

Age and Intensifier Use on Gogglebox: An Australian English Account

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1 Introduction

Imbued with versatility and zest, intensifiers have long been used to index the originality of a speaker's attitude (Peters, 1994). Intensifiers' association with individual thought means that they are invariably tied up with identity and vary greatly from speaker to speaker. This variation in personal style makes intensifiers an ideal subject for a sociolinguistic analysis, where the apparent randomness of their use can be patterned according to social factors (Meyerhoff, 2019).

One such factor that is viewed as influential in understanding intensifier use is age (Barbieri, 2008; Saarenpää, 2016; Tagliamonte, 2008; Xiao & Tao, 2007). The ability for language to indicate age is what guides speakers' linguistic tendencies and preferences (Xiao & Tao, 2007). This belief is reflected in the long-held generational assessment of language use, where younger speakers are perceived to prefer non-standard modes of expression while older speakers are taken to favour more conservative ones (Eckert, 1997; Stenstrom, 2000). According to Poynton (1990), this generational difference is particularly salient in the realm of intensifiers, in terms of how frequently they are used and which specific types are drawn upon.

An intensifier's use in "impressing, praising, persuading [and] insulting" (Partington, 1993, p. 178) means that their interaction with factors, such as age, can be best observed from the domain of reality television. The spontaneity of this genre motivates a speaker to fulfil a wide range of social functions with language and capture the attention of their audience in doing so. Reality television has therefore been a favourable context for a number of linguistic studies seeking to access speakers' authentic vernaculars (Coupland, 2007; Eberhardt & Downs, 2015; Sonderegger et al., 2017).

The objective of this study is hence to investigate the relationship between age and intensifier use from the perspective of Australian English. Owing to the advantages offered by reality television, this relationship will be analysed according to the speech of diverse age groups on the series, *Gogglebox Australia*.

2 Background

The intersection between age and intensifier frequency has been studied across multiple varieties of English. In their corpus studies on British and American English, respectively, both Xiao and Tao (2007) and Barbieri (2008) found that intensifiers are used much more commonly

in younger speakers compared to older speakers. This finding consolidates prior studies on intensifier use (Paradis, 2000; Stenstrom, 2000), which observe that younger speakers are more inclined to exaggerate assertions rather than express them in a neutral manner. While older speakers are also found to use less intensifiers in New Zealand English, Saarenpää (2016) corpus study revealed that the highest usage comes from middle-aged speakers, rather than younger speakers. Divergence is again found in the case of a Canadian English (Tagliamonte, 2008) corpus study, where overall intensifier use was levelled across the generations.

Undertaken in apparent time, these studies also seek to determine whether generational change is taking place across specific intensifiers. The intensifiers *very*, *really* and *so* are consistently the most popular intensifiers across all studies (Barbieri, 2008; Saarenpää, 2016; Tagliamonte, 2008; Xiao & Tao, 2007). In British, Canadian and New Zealand Englishes, *very* is the most popular intensifier for speakers above 50, with its use increasing steadily from the younger to older generations (Saarenpää, 2016; Tagliamonte, 2008; Xiao & Tao, 2007). From the opposite view, *really* is the most common intensifier among speakers below 50 in American, Canadian and New Zealand Englishes (Barbieri, 2008; Saarenpää, 2016; Tagliamonte, 2008), with its use decreasing gradually from younger to older generations. *So* does not have a clear increasing or decreasing pattern in these studies, and therefore does not illustrate the same generational change that is seen across *very* and *really* in certain varieties (Barbieri, 2008; Saarenpää, 2016; Tagliamonte, 2008; Xiao & Tao, 2007).

A noticeable gap in the current literature, therefore, is how the relationship between age and intensifier use is characterised in the context of Australian English. To address the lack of broader research undertaken in this area, the following research questions have been developed for study:

- (1) Does the overall frequency of intensifiers used index the age of Australian English speakers?
- (2) Is generational change evident across any of the specific types of intensifiers used in Australian English?

3 Method

3.1 Aims, Gogglebox and Participants

This study aims to explore the relationship between age and intensifier use in Australian English, according to the two research questions introduced in the Background section. This relationship will be explored through the participants on the reality television series, *Googlebox Australia*.

Googlebox Australia invites audiences into the living rooms of ten Australian households, who watch and react to a wide range of television programs. These programs often evoke animated and emotional responses from the participants. Given that intensifiers are typically found in contexts where “emotional display is foregrounded and encouraged” (Beltrama, 2015, p. 18), this reality series is thus highly conducive to a study on intensifier use.

Due to the wide age range reflected in the Gogglebox Australia cast, this series also supports an analysis of age as a social variable. In this study, all 31 participants ranging from ages 9-76 are examined. The participant age groups and their respective frequencies are summarised in Table 1. The age categories are organised in accordance with Tagliamonte (2008). In this study, ‘younger’ speakers correspond to 9-29-year-olds, ‘middle-aged’ speakers to 30-49-year olds, and ‘older’ speakers to 50-76-year-olds, per Tagliamonte (2008).

In conjunction with age, the participants constitute a diverse range of genders, ethnicities and social classes.

Table 1: Age Group Frequencies on Gogglebox Australia

Age Group	Total
<13	2
13-16	2
17-19	1
20-29	5
30-39	7
40-49	3
50-59	8
60+	3
Total	31

3.2 Data Collection

Data was collected by watching 12 episodes of Gogglebox Australia (McDonald, 2020), from seasons 11 and 12. The seasons were both filmed in 2020. All relevant tokens were recorded electronically while watching each 50-minute-long episode.

The seasons were selected on the basis of retaining the same 31 participants and spanning the single time period of 2020. Indeed, by analysing speakers of different ages at one point in time, an apparent time construct (Labov, 1975) could be achieved for this study. That is, each speaker acts as an exemplar of a historical time period (Wagner, 2012), allowing for generational change in the Australian English speech community to be examined. For this study, generational change is defined as the steady increase or decrease (Meyerhoff, 2019) of an intensifier across generations.

3.3 Data Analysis

As per the current literature (Fuchs, 2017), this study has defined intensifiers as amplifying adverbs that scale meaning “upwards from an assumed norm” (Quirk et al., 1985, p. 589). According to Quirk et al. (1985) these amplifying adverbs can be further divided into maximisers and boosters, with boosters expressing a higher degree of intensification than a maximiser. In line with Ito and Tagliamonte (2003), both maximisers and boosters were considered under the general term of ‘intensifiers’ in this study. Examples of these intensifier meanings can be seen in (1):

1. a. This is extremely salty.
- b. She is so clever.
- c. It is very hot today.

Despite being capable of modifying nouns, verbs and adverbs, the majority of intensifiers modify adjectival heads, according to Bäcklund (as cited in Tagliamonte, 2008). Only clauses with this particular context were studied for analysis. This can again be seen in the examples in (1), where only adjectives are modified.

1. a. This is extremely salty.
- b. She is so clever.
- c. It is very hot today.

Negative contexts were excluded in this study, given that they do not always denote a meaning that amplifies upwards (Ito & Tagliamonte, 2003; Tagliamonte, 2008). This is seen in (2), where *very* does not express the extreme opposite of being hungry, but instead indicates a moderate appetite and is therefore more aligned with a downtoner.

2. I'm not very hungry.

Although the intensifiers *quite*, *pretty*, and *fairly* are able to exert an amplifying meaning in certain contexts, they are typically restricted to downtoner meanings only (Stoffel, 1901). This ambiguity in their usage (Nevalainen & Rissanen, 2002) thus meant that they were also excluded from the study.

In instances of double intensification, such as in (3), the intensifier was counted as one token only, like in Tagliamonte and Roberts (2005).

3. This is really, really cool.

4 Results

4.1 Overall Frequency of Intensifier Use

275 tokens were collected for analysis in total. The overall frequency of intensifiers used by participants is summarised both numerically in Table 2 and schematically in Figure 1 according to speaker age group.

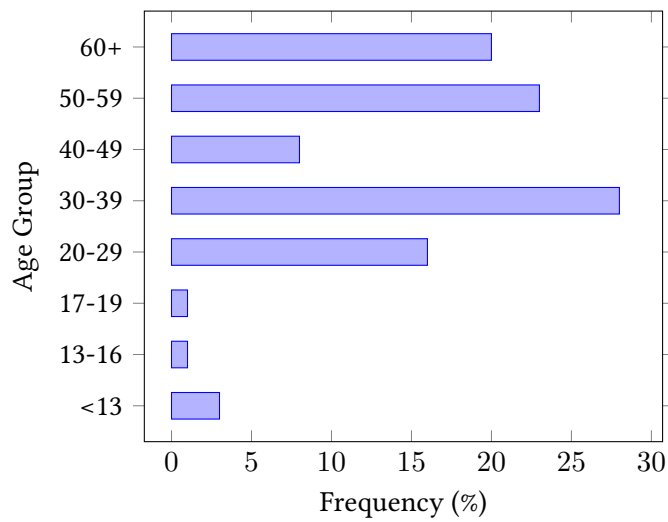
The data reveals that intensifiers are used most by the 30-39-year-olds (28%), followed by the 50-59-year-olds (23%) and then the 60+ age group (20%). There is a noticeable decline between the 30-39-year-olds (28%) and the 50-59-year-olds (23%), with the 40-49 age group being responsible for only 8% of the total intensifiers.

The least number of intensifiers are used by the 13-16-year-olds (1%) and 17-19-year-olds (1%), followed by the <13 age group (3%). There is a steep increase from these age groups to the 20-29-year-olds, who use 16% of the total intensifiers.

Table 2: Total Frequency of Intensifiers by Age

Age	N	%
<13	8	3
13-16	3	1
17-19	3	1
20-29	43	16
30-39	77	28
40-49	21	8
50-59	64	23
60+	56	20
Total	275	100

Figure 1: Total Frequency of Intensifiers by Age



4.2 Distribution of Specific Intensifiers

Intensifiers with a frequency of 5 or more are summarised in Table 3.

Table 3: Total Frequency of Specific Intensifiers ($N \geq 5$)

Intensifier	N	%
So	116	42
Very	56	20
Really	45	16
Super	12	4
Too	8	3
Absolutely	7	3
Bloody	7	3
Other	24	9
Total	275	100

The three most frequent intensifiers in the data are *so* (42%), *very* (20%) and *really* (16%), respectively. The frequency of *so*, *very* and *really* according to age group is represented numerically in Tables 4, 5 and 6, and schematically in Figure 2.

Table 4: Total Frequency of the Intensifier so

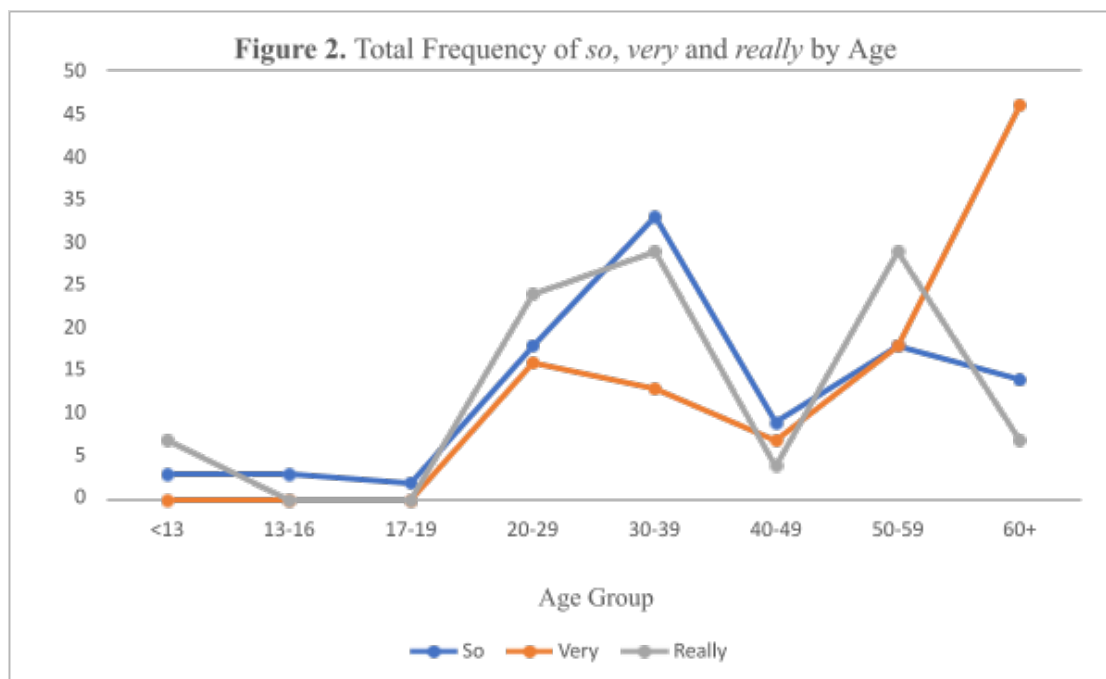
Age	N	%
<13	4	3
13-16	3	3
17-19	2	2
20-29	21	18
30-39	38	33
40-49	11	9
50-59	21	18
60+	16	14
Total	116	100

Table 5: Total Frequency of the Intensifier very

Age	N	%
<13	0	0
13-16	0	0
17-19	0	0
20-29	9	16
30-39	7	13
40-49	4	7
50-59	10	18
60+	26	46
Total	56	100

Table 6: Total Frequency of the Intensifier really

Age	N	%
<13	3	7
13-16	0	0
17-19	0	0
20-29	11	24
30-39	13	29
40-49	2	4
50-59	13	29
60+	3	7
Total	45	100



The apparent time perspective in Figure 2 shows that the frequency of *so* shows no consistent increasing or decreasing trend across the age groups. The clearest consecutive increase is from the 17-19-year-olds (2%), to the 20-29-year-olds (18%), to the 30-39-year-olds (33%), who show the highest usage of *so*. Despite a sharp decrease with the 40-49 age group, who are accountable for only 9% of *so* intensifiers, its popularity increases again with the 50-59-year-olds (18%), who are the equal second biggest users of the intensifier. Its use declines again with the 60+ age group (14%).

The frequency of *very* in Figure 2 shows a more consistent trend. Notwithstanding the peak that occurs among the 20-29-year-olds (16%) and 30-39-year-olds (13%), the intensifier decreases steadily from the 60+ (46%) age group. It is worth noting that *very* is entirely absent from the <13, 13-16 and 17-19 age groups.

The distribution of *really* shows a remarkable symmetry with *so*. Like *so*, the frequency of *really* lacks a steady increasing or decreasing pattern in the data. As with *so*, however, there is a clear increase from the 17-19-year-olds (0%), to the 20-29-year-olds (24%), to the 30-39-year-olds (29%), who along with the 50-59-year-olds (29%), show the highest usage of *really*. Similar to *so*, a decrease takes place after the 30-39 age group, with the 40-49-year-olds using only 4% of *really* intensifiers. Another sharp decline takes place after the 50-59-year-olds (29%), with the 60+ age group using just 7% of *really* intensifiers.

5 Discussion

5.1 Overall Frequency of Intensifier Use

The fact that younger speakers are responsible for the least number of intensifiers in the data contradicts previous studies (Barbieri, 2008; Paradis, 2000; Stenstrom, 2000; Xiao & Tao, 2007). A possible explanation may come from the difference in data mediums. While these studies ascertained data from corpora, this study sourced data from a reality television program, where the youngest speakers from ages 9-19 are from five member households and therefore lack the opportunity to produce as much data as participants from smaller households. Since younger speakers are typically innovators in linguistic change (Romero, 2012), another possibility for this divergence is that younger Australian English speakers are finding means other than intensifiers to enhance the novelty of their speech.

Although Saarenpää (2016) New Zealand English study supports middle-aged speakers in being among the highest users of intensifiers, no previous studies find that older speakers are also among this group (Barbieri, 2008; Saarenpää, 2016; Tagliamonte, 2008; Xiao & Tao, 2007). Given that intensifiers are typically associated with nonstandard and colloquial language use (Fries, 1940; Stoffel, 1901), which is typically avoided by middle-aged and older speakers (Eckert, 1997), it may be possible that the pressures of linguistic conservatism are not upheld by these groups in Australian English. The outlier reflected in the 40-49-year-old category can likely be explained by there being only 3 participants in this bracket, which is comparatively smaller to the other middle-aged and older speaker categories and thus an explanation for the lower intensifier output. This analysis also explains the category's outlier status in 5.2 below.

From the data, it hence appears that the overall frequency of intensifiers used can index the age of Australian English speakers, with fewer intensifiers signalling younger speakers and increased intensifiers signalling middle-aged and older speakers. However, this must be qualified by recognising the limited scope of this study, which has not been able to consider the relevance of participants' gender, ethnicity or class. Gender in particular bears a strong relation with intensifiers, with women having a "fondness for hyperbole" (Jespersen, 1922, p. 250). An analysis of women speakers and their intensifier use may thus further clarify middle-aged and older speakers' strong intensifier frequencies.

5.2 Distribution of Specific Intensifiers

The status of *so*, *really* and *very* as the three most popular intensifiers in Australian English echoes the current literature (Barbieri, 2008; Saarenpää, 2016; Tagliamonte, 2008; Xiao & Tao, 2007).

While the failure of *so* to yield a clear increasing or decreasing trend across the age groups corresponds with previous studies, this is not the case with *really*, whose inconsistent pattern is not supported in the literature (Barbieri, 2008; Saarenpää, 2016; Tagliamonte, 2008; Xiao & Tao, 2007). The general prominence of *so* and *really* across younger, middle-aged and older speakers contradicts claims that these intensifiers are typically reserved for younger speakers (Romero, 2012). Although the 60+ age group evidently prefers *very* as an intensifier, as discussed below, the 50-59-year-old speakers are the second biggest users of *so* and the equal biggest users of

really. This indicates that *really* and *so* are starting to lose their reputation as historically vulgar intensifiers among older speakers (Fries, 1940). Hence, despite the status of *so* and *really* as relatively new intensifiers (Stoffel, 1901), the broader Australian English speech community seems to have adapted to their use, indicating that there is no generational change across the use of *so* or *really* in apparent time.

The overall decreasing trend of *very* from the older to younger ages corresponds to previous studies (Saarenpää, 2016; Tagliamonte, 2008; Xiao & Tao, 2007). The popularity of *very* among the older speakers may be explained by it being the oldest intensifier in modern use (Tagliamonte, 2008), and thereby connoting preferable qualities of standardness (Romero, 2012). The divergent peak of *very* among the 20-29-year-olds and 30-39-year-olds could be explained by the linguistic marketplace principle (Sankoff & Laberge, 1978), where the speakers' increased involvement in the workplace means they tend to use more standard variants at these ages, which they then carry across to other domains (Meyerhoff, 2019). Since this peak is relatively small, however, and there is no usage of *very* among the youngest speakers, the overall declining pattern of this intensifier indicates that it is undergoing generational change in apparent time and losing its popularity in the Australian English speech community.

Despite the generational insights offered by this apparent time study, it is limited by the fact that the 31 individuals are mere exemplars of each generation and cannot reflect the state of *so*, *really* and *very* across the entire Australian English speech community. By using the participants as exemplars, this assessment of generational change also depends on the adult speakers retaining a stable linguistic style across their lifespan (Wagner, 2012). There are, however, indications of this not always being the case, with *very* peaking among the 20-39-year-old age group and then declining again.

6 Conclusion

This paper has sought to reveal connections between age and intensifier use in Australian English through the lens of Gogglebox Australia. The paper suggests that the overall frequency of intensifiers used can index the age of Australian English speakers, with younger speakers being identified with a lower intensifier use and middle-aged and older speakers with a higher use. This preliminary finding would benefit from future research, which could replicate this study and examine intensifier frequency against additional social variables. The study also indicates that, among the three most popular intensifiers, generational change is only taking place across *very*, which is decreasing in popularity among the Australian English speech community. The intensifiers *so* and *really* do not indicate such change in apparent time. As already flagged, however, these findings are somewhat limited by the apparent time construct, whose drawbacks require greater attention in the literature.

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