

## WHEN VERY INTENSE IS NOT REALLY SO INTENSE

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### *Introduction*

This research project aims to explore which intensifiers the younger generation of Canadians are most likely use when conversing with others. For the purpose of this research, the definition of “intensifier” is a term which adds intensity to the word or phrase that it modifies. In “So Cool, Right? Canadian English Entering the 21<sup>st</sup> Century”, Tagliamonte observes that “‘[v]ery’ is quickly moving out of favour in Canadian English. On the other hand, use of ‘really’ is rising and ‘so’ is beginning to rise” (Tagliamonte, 2006). This is the trend which sets the basis for this research paper. Where various intensifiers perform the same function, it is interesting that the younger generation demonstrates preference for certain intensifiers over others. In fact, this is nothing new. A typical feature of intensifiers is that old terms are regularly replaced with new ones when the effect of the former wears off and becomes no longer sufficient to describe the intensity of a given situation. This paper will examine whether the rise of “so” and “really” is consistent across different types of utterance. The choice of utterances used for the survey is based on the possibility of using the intensifiers “so”, “really” and “very” in each. To provide a wide range of linguistic utterances, ten different structural possibilities have been considered for the survey.

One of the initial aims of this project had been to expand on Tagliamonte’s observations by considering whether gender played a part in determining intensifier preferences. However, given that we only have one question per structural variant and knowing that other factors impinge on the choice, we decided to eliminate gender analysis from our study. This decision will be further elaborated on in the section that discusses the limitations of our paper.

### *Hypotheses*

1. The use of the intensifier “very” is becoming less popular in Canada especially among the young generation; “very” has been replaced with “so” and “really” in spoken English.
2. This phenomenon will be consistent across all linguistic variations.

## Methodology

A survey was conducted to find out if “so” and “really” are replacing “very” in popularity among Canadian students. The sample group comprised 50 randomly selected Queen’s students, including an equal number of males and females, all of whom were Canadians. This would ensure that the results would be specific to, and reflect only, Canadian English.

The survey consists of 10 multiple-choice questions. The three choices in each question reiterate the same utterance, differing only in containing the intensifier, “so”, “really” or “very.” For example, Question 1 is as follows:

- (a) That is so cool!
- (b) That is very cool!
- (c) That is really cool!

In the results for this question, option (a) corresponds to “so”, (b) to “very” and (c) to “really”. This order was intentionally varied with each question, to encourage the respondents to go through each option carefully, reading and thinking through which option they would be most likely to use in verbal communication. (Refer to **Appendix 1** for the survey.) Table 1 shows the ten different sentence structures that have been used in the survey.

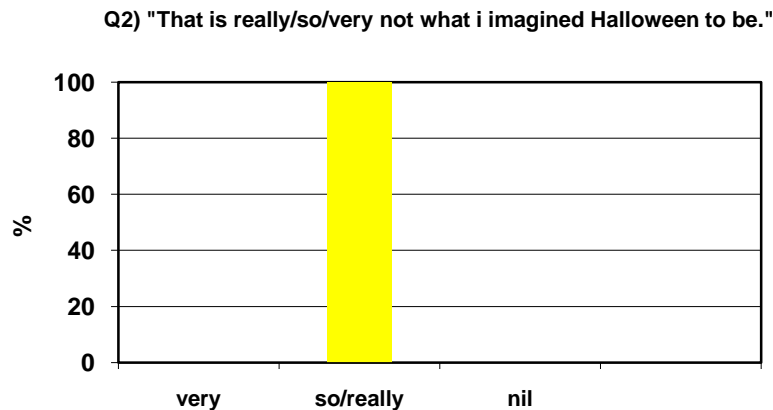
	<b>Structures</b>	<b>Examples</b>
1	Be + intensifier + adjective	That is so cool!
2	Be + intensifier + (not) negation	That is really not what I imagined Halloween to be.
3	Be + verbal material in –ing form + intensifier + adverb	He is running very quickly.
4	Be + intensifier + preposition expressing ‘interest’	She is very into baking these days.
5	Be + intensifier + adverb	The test was so awfully hard.
6	Be + intensifier + pronoun expressing ‘personality’	That shirt is so him.
7	Be + (not) negation + intensifier + adverb	The dog is not very friendly to strangers.
8	Be + intensifier + intensifier	The class is so, so boring.
9	Be + intensifier + verbal material in –ing form	She is really looking forward to the party this weekend.
10	Be + intensifier + time-related adjective	Be patient! The bus will be here very soon.

**Table 1.** Linguistic structures explored in the survey

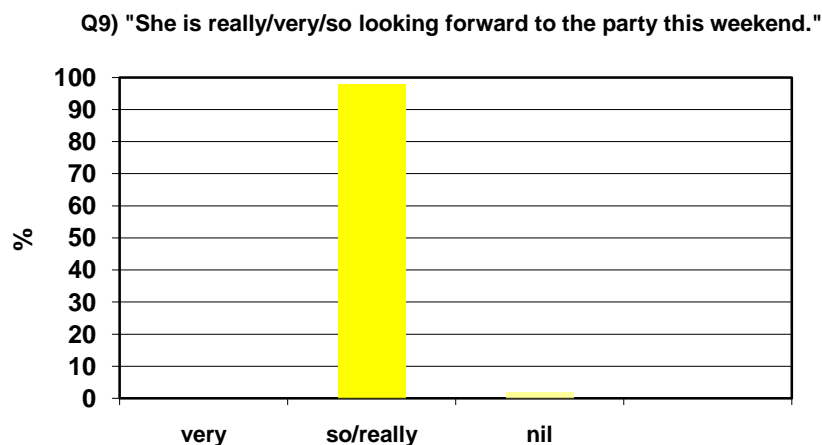
### Analysis of Survey Results

The survey questions are designed so as to cover a wide range of linguistic utterances. Questions 2 and 9 of the survey function as control items, items without true choice (Section D under "Limitations of our survey" explains this further).

**Figures 1.1** (Q2 )and **1.2** (Q9), were consistent with our expectations, with no one choosing "very" in either questions. Thus, "very" is generally perceived to be ungrammatical or awkward in the structures [be + intensifier + verbal material in – ing] and [be + intensifier + not (negation)].



**Figure 1.1** That is really/so/very not what I imagined Halloween to be.



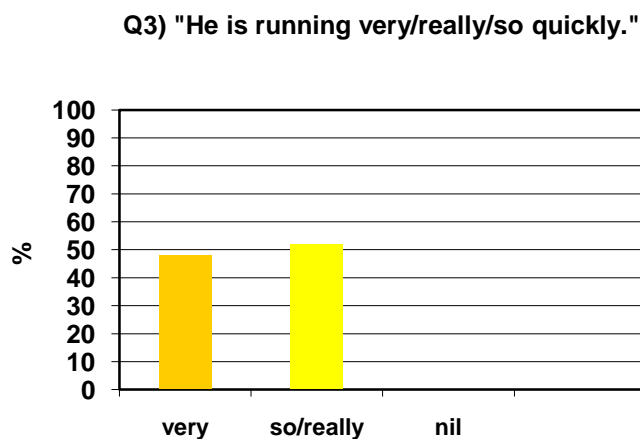
**Figure 1.2** She is really/very/so looking forward to the party this weekend.

Six out of the remaining eight questions demonstrate that the use of "very" as an intensifier is on the decline. This is consistent with our hypothesis. **Figures 1.3–1.8** reflect the survey data accordingly. Therefore, the hypothesis seems to be right in predicting the intensifier of choice for the following structures:

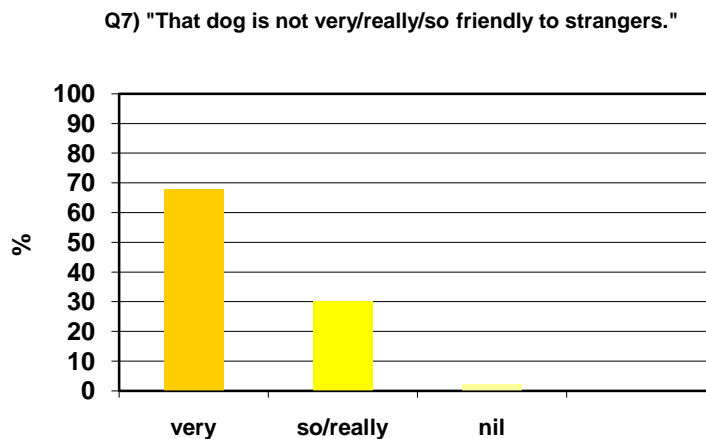
- [Be + intensifier + adjective]*
- [Be + intensifier + intensifier]*
- [Be + intensifier + preposition expressing 'interest]*
- [Be + intensifier + time-related adjective]*
- [Be + intensifier + pronoun expressing 'personality]*
- [Be + intensifier + adverb]*

For example, our young respondents are more likely to say "That is so cool!" than "That is very cool!" (Refer to **Appendix 2, Figures 1.3-1.8** to see these graphs.)

It is perhaps the instances where the survey results ran in conflict with the hypothesis that the survey is most interesting. This is so for Questions 3 and 7. These results are graphed in **Figures 1.9** and **2.0** below. For Question 3, the percentages of respondents choosing "very" and "so/really" are comparable and of negligible difference, whereas for Question 7 ("That dog is not . . . friendly to strangers"), "very" was used more frequently than "so" and "really". This question alerted us to the problem of context, and this will be explained in more detail in the section covering the limitations of our survey.



**Figure 1.9** Showing a context in which "very" remains popular



**Figure 1.9** Showing a context in which "very" predominates

### *Summing up*

Hence, intensifiers such as “so” and “really” are gaining popularity as is evident from the survey results. Out of the ten questions in the survey, a majority of the questions show high percentages of use of “so/really” as compared to “very”. Therefore, our first hypothesis can be established. However, given the contradiction in Question 7, our second hypothesis, that the trend would be consistent across utterance types, was not proven. Next we turn to the question why “so” and “really” in particular?

Labov observes that “*really*” is “one of the most frequent markers of intensity in colloquial conversation” in American English (Labov, 1984, as cited in Ito & Tagliamonte, 2003). This leads us to speculate that the geographical proximity of Canada and America might have a role in the increase use of “really” in Canada. The ever increasing opportunity for interaction and exchange across the border could have gradually introduced intensifying “really” into Canada’s linguistic repertoire.

If “really” has been an established alternative to “very” since the eighties, “so,” on the other hand, seems to be a more recent phenomenon. Tagliamonte and Roberts note an interesting trend in the increase use of “so” in popular media, which could in part account for its increasing popularity:

“[Examining] the use of intensifiers in the television series *Friends* between 1994 and 2002 [...makes it evident that] the once primary intensifier in North America, *really*, is being usurped by *so*...” (Tagliamonte and Roberts, 2004)

The observation in a CTV new story that Canadians are increasingly exposed to a “tidal wave of American magazines, websites, advertising and so-called infotainment shows” further supports our conjecture (“Few Canadians watching home-grown television,” 2009). Statistics show that it was all American programmes--with one “home-grown” exception--that made it to the Top 30 shows for one particular week. It would not be unfair to hypothesize that this influx of mass media, at least to some extent, both influences culture and impacts language choice.

### *Accounting for the Observations*

Why did this shift occur? There are various factors that can contribute to linguistic shifts but in this case, the replacement of the intensifier “very” with “so” and “really,” the impetus could be the need for a stronger word. This phenomenon is aptly encapsulated by Robertson (1945):

[w]hen the strong word is used on light occasion **its strength begins to be dissipated**, and when the fitting moment for it actually arrives it will no longer serve; **familiarity has bred contempt** in the hearer, and one must **begin again to find a new ‘strong word’**”. (as cited in Ito and Tagliamonte, 2003, emphasis ours)

Language needs constantly need to be updated; the words that are being used do not sufficiently convey the intensity of a situation. In Canada, it is “so” and “really” that form the new wave of intensifiers in this cycle of constant replacement and recycling.

*How is this survey useful to our understanding of Canadian English?*

Indeed, our survey conducted within the Queen’s University community does seem to be generally consistent with Tagliamonte’s point on the rising popularity of intensifiers like “so” and “really” within young anglophone speakers in Canada. Yet, the phenomenon of replacing outdated intensifiers with new ones is certainly not limited to Canada but is an occurrence that can be observed in most, if not, all English-speaking communities globally. Tracing the particular trajectory of intensifier replacement in Canada may, however, be revealing. Don Kulick is worth quoting at length as he muses on the motivations for studying language shift:

The study of language shift becomes the study of a people’s conceptions of themselves in relation to one another and to their changing social world, and of how those conceptions are encoded by and mediated through language.  
(Kulick, 1997)

While Kulick’s comment might have been made with reference to a group of people’s abandonment of one language for another, rather than one particular aspect of language as was the focus of our study, it nonetheless highlights the significance of linguistics in understanding communities, people and their interaction with their social environments.

As intensifiers are especially prone to shift, we hope that our survey might lend itself to such a purpose. For while the replacement of intensifiers takes place within various “Englishes,” the terms particular to each linguistic community are unique. When intensifiers shift, the patterns of influence motivating the shift are unique for each speech community, including Canada.

*Limitations of our survey*

*(A) Limited Survey Data*

The survey set out to examine 10 distinct utterances, using one question per syntactic context. Thus, the analysis is solely dependent on the results gathered for the particular question. What this means is that there is no further data to corroborate our findings. While various studies have been conducted on the subject of intensifiers, they tend to focus on gender differences and on the rise of new intensifiers in mass media, as opposed to interrogating the different structural possibilities and the preferences of a particular linguistic community. Given the scarcity of literature to substantiate our analysis, we could only work using data obtained from the relatively modest sample size. Would our results have been contradicted if we had included more questions for each structural variation? This certainly would have been interesting to see.

### *(B) Context Dependency of Utterances*

As the surveys were handed out and returned immediately, we had the chance to receive immediate feedback from the participants. One of the participants pointed out that her answer for question three ("He was running very/really/so quickly") would have differed based on what kind of "running" he was engaging in. Was it leisure? Or was he being chased by a dog? This suggested that the choice of intensifiers is also dependent on the semantic as well as grammatical context. Thus, when one considers our conclusions, it should be kept in mind that they may be dependent on the situations described in our questions.

What further complicated the issue is the fact that the words being modified in each case could also be part of the consideration for the participants. We have an *intensifier + adjective* category, but consider the fact that adjectives could be further subdivided into various categories, i.e., adjectives describing people, colour, places, animals, time and so forth. There is reason to suspect that such differences could influence intensifier choice. It has also been noted that the intensifiers themselves possess different characteristics. For instance, the word "so" contains one syllable, unlike "really" and "very," both of which take a longer time to articulate. It is likely that this aspect of "so" could influence its use in certain instance, say, when one needs to get the point across in an utterance quickly and succinctly.

The sentences in the survey were deliberately general (that is *so/really/very* cool) to avoid creating a specific context in the minds of the respondents. Nevertheless, our working on the assumption that the participants did not have a specific context in mind could have been presumptuous.

### *(C) "Nil" Responses Unevaluated*

While the number of "nil" (no answer chosen) responses was minimal, they nevertheless constitute one set of the responses and warrant our attention. One of the respondents apologized for not being able to complete all the questions, explaining "Sorry, I don't say those." In hindsight, it would have been good to clarify what he meant – whether he would not use those intensifiers in those particular contexts, whether he had some alternative intensifiers in mind, or whether he meant he would not use the utterances themselves. One of the survey's shortcomings is its failure to include any open-ended questions which would have allowed the participants to propose alternatives to the intensifiers covered. It would have been interesting to see if there are other intensifiers in circulation on a university campus, and, if so, what these may be.

### *(D) Considering Syntax*

To some extent, the survey explores the various syntactical possibilities of intensifiers as well. What is clear from the process of fashioning the survey is that certain intensifiers lend themselves to certain linguistic structures more readily than others. This is exemplified in Questions 2 and 9 of our survey, where none of the

respondents checked the letters corresponding to “She is very looking forward to the party this weekend,” or “That is very not what I imagined Halloween to be,” suggesting that “very” is ungrammatical or awkward in the [be + intensifier + verbal material in –ing form] and [be + intensifier + not (negation)] structures. These questions were initially been crafted to eliminate “very” in order to tease out gender differences, if any. As the gender component was subsequently eliminated from our project, these questions doubled as control items in the survey to ensure that the participants were not checking off their answers unthinkingly or mechanically if they perceived themselves to be avid users of “so”, “really” or “very”. The results were consistent with our expectations; no one chose “very” for these questions; thus we could safely deduce that the participants went through each question conscientiously.

What this implies is that while some questions showed clear patterns of preference for “so” and “really” over “very,” the patterns could be indicative of a better grammatical fit rather than a lexical choice.

#### *Possibilities for further research*

In light of the limitations of our survey, we propose some changes that could have improved it, as well as some areas of further research on intensifiers that might be worth looking at.

The study could be improved by having more questions per structural possibility. This would, on a very basic (but important) level, provide more data. It would certainly boost the reliability of the findings if all the questions demonstrated consistency. Conversely, if there were contradictions, it would be valuable to the researcher as well, perhaps drawing attention to overlooked factors affecting choice of intensifiers.

Given that context and syntax could influence an individual’s choice of intensifiers, it seems that both could be probed further. One could, say, use the structure [be + intensifier + (adjective)] and vary the type of adjectives to see if individuals tend to use the same intensifier for different adjectives describing different entities (people, places, colour, time, etc.). Alternatively, one could investigate whether different regions in Canada agree on the grammaticality of certain intensifiers when placed in the various structural possibilities. Either of these follow-up studies could also tabulate results according to gender of respondents to observe if any interesting trends emerge.

In the process of administering the survey, one of the female respondents commented that she felt her responses made her sound like a “valley girl”. This response was triggered by her awareness of her idiosyncrasies in speech habits, and prompted us to reflect upon the sociolinguistic implications of using, or choosing to use, certain intensifiers. As issues of language and identity are often intertwined in complex and dynamic ways, it could be worthwhile to examine the attitude of various groups of people towards the choice of “so” and “really” over “very”. That is to say, would our self-professed “valley girl sound-alike” be conceived in the same way by other social groups? There are again numerous possibilities for how these



"other social groups" might be constituted: economic status, age and educational level being just some options. Age-grading in choice of intensifiers might also be an area of research.

### *What's next?*

Instead of "so" and "really", what other terms could be used to replace "very"? Could it be the British "bloody"? "*That was a bloody brilliant move!*" Or could it be "absolutely"? Or even "pretty," as in "That is pretty neat, eh?" This leads us to wonder why "so" and "really" are chosen in Canada instead of any of the other intensifiers. Language is constantly changing and at any moment, the process of recycling and replacement is taking place. Even at this point in time, a replacement could be in the works. Some of the respondents recorded "nil" responses, indicating that there are other terms which they could be using already.

## References

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## Appendix 1 Survey on the Use of Intensifiers

*We are studying Canadian English in our Linguistics 202\* course at Queen's University, and we would appreciate your participation in this survey. Your participation is completely voluntary and this survey is anonymous. We don't ask your name, but we do ask for some general information about you.*

**Gender:** M / F

**Age:**  Under 18

18-24

25-34

35-44

Over 45

**Nationality:**  Canadian  Non-Canadian (I have spent \_\_\_\_\_ years in Canada)

In each of the following questions, select the utterance which you are *most likely* to use in your *spoken* speech. There are no right answers! We are trying to figure out what Canadians actually say.

1(a) That is *so* cool!

(b) That is *very* cool!

(c) That is *really* cool!

2(a) That is *really* not what I imagined Halloween to be.

(b) That is *so* not what I imagined Halloween to be.

(c) That is *very* not what I imagined Halloween to be.

3(a) He is running *very* quickly.

(b) He is running *really* quickly.

(c) He is running *so* quickly.

4(a) She is *very* into baking these days.

(b) She is *so* into baking these days.

(c) She is *really* into baking these days.

5(a) The test was *so* awfully hard.

(b) The test was *really* awfully hard.

(c) The test was *very* awfully hard.

6(a) That shirt is *so* him.

(b) That shirt is *really* him.

(c) That shirt is *very* him.

7(a) That dog is not *very* friendly to strangers.

(b) That dog is not *really* friendly to strangers.

(c) That dog is not *so* friendly to strangers.

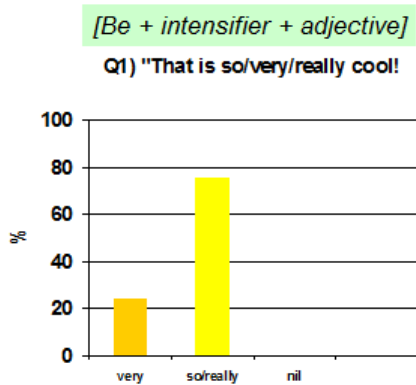
- 8(a) This class is *so*, so boring.  
 (b) This class is *very*, very boring.  
 (c) This class is *really*, really boring.

- 9(a) She is *really* looking forward to the party this weekend.  
 (b) She is *very* looking forward to the party this weekend.  
 (b) She is *so* looking forward to the party this weekend.

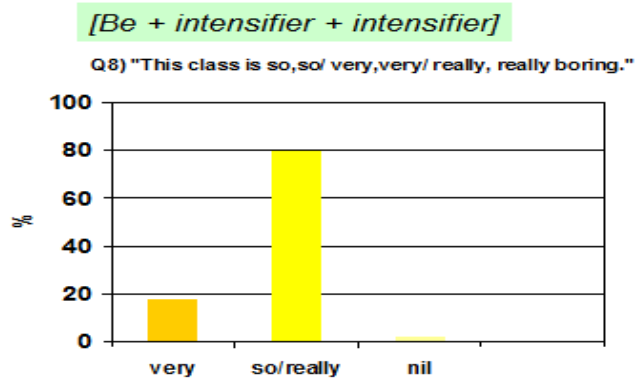
- 10(a) Be patient! The bus will be here very soon.  
 (b) Be patient! The bus will be here really soon.  
 (c) Be patient! The bus will be here so soon.

## Appendix 2 Contexts with "very" superseded by other intensifiers

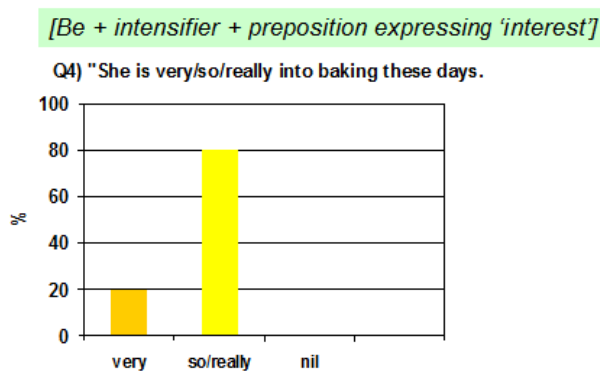
**Fig. 1.3**



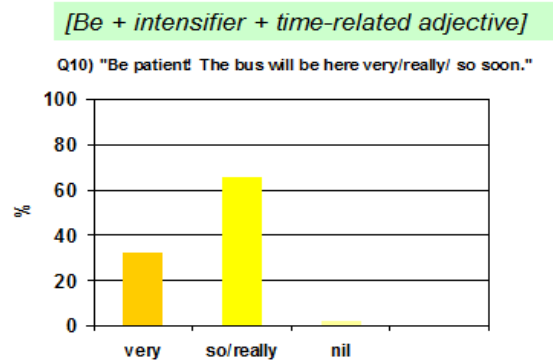
**Fig. 1.4**



**Fig. 1.5**

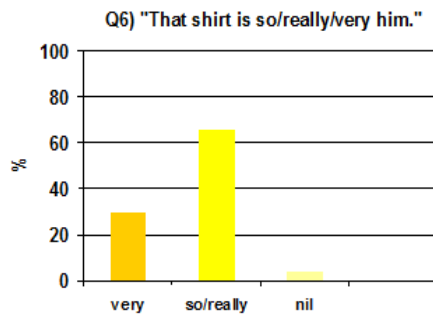


**Fig. 1.6**



**Fig. 1.7**

[Be + intensifier + pronoun expressing 'personality']



**Fig. 1.8**

[Be + intensifier + adverb]

