent two, though combining the subsequent two to check for a statistically significant change returns only a marginal result (Pearson's χ^2: $p = 0.059$, $df = 1$; $n = 2509$). There is no clear evidence of a change in the intensification rate, especially if age-graded behavior in Toronto leads people in their twenties to use more overt intensifiers than everyone else (Tagliamonte, 2008:367).

With the assumption of a stable intensification rate, we proceed to an analysis of the intensifier variants themselves.

Distribution of intensifiers

Table A1 in the Appendix contains a list of the 56 distinct lexical items that serve as intensifiers in the data. Nearly half of these ($n = 26$) appear only once each in the LIN351 subsample. Table 4 separates the variants represented by 10 or more tokens apiece (as per Tagliamonte, 2008:368). In descending order, the top five are *really, so, very, pretty*, and *super*.

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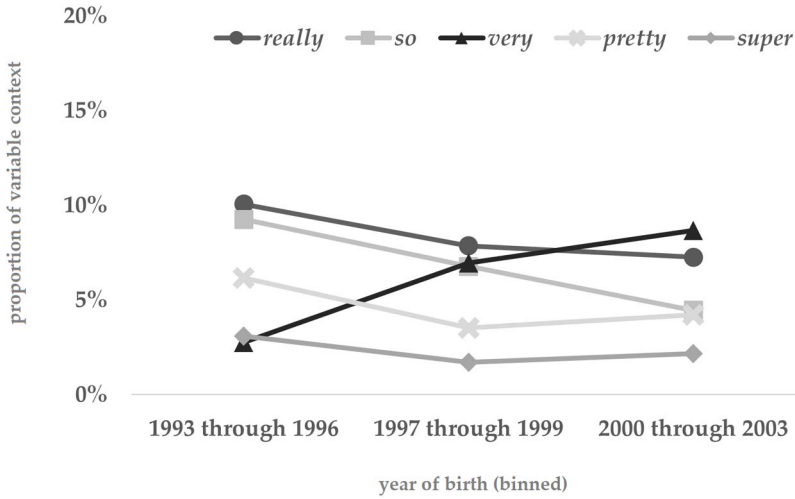

Figure 1. Rates of the top five intensifiers by year of birth.

The most prevalent intensifier in the LIN351 subsample data is *really*, just as it was in the TEA (Tagliamonte, 2008:368). However, its rate is unexpectedly low. In the TEA, *really* reached 13.0% (Tagliamonte, 2008:368). In a set of smaller towns of southeastern Ontario, it was "approximately 14%" (Tagliamonte & Denis, 2014:114). This included both the young people and their older counterparts who had much less *really*. In this subsequent study with young adults alone, *really* is less frequent than anticipated. However, the relative order of *really, so*, and *pretty* is the same as in the youngest individuals in the TEA (Tagliamonte, 2008:372). *Very* is ranked higher than *pretty* rather than below it. *Super* is fifth at 2.2%. It was so much lower in the TEA, collected between 2002 and 2006, that it was combined into the "other" category, which even all together represented only 1.4% of the data (Tagliamonte, 2008:368, Table 3).

Diachrony

Figure 1 breaks down the distribution of intensifiers by binned YOB.

The oldest cohort has the intensifier system that we expected based on the prior studies of Toronto English (Tagliamonte, 2008, 2016): *really* is the most prevalent, *so* and *pretty* are also well established, and *very* is low frequency. Contrary to expectation, neither *so* nor *super* is increasing by YOB. Rather, there is a net decline among all the top intensifiers except *very*. Within the space of 11 years of birth, *very* becomes the most prevalent intensifier in the system. The individuals born between 2000 and 2003 are using it even more than they use *really*. The intensifier *so* falls the most dramatically, and *super* is stagnant in fifth place.

We had expected to find a new incoming form among intensifiers in seven years of real-time data collection, but it is curious that *very* would be the only intensifier increasing in frequency. *Very* is an older and more conservative variant (Aijmer, 2018b; Barnfield & Buchstaller, 2010:263; D'Arcy, 2015; Fries, 1940:204-205; Tagliamonte, 2008; Xiao & Tao, 2007:259). As of 2009-2010, it was the only

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Table 5. Rates of the top five intensifiers by gender ($n = 2509$)

Gender	*really*	*so*	*very*	*pretty*	*super*	Total *n*
Women	9.2%	8.1%	7.0%	3.1%	2.1%	1635
Men	6.2%	3.8%	5.3%	6.7%	2.4%	861
Nonbinary	15.4%	15.4%	7.7%	7.7%	0.0%	13

intensifier that Tagliamonte (2016) found in academic essays written by young adults; in CMC registers from the same individuals, *very* is a distant fourth after *so, really*, and *pretty*—consistent with being at the end of a long downward trend. What could explain the shift to higher rates of *very*, of all things, in Figure 1?

Before we can confidently conclude that this is a change in progress, we consider and evaluate two alternative explanations that could have been caused by pandemic-induced changes to our methodology in 2021 and 2022. One has to do with gender. After 2020, given the additional practical challenges, we no longer aimed for a balanced gender sample in the individuals interviewed by our students. If (1) *very* is an older, more-standard variant, if (2) women generally use higher rates of more-standard variants (Labov, 1990), and if (3) the LIN351 sample became increasingly female, this could account for the increasing use of *very* without an appeal to linguistic change. The other alternative explanation has to do with how the spoken interviews were conducted. While videoconferencing does not automatically undermine the informal nature of a spoken sociolinguistic interview (Gardner & Kostadinova, 2024), the presence of a formal variant, that is, *very*, might signal nothing more than an effect of subtle modality change.

Examination of the top five intensifier variants by the individual's gender, in Table 5, suggests that women use slightly more *very* than men do.

However, analysis of the gender distribution by year of interview (not shown in Table 5) reveals that the proportion of women hovers around 50% and does not increase after 2020. Therefore, the rise of *very* in Toronto between 2016 and 2022 cannot be attributed to the possibility of more female interviewees later in the project.

Similarly, in 2021, when nearly every LIN351 student did a spoken interview via videoconferencing rather than in person, the rate of *very* is—if anything—relatively low (5.6%). Although the proportion of *very* is highest in 2022, only five out of 88 individuals in the subsample were interviewed that year. We thus conclude that neither the gender balance of the sample nor the introduction of videoconferencing can account for the increase in *very* in our data over time.

One subtler alternative explanation remains with respect to the IM data. The original methodology for data collection was better-suited to 2016 than to 2022, given the pace of technological change and how it affects communicative norms (see Tagliamonte, 2016:8-9). The original setup specified that the IM interview had to be conducted through keyboards attached to computers. This directive proved to be more unusual in 2022 than it had been in 2016; six years later, it was less common for students to have an IM conversation this way. Several LIN351 students in the later years reported that they rarely/never talked to their friends via anything like the IM setup we had in mind. This risked making the task somewhat or highly artificial, even for pairs of good friends—possibly undermining access to the vernacular. For this reason,

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Table 6. Rates of the top five intensifiers by register ($n = 2509$)

Register	*really*	*so*	*very*	*pretty*	*super*	Total *n*
Speech	9.1%	7.1%	7.1%	4.5%	2.1%	1612
Instant messaging	6.7%	5.9%	5.4%	4.2%	2.3%	897

toward the end of the seven-year period, the later instructor (Brook) told the students that they were welcome to message each other with smaller devices and/or using their thumbs if they wanted, as long as they had an easy way of extracting the transcript at the end. It remains possible that what the 2021-2022 students ended up doing for the IM condition was not a good match for anything they were already doing with their friends. However, this possibility is unlikely to be the explanation for the higher rates of *very*. Although register mismatch could have amplified rates of *very* in IM selectively, Table 6 shows that the rates in the SP data from the same set of 88 individuals are higher still.

Multivariate analysis

Table 7 shows the results of a binomial mixed-effects logistic regression conducted in *R* (version 4.2.1, R Core Team, 2022) with *very* treated as the predicted variant versus

Table 7. Mixed-effects logistic regression of the effects of gender (excluding tokens from nonbinary individuals), sexuality (excluding tokens from individuals with unknown orientations), YOB (binned into three groups), and register ($n = 2285$)

Fixed effects	Rate	Estimate	Std. error	*z*-value	*p*-value	
Intercept	6.5%	−2.62	0.29	−9.14	<0.001	***
Gender						
Women	7.0%					
Men	5.3%	−0.08	0.27	−0.31	0.76	
Sexuality						
LGBQ+	8.9%					
Straight/heterosexual	5.4%	−0.31	0.28	−1.13	0.26	
YOB (binned)						
1993-1996	2.8%	−0.99	0.36	−2.79	<0.01	**
1997-1999	6.9%					
2000-2003	8.7%	0.06	0.28	0.21	0.83	
Register						
Instant messaging	5.4%		(reference level)			
Speech	7.1%	0.23	0.21	1.10	0.27	
Random effect				Variance	SD	
Individual				0.40	0.63	

**indicates "highly significant" ($p < 0.01$),
***indicates "very highly significant" ($p < 0.001$).

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all the other alternatives (including zeroes). We include gender (for individuals who reported a binary gender identity), sexuality (given the hint of a queer lead in the proportions), binned YOB, and register.

The number of tokens of the predicted variant *very* is limited ($n = 145/2285$ intensifiable adjectives), and only one of the factors attained significance: binned YOB. The individuals in the oldest group (those born between 1993 and 1996) have significantly less use of *very* than the individuals in the middle group (born between 1997 and 1999). The youngest group exceeds the *very* rate of the middle group, though only slightly and not enough to cause an additional significant increase.

Given statistical verification and the rejection of three alternative explanations for the apparent increase in *very* by YOB, we conclude that this is a genuine case of linguistic change, with *very* as the incoming intensifier. The hints of leads by women and/or queer individuals do not attain significance, nor does the higher proportion in speech than in IM.

Discussion

A resurgent very

While we anticipated finding an incoming intensifier, the innovation that we discovered is neither *so* nor *super*, but arguably the least likely contender: *very*. This variant has been a prominent intensifier in English for more than 500 years (Breban & Davidse, 2016:228; Ito & Tagliamonte, 2003:265; Mustanoja, 1960:327). It spent most of that time as the majority form (D'Arcy, 2015:485), but toward the end of the 20th century, *very* declined in the vernacular in favor of *really* across several varieties of English, including British, New Zealand, and Canadian (Barnfield & Buchstaller, 2010; Bauer & Bauer, 2002; D'Arcy, 2015; Ito & Tagliamonte, 2003; Lorenz, 2002; Palacios Martínez & Núñez Pertejo, 2012; Tagliamonte, 2008; Tagliamonte & Denis, 2014). By the beginning of the 21st century, *very* was "out-going" in Toronto (Tagliamonte, 2008:382), "secondary" in southern England (Palacios Martínez & Núñez Pertejo, 2012:791), and "old-fashioned" in British and American Englishes alike (Aijmer, 2018b:61). As recently as 2009-2010, in the written English of young people in Toronto, *very* was characteristic only of formal academic prose, and rare in casual registers of CMC (Tagliamonte, 2016:22). In other words, only a few years ago, in young adults in the same city, *very* was an old prestige variant—anything but vernacular. Regardless, our results find *very* returning to wider use in young Canadian adults who are mostly from Ontario. From data collected between 2016 and 2022, our youngest cohort (born between 2000 and 2003) uses *very* more than they use *really* in both speech and IM. We have considered, but ruled out, three alternative accounts of a rise in *very*. This, in conjunction with statistical verification of the increase between our oldest cohort (born in 1993 through 1996) and middle cohort (1997 through 1999), has led us to interpret the YOB effect as a linguistic change. Still, such a thing seems surprising. Could *very* be the incoming dominant intensifier, after so recently seeming destined for obsolescence?

If the individuals in our data are representative of Canadian English, and if Canadian English is patterning as per American English in this respect, then complementary evidence for the notion of a resurgent *very* comes from the results of Vaughn et al. (2018). Like Van Herk (2008) and this study, the authors focused on

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Table 8. Ranking of five intensification options by social meaning in two groups of respondents, from Vaughn et al. (2018:306, Table 1)

	Intensifier order (highest to lowest)	
	Youngest listeners (18-24; $n = 378$)	Oldest listeners (60-81; $n = 63$)
Hip/trendy	*very* > *really* > *real* > *super* > *none*	*super* > *none* > *real* = *really* > *very*
Millennial	*very* > *really* = *real* > *super* > *none*	*very* > *none* > *super* > *really* > *real*
Immature	*really* > *very* > *real* > *super* = *none*	*super* > *none* = *real* > *really* > *very*
Annoying	*really* > *very* = *real* > *super* > *none*	*super* > *very* > *none* > *really* > *real*
Cool	*real* > *very* = *really* > *none* > *super*	*none* > *real* > *super* = *really* > *very*
Friendly	*very* > *real* = *none* > *really* > *super*	*super* > *real* > *very* > *really* > *none*
Articulate	*none* = *super* > *real* > *very* > *really*	*really* > *real* > *very* > *none* > *super*
Old-fashioned	*super* = *none* > *really* > *real* > *very*	*really* > *real* = *very* > *super* > *none*

intensifiers as an accessible, interesting case study for undergraduates diving into the study of language variation and change. Unlike Van Herk (2008) and the methodology employed here, Vaughn et al. (2018) probed the possible social meanings of intensifiers in English in the United States. The results for *very*, reproduced in Table 8, are dichotomous. Respondents across age groups report that *very* sounds the most "intelligent" of *very, really, real, super*, and a bare adjective—exactly as could be expected of an old prestige form. Likewise, older respondents (those 60 to 81 years old at the time of the study) position *very* as the least "hip/trendy," the least "cool," and moderately old-fashioned. However, "listeners' associations … have almost completely swapped over apparent time" with respect to the perception of *very* (Vaughn et al., 2018:306). Among young-adult respondents, *very* places first for "hip/trendy," "friendly," and "Millennial;" second for "annoying" (after *really*); and an astonishing *last* for "old-fashioned."

Vaughn et al. (2018) examined perception rather than production, and American rather than Canadian English. However, we suggest that their findings help to explain ours, and vice versa. While *very* retains its connotation of "intelligence" from earlier times, a resurgence in use among young people would go hand-in-hand with connotations of being "hip/trendy" and "cool." Beltrama and Staum Casasanto (2017) found exactly this correlation for the intensifier *totally* in perceptual data from American English, such that linguistic contexts more characteristic of younger speakers also sound younger to onlookers.

Accounting for very *on the upswing*

The associations of *very* with formality, standardness, and the written word endured until recently. In young adults in Toronto, as recently as 2009-2010, *very* was seldom found outside formal writing (Tagliamonte, 2016). Of course, quick change in the intensifier system is commonly observed (Barnfield & Buchstaller, 2010; Macaulay, 2006; Peters, 1994:269; Quirk et al., 1985:590; Tagliamonte & Roberts, 2005), and intensifiers are easily recycled (Bolinger, 1972:18; Buchstaller, 2006; Ito & Tagliamonte, 2003; Stenström, 2000; Tagliamonte, 2008:362). This was the motivation for the selection of intensifiers as the focus of this compressed and granular real-time

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study. However, examples of rapidly incoming intensifiers—such as *well* in British English (Aijmer, 2018b, 2021; Stenström, 2000)—tend to come from the vernacular end of the system rather than the conservative end. In this case, intensifier recycling has unexpectedly seized upon an old prestige form. It is almost as if young Canadian English users had enthusiastically re-adopted the obsolescent *whom* (see Bohmann et al., 2021) as a way of signaling coolness and hipness. Can recycling be convincingly linked to the revival of *very*?

In classic intensifier recycling, once-prominent variants become low in frequency, "tend[ing] to remain in the reservoir of forms that users may deploy to intensify" (Barnfield & Buchstaller, 2010:281). It must be the case that, just as newly popular intensifiers become victims of their own success by wearing out, untrendy intensifiers may quickly regain novelty and become freshly attractive, even to young adults looking for new vernacular options. As per Beltrama and Staum Casasanto (2017:178), "marked variants tend to be particularly salient carriers of social meanings across phonological, morphosyntactic and semantic types of variation." More specifically, Van Herk and Childs (2015) suggested that when a variant has been declining, it might suddenly *acquire* salience and the ability to pick up social meaning. While nothing guarantees immortality for that given intensifier,[7] in this case, a restricted *very* must have become marked enough to catch the collective attention of young adults.

Arguably, the larger mystery in our findings is why *so* is not the incoming form, after it seemed poised to move into this role in Toronto (Tagliamonte, 2008, 2016). Relative to *very*, the intensifier *so* may have disadvantages both linguistic and social. Linguistically, *so* originated as a postverbal comparative structure and still lacks a productive attributive use, as in **a so exciting day* (Bauer & Bauer, 2002; Tagliamonte, 2008:374). In the data for this study, *so* is only ever found predicatively (e.g., *the day was so exciting*).[8] This means that *so* cannot compete as an intensifier of attributive adjectives.

Socially, *so* and *pretty* are variants that Tagliamonte (2008) found to have opposite gender associations in the TEA, with *so* being favored by women and *pretty* by men. Figure 2 splits the proportions of the top five intensifiers by binary gender and register, showing a straightforward replication. The gender connotations of *so* and *pretty* in Toronto are stable and enduring; they affect both speech and IM.

This means that among the top five intensifiers, if the older incoming form *really* is losing its novelty and strength as an intensifier, *very* may be the most obvious gender-neutral alternative. In the last few years, Western societal discourse has come to recognize the complexity and nuance of gender (see Airton, 2019) and inspired large numbers of conversations about inclusivity and language (e.g., Conrod, 2019; Konnelly & Cowper, 2020), possibly giving an advantage to forms with gender-neutral connotations. For instance, in a study of changing attitudes toward *y'all* in the United States, McCurdy (2022) found insufficient explanatory power in the linguistic/functional argument—that English benefits from a distinction between singular and plural second-person pronouns. He proposed that the key incentive was instead the clearly gender-neutral nature of *y'all*, relative to *you guys*, in American English. Among groups such as northerners who have little historical precedent for the use of *y'all*, its adoption can signal progressivism and/or queerness.[9]

Another possibility, not mutually exclusive with the first, is that *very* has caught the edge of what Crystal (2008:147) referred to as "comic archaism." Aijmer (2018a:75)

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Figure 2. Rates of top five intensifiers by register and two gender categories ($n = 2496$).

reported online metacommentary suggesting that *very* has "a kind of anachronistic charm." Across variables, minor variants from the periphery of the feature pool are easily used in language play (Bohmann et al., 2021; Brook & Blamire, 2023; Crystal, 1998:147, 2008:147; van Compernolle, 2008:331). Given that intensifiers are a showcase for linguistic creativity (Ito & Tagliamonte, 2003), we should expect intensifier systems to attract playful language of all kinds (see Brook & Blamire, 2023:521-522).

Conclusion

For seven consecutive years, we used the teaching/research enterprise to conduct a pedagogical project in an undergraduate course to train students in sociolinguistic interviewing techniques. After 2022, we pooled the data that we were granted permission to use in ongoing research and used it to look for real-time change in English-language intensifiers: a linguistic system known to be the site of rapid, creative layering of multiple forms over time. The findings support our prediction that we would discover an incoming form—though we did not suspect this would be the established prestige form *very*. However improbable this outcome seems, no alternative interpretation could account for this development. Moreover, statistical modeling confirmed a significant increase in the rate of *very* between the oldest cohort (born 1993 through 1996) and the younger two cohorts (born 1997 through 1999 and 2000 through 2003). We conclude that in Ontario English, *very* has been enthusiastically recycled by young adults. This finding is consistent with recent trends in American English, where *very* is reported to have the social meaning of young, hip, cool, and definitely *not* old-fashioned (Vaughn et al., 2018).

To account for these findings, we have suggested that for young adults, *very* has become just marked enough (as per Van Herk & Childs, 2015) to have renewed appeal as an intensifier. Elements that may support the re-emergence of *very* include: (1) *very* has a linguistic advantage over the syntactically restricted *so*; (2) it is more gender-neutral in Ontario English than either *so* or *pretty*; and (3) it might signal a facetious hyper-standardness to young people (Aijmer, 2018a:75).

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Given the nature of the data, our findings also have implications for broader issues in the field of variationist sociolinguistics. Most notably, the amount of coherence in the data speaks to the ability of naturalistic data to reflect linguistic change straightforwardly (and to the underlying orderly quality of those changes, as per Weinreich et al., 1968). Despite being distributed among hundreds of different LIN351 students, two separate instructors, multiple TAs, and timepoints before and during the COVID-19 pandemic, systematic patterning emerges from a robust vernacular.

The revival of *very*, odd though it seems, emphasizes the extent to which constant change is an integral part of the intensifier system (Bolinger, 1972:18; Buchstaller, 2006; Ito & Tagliamonte, 2003; Stenström, 2000; Tagliamonte, 2008:362). Only a short period off-stage as a minor intensifier was enough for it to be repurposed, upcycled, and imbued with new social meanings (Vaughn et al., 2018). In contemporary English, then, *very* is dead—long live *very*.

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Competing interests. The authors declare none.

Notes

1. None of this means that an individual lexical item, or a token thereof, is necessarily easy to classify. A few are often ambiguous, such as *quite, pretty*, and *just* (Diehl, 2005; Ito & Tagliamonte, 2003:278; Labov, 1984b; Macaulay, 2002; Nevalainen & Rissanen, 2002; Paradis, 2000; Stoffel, 1901:278; Wagner, 2017:64). For the sake of comparability with earlier studies, we included all the potentially ambiguous lexical items and make no attempt to disentangle the meanings.

2. In 2016, 2017, and 2018, the class was taught by Tagliamonte with Blamire as the TA. In 2019, 2020, 2021, and 2022, the class was taught by Brook, with the support of additional TAs.

3. In accordance with the requirements of the University of Toronto Research Ethics Board for Social Sciences, Humanities and Education, we procured ethics clearance for data collection as part of normal undergraduate coursework. This was accomplished on a yearly basis between late 2015 and late 2021 via a DERC within the Department of Linguistics. We use materials in this study only from students who provided permission.

4. The strategy that was the simplest was tying the interview order to whether the students' ID numbers were even or odd.

5. There were a few cancellations/withdrawals on the part of students' chosen interviewees; these were handled on a case-by-case basis depending on the timing of the withdrawal relative to the progression through the semester. A small number of students were granted exemptions for reasons related to disabilities and/or other extenuating circumstances. These students typically did an alternative transcription activity—for instance, with an existing YouTube video of an interview—and their data were not included in the corpus.

6. A caveat is that at the time of data collection from 2002 to 2006, these speakers had not yet gone through adolescent incrementation (Denis et al., 2019; Labov, 2001:446-465), and thus their rates of the incoming *really* could be underestimated from the TEA results alone.

7. For instance, the Old English *swiþe* died out (Méndez-Naya, 2003; Mustanoja, 1960).

8. A reviewer points out *such* as a semantically comparable option in attributive position (*such an exciting day*), but we found only 10 tokens of *such* as an intensifier and have treated it as a separate variant.

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9. While we did not find a statistically significant effect of LGBQ+ sexuality on the use of *very*, there may be in-group uses of the word, both morphosyntactically and phonetically (L. Konnelly, p.c., September 17, 2023). One possibility from Black drag circles in the United States involves the phrase *very that*, or additional [*very* + DP] structures that include overt determiners (B. McCleary, p.c., January 24, 2024). While we cannot evaluate whether the resurgent *very* has roots in any queer communities, we note that hyperformal language is sometimes a part of queer in-group language play (Eckert, 2012:96; Fought & Eisenhauer, 2022:187; Podesva, 2004, 2007; also M. H. Gardner, p.c., February 16, 2024).

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Appendix

Table A1. Distribution of individual intensifiers in our data

Intensifier	*n*	%
(non-intensified)	1599	63.7
really	206	8.2
so	167	6.7
very	162	6.5
pretty	110	4.4
super	55	2.2
kind of	40	1.6
just	25	1.0
too	22	0.9
a little	14	0.6
quite	10	0.4
such	10	0.4
enough	7	0.3
a bit	6	0.2
all	6	0.2
that	5	0.2
completely	5	0.2
relatively	4	0.2
a little bit	3	0.1
fairly	3	0.1
fully	2	0.1
slightly	3	0.1
this	3	0.1
absolutely	2	0.1
crazy	2	0.1
freaking	2	0.1
fucking	2	0.1

(*Continued*)

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Table A1. (*Continued.*)

Intensifier	*n*	%
incredibly	2	0.1
ish	2	0.1
mostly	2	0.1
totally	2	0.1
a lot	1	0.0
AF	1	0.0
almost	1	0.0
amazingly	1	0.0
-ass	1	0.0
dead	1	0.0
deadly	1	0.0
entirely	1	0.0
exceptionally	1	0.0
extra	1	0.0
friggin	1	0.0
half	1	0.0
highly	1	0.0
mildly	1	0.0
moderately	1	0.0
overly	1	0.0
particularly	1	0.0
perfectly	1	0.0
predominantly	1	0.0
real	1	0.0
semi	1	0.0
somewhat	1	0.0
sort of	1	0.0
unusually	1	0.0
way	1	0.0
yay	1	0.0
Total	**2509**	**100**

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