

## A Corpus-Based Analysis of the Adjective Intensifiers *well* and *proper* in British English using the BNC1994 and the Spoken BNC2014

James Stratton  
Purdue University

The use of adjective intensifiers in the English language has been a topic of much linguistic discourse (Stoffel 1901; Bolinger 1972; Altenberg 1991; Partington 1993; Paradis 1997; Lorenz 2002; Nevalainen & Rissanen 2002; Ito & Tagliamonte 2003; Tagliamonte & Roberts 2005; Xiao & Tao 2007; Méndez-Naya 2008). As the examples shown in (1) demonstrate, *well* and *proper* in British English can also function as adjective intensifiers, i.e., they can syntactically modify adjectives.

- (1) (a) he's *proper* silly  
(b) I've got *proper* hairy toes  
(c) they get *proper* hot weather  
(d) that's *well* skanky  
(e) she's *well* pretty  
(f) she had a *well* posh version of the Yorkshire accent  
(g) she looked *well* older than sixty-six  
[dataset from the BNC1994 and the Spoken BNC2014]

However, to date, few studies have empirically investigated the use of these two adjective intensifiers in British English. Literature on *proper* is virtually non-existent and although *well* was briefly explored by Stenström (2000), the study did not explore its usage throughout time and the study used a small sample corpus which was also not geographically representative of British English. The present study bridges this gap by examining their present-day usage in the spoken component of the BNC (British National Corpus 1994) with the recently released Spoken BNC2014 (British National Corpus 2014). By using a dataset of over 20 million words (approximately 10 million per corpus), the present study explores their frequency, collocational and syntactic distribution from 1994 to 2014.

The results indicate that both adjective intensifiers have significantly increased over the last two decades. Furthermore, while the adjective intensifier *well* is used more frequently than *proper*, *proper* has accelerated at a faster rate over this twenty-year period. The present study also argues that these two adjective intensifiers are multifunctional and productive insofar as what they can modify and collocate with. This is because they can modify both predicative (1a, 1d, 1e) and attributive adjectives (1b, 1c, 1f), gradable (1c, 1e) and extreme adjectives such as *gorgeous*, as well as some comparative adjectives (1g). As for their collocational distribution they can modify adjectives of a variety of different semantic classes, and can modify adjectives of both positive (1e) and negative prosody (1a, 1b, 1d). Moreover, the number of verbs with which they collocate such as [*to be, to get, to seem, to look, to find, to become* + ADJ] has increased over the two decades.

## References

- Altenberg, Bengt. 1991. Amplifier Collocations in Spoken English. In Stig Johansson & Anna-Britta Stenström (eds.), *English Computer Corpora*, 127–47. Berlin and New York: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Bolinger, Dwight L. 1972. *Degree words*. The Hague and Paris: Mouton.
- Dixon, R. M. W. 1977. Where have all the adjectives gone? *Studies in Language* 1, 19–80.
- Ito, Rika & Sali Tagliamonte. 2003. *Well weird, right dodgy, very strange, really cool*: Layering and recycling in English intensifiers. *Language in Society* 32, 257–279.
- Lorenz, Gunter R. 2002. *Really worthwhile or not really significant?* A corpus-based approach to the delexicalization and grammaticalization of intensifiers in Modern English. In Ilse Wischer & Gabriele Diewald (eds.), *New reflections on grammaticalization*, 143–161. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Méndez-Naya, Belén. 2008. Special issue on English intensifiers. *English Language and Linguistics* 12(2): 213–219.
- Nevalainen, Terttu & Matti Rissanen. 2002. *Fairly pretty or pretty fair?* On the development and grammaticalization of English downtoners. *Language Sciences* 24, 359–80.
- Paradis, Carita. 1997. *Degree Modifiers of Adjectives in Spoken British English*. Lund: Lund University Press.
- Partington, Alan. 1993. Corpus evidence of Language Change: The Case of Intensifiers. In Mona Baker, Gill Francis, and Elena-Bonelli (eds.), *Text and technology. In honour of John Sinclair*, 177–92. Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
- Stenström, Anna-Brita. 2000. It's funny enough man: Intensifiers in teenager talk. In John M Kirk (ed.), *Analyses and Techniques in Describing English Corpora Galore*, 177–190. Amsterdam: Rodopi.
- Stoffel, Cornelis. 1901. *Intensives and Down-toners: A study in English adverbs*. Heidelberg: Carl Winter.
- Tagliamonte, Sali A. & Chris Roberts. 2005. So weird; so cool; so innovative: The Use of Intensifiers in the Television Series Friends. *American Speech* 80(3), 280–300.
- Xiao, Richard and Hongyin Tao. 2007. A corpus-based sociolinguistic study of amplifiers in British English. *Sociolinguistic Studies* 1, 241–273.