

SO VERY REALLY VARIABLE: SOCIAL PATTERNING OF INTENSIFIER USE BY NEWFOUNDLANDERS ONLINE

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ABSTRACT

Previous studies have shown that one of the linguistic tools that individuals use to identify themselves is adjectival intensification (e.g., *so cool*, *very cool*, *really cool*). We assembled and analyzed a corpus of over 3000 intensifiable adjectives (i.e., environments where intensification could occur) extracted from Newfoundland-oriented public internet forums. Statistical analysis of the correlations between intensifier choice social patterning among our speakers led to findings similar to previous studies. *So* is the most common variant, especially among urban females, while the older variants *really* and *very* are favoured in rural areas, especially among males. Conditioning of the less frequent variant *fuckin(g)* seems to show the persistence of gender distinctions outside urban areas.

Mots-clés : Variation en anglais, intensificateurs, pratiques langagières sur internet, Terre-Neuve

RÉSUMÉ

Les investigations faites à présent confirment que l'intensification adjectivale (e.g., en angl., *so cool*, *very cool*, *really cool*) sert à renforcer l'identification linguistique de l'interlocuteur. La présente étude traite une base de plus de 3000 données que nous avons rassemblées à partir des salles de discussion sur internet en Terre-Neuve, adjectifs sujets à l'intensification dans le discours populaire. L'analyse statistique des corrélations entre les comportements linguistiques dans le choix de l'adjectif intensifiant chez nos sujets donne des résultats similaires à ceux des études antérieures : *So* est la variante la plus commune, en particulier chez les femmes urbaines, tandis que les variantes plus vieilles *really* et *very* sont favorisées dans les secteurs ruraux, en particulier chez les hommes. Le conditionnement de la variante *fuckin(g)* paraît indiquer la persistance du rôle du genre dans la variation linguistique en dehors des régions urbaines.

Key words: English language variation, intensifiers, online language use, Newfoundland

1. INTRODUCTION

Intensifiers, adverbs which boost the meaning of the words they modify, are an excellent linguistic variable through which to examine sociolinguistic distinctions, as they are easy to identify and isolate, readily undergo change, and have especially strong social correlations. In English, intensifiers are an area of rapid and dynamic linguistic change (Quirk et al. 1985), associated with linguistic creativity and performative behaviour (Peters 1994; Stoffel 1901). Since they often serve as emphatics, they play an important role in emotional expression and are more socially correlated than many classes of words with less subjective content. Ito and Tagliamonte (2003) studied the intensification of adjectives by speakers in York and found that the intensification used was linked to the social classifications of the speakers. Similarly, Van Herk and OIP (2006) examined intensifier usage online, contrasting subgroups of tweens, country fans, hip-hop fans, nerds, and a baseline group. Using these two studies as a framework, we will examine intensifier use by Newfoundlanders, and observe how patterns in intensifier use reflect general as well as local trends.

We first lay out the methodology of our study, and briefly profile initial findings. Next, we discuss the lexical origin of intensifiers, and speculate on the development path of a newer intensifier, *so*. Then, we discuss some of the implications of the observed social (gender and region) trends in the use of common intensifiers, as well as the highly marked form *fuckin(g)*.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1. Corpus

Our corpus, which includes over 3000 tokens of intensifiable adjectives, was collected from online public forums within the youth-oriented social networking websites "Facebook" and "Blue Kaffee".¹ Both sites were chosen for their high degree of interaction. While the data reflect written language, the very nature of "posting" to online forums and discussions requires participants to assert identity through language. Information regarding gender and region was gathered from publicly accessible user and forum profiles. All data was collected between September and November 2007 and came only from those identifying themselves as being from Newfoundland.

The collection of language samples from online databases is a fairly new, yet increasingly popular, method (Richardson 2005; Van Herk and OIP 2006; Abraham 2008; Van Compernelle 2008). Among the advantages of this approach is the access to an enormous sample of language and data collection that is timely and financially viable, producing research that is replicable. Through this study we also identified one major disadvantage to this approach: the lack of publicly available socioeco-

¹"Blue Kaffee" is a website based in Newfoundland and Labrador that allows users to post journals and communicate with friends.

conomic information about participants. This has prevented us from considering age as a factor group, and has forced us to exclude some tokens when examining region and gender effects.

2.2. Variable context

Following Ito and Tagliamonte (2003) and Van Herk and OIP (2006), we chose to focus on adjectival intensification only. This made it easy to circumscribe the variable context, and provide an accurate representation of the non-application case. With adjectival intensification as the variable, the data set comprised places where intensifiers did occur, as seen in (1a), and places where they could have occurred but did not, seen in (1b).

- (1) a. That's really great.
- b. That's \emptyset great.

It should be noted that instances where *so* preceded an adjective followed by *that* were excluded. The function of *so* in (2a) is not one of intensification, contrasted with the use of *so* in (2b).

- (2) a. That movie was so boring that I fell asleep.
- b. That movie was so boring.

2.2.1. Variants

All of the following intensifiers were coded: *so*, *very*, *really*, *pretty*; learned/formal intensifiers (*fuckin(g)*,² *too*, *super*, *totally*); cool/trendy intensifiers (*freakin(g)*, *real*, *way*); other; \emptyset intensification. As a category, 'learned/formal intensifiers' included only *completely*, *absolutely* and *extremely*. Variants such as *excruciatingly*, *incredibly* and so on were included in the 'other' category. The 'cool/trendy' category included, for example, *mad*, *wicked*, *hella* and so forth. Some variants were too infrequent to mention in our analysis.

2.3. Coding

Four factors affecting intensification patterns were established, as supported by previous research (Ito and Tagliamonte 2003; Van Herk and OIP 2006). Linguistic factor groups included were position and type of adjective, while the social factor groups were gender and region.

2.3.1. Adjective position

Adjectives may occupy two main types of position in a sentence (3): attributive position, where they occur immediately before a noun, and predicative position, where they occur after a stative verb.

²The variant *fuckin(g)* had previously been studied by Van Herk and OIP (2006) and was therefore included in our analysis.

(3) Attributive position: I have a *very large* family.

Predicative position: I am *very proud* of where I came from.

2.3.2. Adjective type

In this study, adjectives types included the following categories: ‘dimension’ (big, small), ‘physical property’ (hard, soft), ‘human propensity’ (kind, rude), ‘age’ (old, young), and ‘value’ (good, bad). Those not falling into one of these categories (e.g., green, fast) were included in the ‘other’ category.

2.3.3. Informant gender

Previous studies have revealed strong effects for informant gender, with women leading in the adoption of newer forms (*really, so*) and men favouring the use of *fuckin(g)* (Ito and Tagliamonte 2003; Van Herk and OIP 2006). The Ottawa study also revealed interesting interactions between speaker sex and other social categories, in that the strength of correlations between speaker gender and variant choice can be reduced, or even disappear, depending on the degree to which a social subgroup is expected to participate in the heterosexual marketplace (Bucholtz 1999).

Note that here, as in Van Herk and IOP (2006), we code for informant gender based on self-description. This leaves us with some data for which we have no informant gender information. Both social factor groups thus included an “unknown” category. It also requires that we accept self-descriptions. This seems reasonable in the current context, in that we are interested here in the *performance* of social (gender and regional) identities, rather than biological categories.

2.3.4. Region

The regional distinctions were made with attention to urban/suburban divisions and focused primarily on the Eastern Avalon portion of Newfoundland. We coded informant region as: *St. John’s* (within city limits), the *Suburbs* (those areas surrounding St. John’s, but not part of the city proper, such as The Goulds, Kilbride, Conception Bay South, and Mt. Pearl), or *Other* (any area outside of these regions). In the following analyses, we have collapsed these into a two-way distinction for statistical purposes. When analyzing traditional form, we have combined the suburbs with rural areas, as the “bayman/townie” distinction is highly salient to Newfoundlanders; when studying incoming forms, we have combined the suburbs with the city, based on recent work by Tagliamonte (2007) that suggests that the suburbs pattern with (or even lead) the city in the adoption of youth-driven incoming forms. Interestingly, while we anticipated finding social work being done by traditional “Newfoundlandy” intensifiers such as “That’s *some/right* good”, these intensifiers were extremely rare in the current data set.

All statistical analysis presented here was obtained through the use of Goldvarb (Rand and Sankoff 1990), of the Varbrul family.³

³This variable rule analysis program is a free software tool developed specifically for

TABLE 1
Distribution of tokens, by variant

Intensifier	%	N
<i>so</i>	6.90	225
<i>very</i>	4.40	144
<i>really</i>	3.60	117
<i>pretty</i>	2.80	93
Learned/formal intensifiers ^a	1.80	59
<i>fuckin(g)</i>	1.40	45
<i>too</i>	1.00	32
<i>super</i>	.43	14
<i>totally</i>	.31	10
Cool/trendy intensifiers ^b	.21	7
<i>freakin(g)</i>	.18	6
<i>real</i>	.15	5
<i>way</i>	.09	3
Other intensifiers ^c	3.30	109
∅ intensification	72.90	2397
Total		3265

^a*completely, absolutely, extremely*

^b*excruciatingly, incredibly, etc.*

^c*mad, wicked, hell, etc.*

3. RESULTS

The most common variant in our corpus was the non-application case, in which no intensifier was used. The distribution of all intensifiers included in this study is shown in Table 1.

3.1. Participation in language change

Intensifiers are an area of frequent linguistic change. Often in the history of English new intensifiers have entered common usage, in many cases supplanting previously dominant forms, only to be supplanted in turn. A brief overview of the cycling of dominant intensifiers in the English language from the twelfth century to present is provided in Ito and Tagliamonte (2003), referencing Mustanoja (1960).

Most intensifiers are created by shifting the meaning of words already in the language. Many of these source words had an original meaning of 'strong' or 'true', which was extended over time to apply these qualities to another adjective. As argued in Partington (1993), it "is a short step from averring truth to being emphatic about it".

linguistic research and is available to download at individual.utoronto.ca/tagliamonte/Goldvarb/GV_index.htm.

This original meaning may be maintained alongside the intensive meaning, or it may fade from usage until the word functions solely as an intensifier. Older intensifiers, especially, are likely to have lost their original semantic content and become function rather than content words, through a process known as delexicalization.

Partially delexicalized intensifiers usually exhibit semantic or grammatical restrictions on their usage, reflecting remnants of their original lexical meaning. The longer the intensifier has been in the language, the fewer restrictions one typically finds.

As an example of differing degrees of delexicalization, we can look at two of the oldest dominant intensifiers still in common usage: *very* and *really*. *Very* is the older of the two, found in writing since the 1600s, while *really* dates from the late 1800s (Ito and Tagliamonte 2003; Mustanoja 1960). Their rates of usage in our data are roughly equivalent. Both *very* and *really* originate from adverbs indicating truth of report, a common path of intensifier creation. We would expect *very*, as the older form, to be the more fully delexicalized of the two, and indeed this appears to be the case (4a). The original non-intensifier meaning survives for *really*, but not *very* (4b).

(4) a. *Intensifier usage:*

A *very* long book.

A *really* long book.

b. *Non-intensifier usage:*

*I *very* read the book.

I *really* read the book.

Also, there appear to be certain classes of adjectives which can accept intensive *very*, but not *really* (nor most other intensifiers in our data; Figure 1). Most of these adjectives fall into the 'other' category in our classification scheme, and explain the disproportionately high favouring of *very* for adjectives of this type. Nevertheless, *really* is still highly delexicalized, and it is only in these few contexts that we can see more restrictions than we find with *very*.

As an example of partial delexicalization in the current data set, we turn our attention to *so*, a significantly younger intensifier, but one which is rapidly becoming a dominant form, particularly among the younger generation. In our corpus, *so* is actually the most common intensifier by a fair margin.

Partially delexicalized intensifiers often exhibit some restriction on their usage. They may initially pattern only with specific types of adjectives or particular grammatical constructs. Over time, these restrictions may become laxer, as people begin to apply the intensifier in an increasing number of contexts.

If we examine how *so* patterns with different semantic categories of adjectives, as compared to the more mature intensifiers *very* and *really*, no obvious semantic restrictions are evident (Figure 1).

Although there are variances between the categories, such as *so* being used proportionally more often for adjectives of value (e.g., "That pasta was *so* good") and

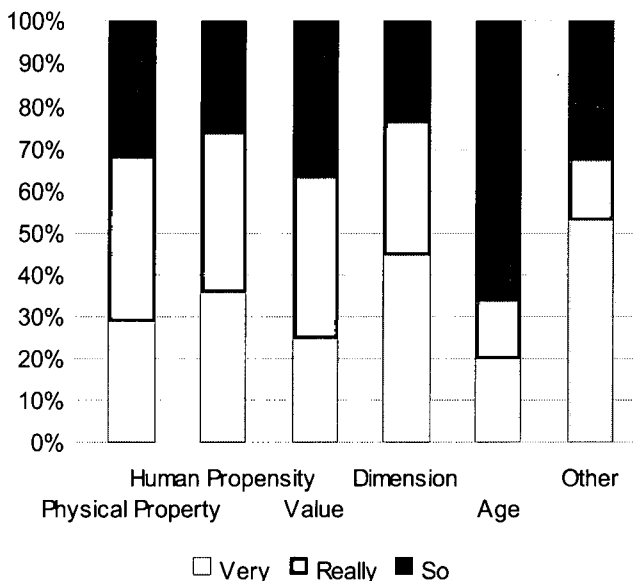


FIGURE 1

Relative frequency of intensifier usage, as percentages, normalized for overall intensifier and adjective frequency

less for adjectives of dimension (e.g., “That was *so* big”), this variation is at similar or lesser levels than it is for the more mature intensifiers.⁴ Note, for comparison, an even more pronounced disfavouring of *very* for adjectives of value. Moreover, *so* displays no obvious semantic gaps, or categories where it appears to be disproportionately absent. On the whole, it exhibits robust patterning with adjectives of all kinds, comparable to the other two major intensifiers. What variation exists between categories is likely a result of which intensifier speakers feel is semantically more appropriate for a given adjective, rather than the result of any grammatical restriction.

However, when we look at adjective position, we see a dramatic restriction. While both *very* and *really* have a nearly equivalent ratio of attributive and predicative usage (5a), *so* is found solely in predicative position in our data (5b). Out of 225 utterances of intensifier *so*, none of our speakers used it to intensify an attributive adjective, even once.

(5) a. *Attributive Position:*

A *very* old book

*A *so* old book

⁴The apparent strong favouring of *so* for adjectives of age is unreliable due to very low n (< 20) for this category in our data.

TABLE 2
Major intensifiers, adjective position

	Attributive	Predicative	Total tokens
<i>very</i>	39.58% (57)	60.42% (87)	144
<i>really</i>	37.60% (44)	62.39% (73)	117
<i>so</i>	00.00% (0)	100.00% (225)	225

b. *Predicative Position:*

The book is *very* old.

The book is *so* old.

This distribution is consistent with findings in Ito and Tagliamonte (2003) and Van Herk and OIP (2006), and shows that across region and social groups, there is a near-total consensus that attributive *so* is ungrammatical. This is a clear indication of incomplete delexicalization, and may offer insight into the intensifier's origin.

Ito and Tagliamonte (2003) list four stages of delexicalization in the creation of intensifiers, using *very* as their model. However, they state that such intensifiers become grammatical in attributive position (stage 3) before predicative position (stage 4). Since this is clearly not the case for intensifier *so*, it must be following a different path, possibly since it derives from a different type of source.

One possibility is that intensifier *so* is an extension of the usage of *so* indicating 'to a specified degree', as in "It was *so* cold that I had to wear my coat." Although such a usage does not grammatically entail that the specified degree was extreme, simply that it was 'cold enough that ...', such a shift would in many ways mirror the transition of *very* from truth assertion to intensifier. Both forms shift from merely asserting truth/degree to being emphatic about this truth/degree. Grammatically, intensifier *so* can be formed simply by dropping the subordinate clause, creating "It was *so* cold." This is probably why it has skipped the attributive phase of intensifier creation; its base form was already predicative only. Interestingly, many style guides⁵ indicate that using *so* for degree without the subordinate that-clause is inappropriate in formal contexts, lending credence to this being a newer adaptation that has yet to gain formal parity with older forms. Despite its differing origins, the rising popularity of intensifier *so* may eventually lead to its extension into attributive position, inversely mirroring the development of earlier intensifiers.

⁵Meyers (1991:354) lists no less than seven separate style guides and writing handbooks which criticize usage of *so* without a *that*-clause. A similar sentiment is found in the Merriam-Webster's *Dictionary of English Usage*. The *Random House Unabridged Dictionary* (2006) is less prescriptive, but still suggests that *so* without a *that*-clause occurs primarily in informal speech.

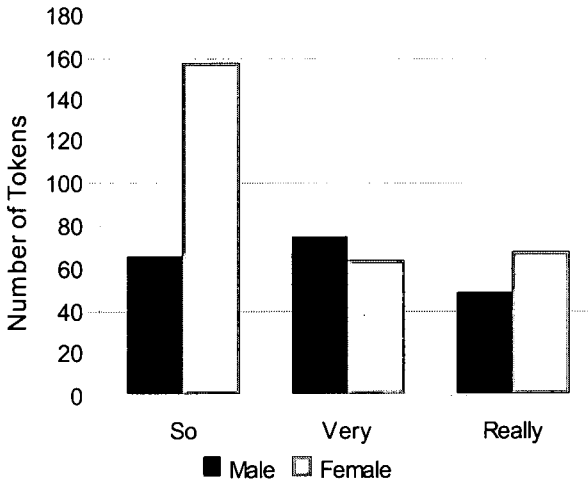


FIGURE 2

Distribution of major intensifiers by gender

3.2. Social conditioning of major intensifiers

We turn now to the correlations between the intensifiers *so*, *really*, and *very* and our social dimensions of informant sex and region, to see whether the social conditioning of intensifier choice in Newfoundland reflects participation in change in progress for the intensifier system as a whole.

Figure 2 shows the distribution of the three main intensifiers by informant sex. Women use *so* more than twice as often as men. Males use *very* slightly more than women; women use *really* slightly more than men.

The overall levels of intensification (22% for females, 13% for males) support the traditional association of intensification with women. Furthermore, the suggestive upswing of *so* with females in Figure 4 may be because the form carries more emotional weight than *very* or *really*. Part of the reason females are using *so* to such an extent may be its ability to carry larger amounts of emotional content. For example, (6d) illustrates how word-final '-o' is useful when adding prosodic effects.⁶ Given the findings discussed up to this point, the more delexicalized condition of *very* as the older form may explain its dissociation from females, who appear to prefer the more 'intense' intensifiers. Note again, as mentioned in the previous section, the proportional favouring of *so* for adjectives expressing emotionally associated content (such as adjectives of value), and disfavouring for adjectives expressing more objective content (such as adjectives of dimension).

⁶Paradis (1997) suggests that there seems to be a harmonious relationship between lexical and intonational expressiveness where "strongly reinforcing words seem to co-occur with prosodic prominence" (1997:10).

- (6) a. First year boys are *so* cute when they're trying not to look awkward.
 b. He is *so* punk rock.
 c. Good thing we look *so* fabulous.
 d. I love caramel log bars ... they are *sooooo* good.

The (perhaps stereotypical) viewpoint that women often use more emotional forms is commonplace in the literature (Jespersen 1922; McMillan et al. 1977), where certain intensifiers have been regarded as distinctively female. Lakoff (1975) in particular distinguishes the use of *so* as a characteristically female application. Taken from our data, the sentences in (6) exemplify ways in which Newfoundland females are using *so* to "boost" the meaning of adjectives.

TABLE 3

Distribution of major intensifiers, by region

	<i>so</i>	<i>very</i>	<i>really</i>
St. John's and suburbs:			
Male	53	45	26
Female	123	36	50
Total	1276	81	76
Outside St. John's:			
Male	7	20	14
Female	19	15	12
Total	26	35	26

TABLE 4

Social factors conditioning choice of intensifier

	<i>so</i>	<i>very</i>	<i>really</i>
Gender effect:			
Male	.383	.562	—
Female	.594	.450	—
Region effect:			
St. John's and suburbs	.525	.463	.477
Outside St. John's	.392	.685	.601

Table 3 shows us that, at least as far as frequency is concerned, females in St. John's and the suburbs are leading the way in the use of *so* in comparison to the more sparsely populated areas of outport Newfoundland. Males outside of St. John's and the suburbs prefer *very*, while females choose *really* more frequently than *so*. Figures 3 and 4 display a comparison among the three most common intensifiers in our study, by region, and Table 4 lists the factor weights conditioning choice of intensifier. Although *very* and *really* occur at roughly equal rates in both

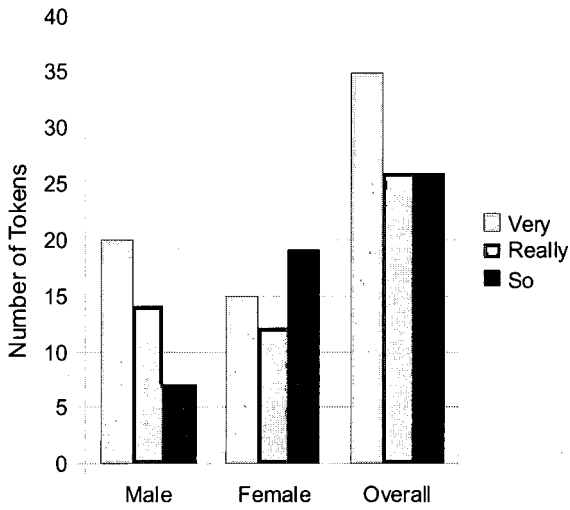


FIGURE 3

Distribution of major intensifiers, outside St. John's

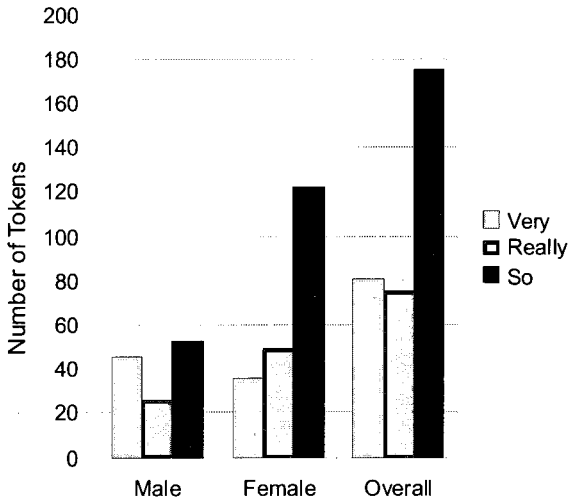


FIGURE 4

Distribution of major intensifiers, St. John's and suburbs

regions, there is a dramatic difference in the usage of *so*. Although *so* is still the most commonly used intensifier by rural females, it is by a far smaller margin than we find in the urban data. In fact, usage rates of all three intensifiers by rural females pattern very closely with urban males. Rural males, on the other hand, highly disfavour *so*, compared to the older intensifiers. *Very* remains the most common intensifier in rural areas.

Keeping with the historical model presented earlier, this suggests that areas which are more geographically separated from the urban center are holding on to older, more traditional forms. Also, it is consistent with the general view that females lead linguistic change.

While older variants are falling out of favour in urban St. John's, they have by no means fallen entirely out of usage. They are still available to speakers and, as Ito and Tagliamonte (2003:277) point out, "it appears that old intensifiers do not fade away; they stick around for a very long time." An investigation which allows time-depth comparisons might tell us more about recycling intensifiers in the Newfoundland context. In our data, an apparent time analysis is unfeasible, given the limited age range for the average speaker, and irregular availability of age data.

In areas of frequent change and recycling such as intensifiers, newer forms may hardly appear long enough to become institutionalized. Resistance to intensifier change in rural areas may indicate an attempt to maintain traditional group identities. Our data reveals that urban and suburban males are selecting a more diverse range of intensifiers. On the other hand, females of the same locality are showing a strong preference for *so*. One hypothesis is that rural males avoid using socially-sensitive *so* to retain distinctive (traditional) maleness, while females use high amounts of *so* as part of an emerging language change.

3.3. Social conditioning of *fucking(g)*

Having observed a pronounced gender effect in the usage patterns of the most frequent variants, particularly in the gendered usage of the youngest variant, we next examined the more infrequently occurring variants in search of further evidence of gendered intensification behaviour; in our final analysis, we focused on the *fuckin(g)* variant. In contrast to *so*, a highly socially correlated, but comparatively new intensifier, we assume that the *fuckin(g)* variant has been used as an intensifier for a greater length of time. We acknowledge, however, that the origin of this intensifier is difficult to trace, given the relative obscurity of the word's full etymology due to its historically taboo social status.

Given our assumptions regarding the variant's relative age, and the infrequency of its attestation within the corpus, we also assume it to have already achieved a certain stability such that the observable pattern of behaviour for the variable, whatever it might be, is unlikely to be significantly affected by the introduction of incoming, newer variants. In effect, the social correlations are likely to represent a stable condition, rather than a change in progress.

In total, there were 45 tokens of the *fuckin(g)* variant in our corpus, representing just over one percent of all the tokens in the corpus or approximately five percent of the intensified tokens. Though this comprises a relatively small portion of the total corpus, our analyses of the distribution of the form achieved statistical significance. Due to categorical non-application of the variant by our rural female population, it was necessary to combine their data with that of our suburban informants in order to facilitate the multivariate analysis. We feel justified in this approach for two reasons: firstly, the raw use percentages of the *fuckin(g)* variant by our suburban speakers were almost exactly mid-way between those of our rural and urban speakers, but slightly favouring the pattern of the rural speakers; secondly, the combination of the rural and suburban speakers makes sense socio-historically given the traditional dichotomy between those living in St. John's and those living in rural communities.

We also excluded data from those speakers coded as 'unknown' for either gender or region. This left us with a subset of 38 tokens: 19 Suburban-Rural, 19 St. John's Urban; 28 males, 10 females.

TABLE 5
Distribution of *fuckin(g)*, by social factors

	Males	Females	Total (Region)
Suburban-Rural	16	3	19
St. John's Urban	12	7	19
Total (Gender)	28	10	

Treating the use of *fuckin(g)* as the application value and all other variants as the non-application value, an initial analysis suggests both a possible region effect and a possible gender effect constraining the behaviour of this variant. Usage of *fuckin(g)* was 30 percent higher among the St. John's urban population in comparison with the suburban-rural group. The gender difference was even more pronounced as our male speakers used the variant with almost three and a half-times as often as our female population.

TABLE 6
Percentage use of *fuckin(g)* vs. other intensifiers, by speaker sex and region

	Suburban-Rural	St. John's Urban
Males	11.5	6.2
Females	1.8	3.0
Overall	6.2	4.4

However, a more detailed multivariate analysis reveals an extra layer to these findings: the apparent region effect is merely the result of entanglement with the

gender effect. With region eliminated, further findings for gender are of particular interest. Although gender has a statistically significant effect on the use of *fuckin(g)*, this effect is only significant for the suburban–rural group, and not the St. John’s urban group. In other words, the gender boundaries for the use of the variant are much more clearly defined in non-urban areas.

This suggests that certain, more traditional sociolinguistic conditioning may be active outside the urban core. In much the same way that non-urban areas still favour older intensifiers over *so*, they may preserve gender distinctions that are losing their relevance in urban areas. It may also suggest that *fuckin(g)* means something different to urban speakers than it does to suburban–rural ones. An apparent time study of this variant might shed further light on how gender patterns conditioning its usage are changing in both urban and rural areas.

4. CONCLUSION

A major finding is that the intensifier with the highest rates of use is definitively *so*. Despite its frequency in our Newfoundland corpus, *so* has not yet reached the same level of grammaticization as the popular and widespread intensifiers *very* and *really*. *So*’s limited distribution is not simply a reflection of intensifier choice, but also of its grammatical restrictions that are not shared with other frequently used intensifiers. These findings are consistent with those of Van Herk and OIP (2006), and the data also follows the findings of Ito and Tagliamonte’s study in the UK (Ito and Tagliamonte 2003), though not as closely. This is likely because of the closer cultural similarity of the two Canadian geographies, and also because the *Ottawa Intensifier Project* (OIP) is a more recent study. Our study shows that it is important to consider an urban vs. rural distinction when studying this type of corpus, especially with such a trendy and socially motivated process as intensification. Our study further brings to light that gender practice is locally constituted, “young people” is not a single category, and important distinctions are made in this social sphere. Ultimately, regarding intensification, Newfoundlanders do not behave linguistically so very differently after all.

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