Foundering: Reconsidering adjectival intensification

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Variationists sometimes adopt a type of methodological founder principle, whereby the first researchers to study a variable develop approaches that are replicated and reified by subsequent scholars. Reconsidering such approaches can nuance our analyses – see, for example, Walker & Meyerhoff’s (2006) reinterpretation of the “following grammatical category” constraint for copula deletion.

We propose a similar reinterpretation, this time of the variable context, for a variable diagnostic of rapid sociolinguistic change (Ito and Tagliamonte 2003; Van Herk and OIP 2006; Tagliamonte 2008; Lealess et al. 2009; Barnfield and Buchstaller 2010): the intensification of adjectives (1).

(1)  a. He’s right huge. (Molly, 3f)
    b. Oh, yes, she’s a very good baker. (Robert, 1m)
    c. Sometimes it gets really intense. (Evan, 3m)

Since Ito & Tagliamonte (2003), researchers have defined the variable context as the full range of intensifiable adjectives (e.g., red and cool are in, hand-carved is out), whether overt intensification occurs or not. We argue that this is appropriate to study intensification as a whole, but not the choice of intensifier. Deciding to intensify is a different discourse/pragmatic process than choosing among intensifiers. Thus, studies of intensifier choice should take as their variable context only intensified adjectives. Otherwise, true effects can be masked by the preponderance of non-intensified tokens (typically over 60%), which are themselves linguistically and socially constrained.

We illustrate with data from two corpora of rapidly changing language: spoken Labrador Inuit English (N=1399, 20% intensified) and written online data (N=9441, 34% intensified). Comparing results for frequent intensifiers highlights the differences that including or excluding non-intensified tokens can make. In Labrador, very, pretty and real have the same constraints in both runs, though the relative ordering and weight change, while right and really show different significant factors. In online data, really, so, and very show changes in ordering and weight. In both cases, the inclusion of zero forms obscures important social and apparent-time effects.

References
