The absolutely fabulous (recent) history of intensification

Alexandra D’Arcy
University of Victoria

The intensifier system is a notorious site of change in English, characterized by ‘fevered invention’ (Bolinger 1972:18) and constant renewal (Brinton & Arnovik 2006). This makes it inherently interesting with respect to the mechanisms that operate on variation and change, and synchronic variationist research has exposed ongoing shifts in the frequency of individual forms and ongoing delexification and generalization of incoming forms (e.g. Ito & Tagliamonte 2003; Rickford et al. 2007). With but one exception (Barnfield & Buchstaller 2010), however, what is notably missing is variationist research which addresses the diachronic dimension of this grammatical sector. Given the volatile nature of intensification, a diachronic perspective is key to understanding the mechanics of layering and recycling. Are frenetic shifts in variant choice a regular aspect of the system, or is the overarching pattern one of stability, punctuated by bursts of change? We may also wonder about the longitudinal impact of delexification on the sector as a whole: Is the variable grammar affected by ongoing change, or do shifts involving individual lexical items operate separately from the architecture of intensification more generally?

The Origins of New Zealand English Corpus, ONZE (Gordon et al. 2007), provides a window to more than 150 years of casual speech data, 1850 to the present. It thus provides a rare opportunity to trace the recent history of intensification. Analysis of over 12,000 adjectival heads from over 250 speakers reveals gradual patterns of historical ebb and flow. The longitudinal pattern is not one of rapid and large-scale reconfiguration but of general expansion across the functional domain, just as reported by Barnfield and Buchstaller (2010) for their British materials. Intensification becomes more frequent across time, and affects a broader range of adjective types. The contemporary situation, however, is one of rapid and large-scale reorganization of forms, precisely as seen in other synchronic research of English varieties. Some of this reorganization is quantitative, but some is qualitative, involving changes in the configuration of the constraints on variation. The diachronic evidence provided by ONZE thus suggests that long-standing patterns can perdure. Systemic change can be quite gradual, yet the inherent form/function asymmetry that characterizes the domain supports (indeed, may even engender) periods of ‘fevered’ shifts in individual intensifiers.
References


