



Gender  
Differences in  
Intensifying  
Modifiers: So,  
Very, Really, and  
Pretty

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*Studies have generally shown that women tend to use more amplifiers, also called intensifiers, which are modifiers that scale up a quality. To test the validity of these claims, this study analyzed the speech of seven men and seven women and looked for the frequency of four amplifiers: so, very, really, and pretty. Contrary to previous research, in this study the men actually used twice as many amplifiers as women. Furthermore, each gender preferred the same intensifiers, with really being most common, followed by so, pretty, and very. It is true that men and women responded differently, just not in the way expected.*

# Introduction

It has been widely acknowledged that males and females speak differently, and this difference is usually viewed as socially constructed (Wolfram and Schilling-Estes 2006). Many studies have focused research on the differences between genders, ages, and regions when considering intensifying modifiers, commonly known as amplifiers or intensifiers. These studies have shown varying results in which amplifiers are most commonly used by each gender. The majority of the research done on intensifiers, especially relating to gender, has been done using corpora. However, studies have shown that intensifiers are used more frequently in speech than in writing (Xiao and Tao 2007). This study analyzes intensifiers in speech by using recorded interviews conducted in person. Thus, the purpose of this study is to examine how men and women differ in their use of intensifiers in speech.

## Literature Review

There are many different theories that try to explain why the differences between male and female language exist. The “Cultural Gender Difference Approach” is a theory that says that the differences between genders arise from girls and boys in America developing their speech in separate communities, and this separate development influences them as adults. Generally, boys and girls separate into same-gender groups when developing many of their language-use patterns. Girls associate in groups that develop cooperation, equality, and emotionally charged friendships. From these groups, females tend to develop a style of speech that is interactive, encouraging, and cooperative. Boys, conversely, associate in groups where power is the most important characteristic, and because of this, their style of speech often develops into one of dominance and competition (Wolfram and Schilling-Estes 2006).

Intensifiers are defined as “adverbs that maximize or boost meaning” (Murphy 2010) and are used to demonstrate verbal skills and capture the attention of the audience. These intensifiers can be divided into two groups: amplifiers and downtoners. Amplifiers are adverbs or adjectives that scale up a quality, while downtoners scale down a quality. Intensifiers are used emotionally and socially to add versatility and color to speech. The connection between intensifiers and the speaker’s feelings has been studied by Brown and Tagliamonte (2012) as a type of self-presentation that contributes to a type of meta-narrative. Amplifiers are most generally associated with female speech (Murphy 2010).

Female speech is identifiable by the use of modifiers, as seen in a study done by Kramer (1974). Seventeen women and seventeen men were asked to write a description of photographs of either a building or a group of people. These paragraphs were then given to another group, and their task was to determine the gender of the author. There were fifty-nine correct guesses and fifty-one incorrect ones, thus showing that there is a slight difference between male and female speech.

Not only are intensifiers more common in female speech, they are also more common in speech than in writing (primarily among educated speakers) and are generally decreasing (Xiao and Tao 2007). When looking at narratives and non-narratives (utterances given as stories or just interactive speech), Brown and Tagliamonte (2012) said that neither age nor gender plays a significant role in the amount of intensifiers present in narratives, but both play a significant role in non-narratives.

Other research shows differences of gender and intensifiers. Suleiman and O’Connell (2008) analyzed the difference of speech between Hillary and Bill Clinton. This study showed that there were a number of male and female speech indicators between the two politicians, including the number of syllables, the amount of referencing, and the use of the intensifier *so*. The study specifically noted that “in

addition Hillary Clinton uses *so* more frequently than [Bill] Clinton, . . . finding that women use intensifiers more than men” (Suleiman and O’Connell 2008).

Further distinctions have been made on which intensifiers are used most often and by which gender. A study done by Brown and Tagliamonte (2012) says that *really* is the most popular intensifier, *so* is preferred by adolescent women, and *pretty* is the intensifier preferred by adolescent men. In this study of the Toronto English Archive, it was also found that younger women lead new language innovations into other discourse contexts. In contrast, a study done in the Corpus of Spoken Professional American English by Yaguchi, Iyeiri, and Baba (2010) found that *so*, *very*, *really*, and *pretty* were in the top five most frequently used amplifiers. In the breakdown of the intensifiers, the females used those four more than males did. These results also showed that women depended on the use of *very* more than *real/really*. When looking at intensifiers used online by Newfoundlanders, Bulgin et al. (2008) showed that *so* was used by females more than twice as often as by males. Males used *very* somewhat more than women; women used *really* slightly more than men.

There is not a general consensus on which intensifiers are used more by males or females. The previously listed studies were mostly based on corpus data. In this paper, I want to focus on the difference between male and female speech based on in-person interviews. After looking at all of the various results, I found that *so*, *very*, *really*, and *pretty* are generally agreed to be the most frequently used intensifiers. I want to look specifically at which intensifiers each gender uses most frequently. I also want to further prove previous research, which states that females use intensifiers more often than males do. While there is plenty of research stating that age is a significant feature when looking at intensifiers, I have decided to focus solely on gender and tried to keep all of the participants of this study within a ten-year age range of one another.

In this study, I will try to prove that the female participants of this research use intensifiers more than males; I believe females will prefer the intensifiers *so* and *very*, and males will prefer *really* and *pretty* more than the other intensifiers. I will look at the methodology used to gather the information needed for this comparison, analyze the results of the study, and discuss the limitations of this study and some opportunities for further research in this particular field.

## Methodology

For this research on the different uses of amplifiers between genders, I conducted a field study in which I interviewed fourteen individuals currently attending Brigham Young University. Although fourteen is a smaller sample size than I would have liked, I did not have the time or resources for more respondents. I interviewed seven males and seven females, and with their approval I recorded each interview. The participants' ages ranged from nineteen to twenty-eight. The seven females aged from nineteen to twenty-eight, with two at age nineteen, three at age twenty, one at age twenty-two, and one at age twenty-eight. The seven males aged from nineteen to twenty-six, with one at age nineteen, three at age twenty-one, one at age twenty-two, one at age twenty-four, and one at age twenty-six. The participants came from various regions of the United States, including San Diego, California; Redlands, California; Victorville, California; Logan, Utah; Ogden, Utah; Danton, Texas; Seattle, Washington; Buffalo, New York; Long Island, New York; Fort Collins, Colorado; and Burley, Idaho. Four of the participants were from the Ogden, Utah area, and two were from the Seattle, Washington area.

Testing the Cultural Gender Difference Approach, I made sure to recreate the same situation for both genders of the study. The participants were each given four prompts and asked to respond to one or all of them until they had spoken for five minutes. Participants were

told that it did not matter whether or not they covered all four prompts or to which of the four prompts they responded; they were instructed to use the prompts as material to talk about for the necessary five minutes. They were asked to describe (A) their favorite family vacation, (B) their favorite vacation, (C) their best day ever, or (D) their worst day ever. They were each given the prompts before the recording began and given some time to think over the questions so that they could respond without stopping. The recording started when the individuals indicated that they were ready to begin.

Each of these interviews was conducted on a one-on-one basis in a semi-private setting; thirteen were done in the participants' own apartments, and one was done at a private table in a building located on the campus of Brigham Young University. I sat across from each individual, using my laptop as a recording device. There were other people present for each interview; however, they were not directly associated with the interview. To avoid skewed results, the participants were not informed of what I was analyzing until after their interview was over.

After all of the interviews were finished, I went through and carefully listened to each recording, marking down each occurrence of the intensifiers *so*, *very*, *really*, and *pretty*. I then listened to each recording a second time, making sure that I had accurately recorded the correct number of intensifiers for each participant. The results were recorded on separate sheets, one for the males and one for the females, so that the data could be processed more easily.

## Results

In this paper I hypothesized that the females of this study would use intensifiers more than men would. I also hypothesized that the females would use the intensifiers *so* and *very* more than the other intensifiers

and that the males would use the intensifiers *really* and *pretty* more than the other intensifiers. The results follow.

Table 1 shows the number of intensifiers the females used throughout the duration of their five-minute interviews. Table 2 shows the number of intensifiers the males used during their five-minute interviews. Figure 1 and Figure 2 show the data from these tables in a chart that better displays the occurrences of each intensifier.

#### Intensifying Modifiers

Speaker	So	Very	Pretty	Really
Female 1	1	0	2	5
Female 2	1	0	0	4
Female 3	5	0	1	0
Female 4	2	1	0	7
Female 5	2	1	0	4
Female 6	0	0	0	5
Female 7	1	0	1	9
Total	12	2	4	34

Table 1

#### Intensifying Modifiers

Speaker	So	Very	Pretty	Really
Male 1	6	2	0	21
Male 2	1	0	0	22
Male 3	1	0	0	3
Male 4	1	1	0	3
Male 5	0	0	3	11
Male 6	0	0	3	15
Male 7	0	0	0	9
Total	9	3	6	84

Table 2



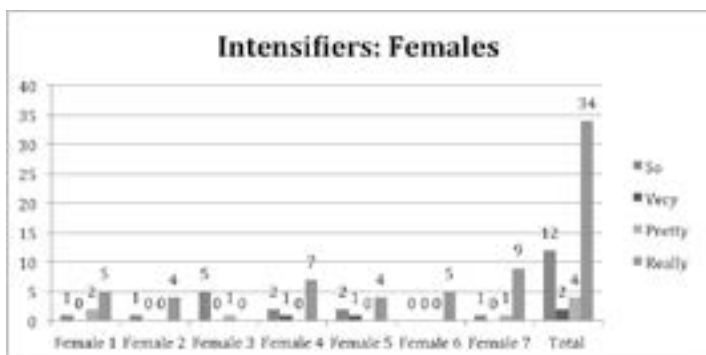


Figure 1

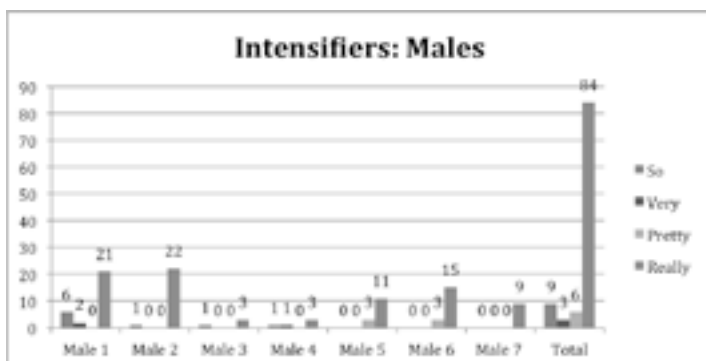


Figure 2

Figure 3 shows the complete totals of all of the occurrences of intensifiers used by both the males and females in the duration of their five-minute interviews. Figure 4 shows the average number of times each intensifier was used throughout all fourteen interviews, divided up to compare females to males.

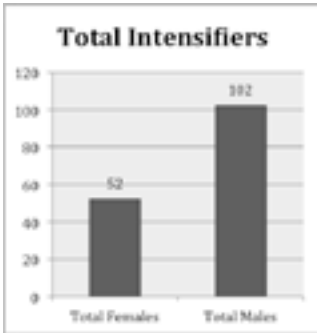


Figure 3

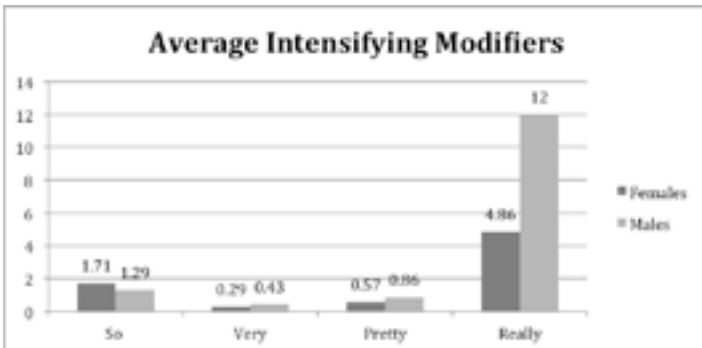


Figure 4

Based on these results, the data shows that the males almost doubled the females' use of intensifiers in their interviews. Females chose to use (in order of frequency) first *really*, second *so*, third *pretty*, and last *very* when selecting their modifiers. There was a 4.57 range in between the average occurrences of the most used intensifier, *really*, and the least used intensifier, *very*. The males chose to use first *really*, second *so*, third *pretty*, and last *very*. There was an 11.57 range in between the average occurrences of the most used intensifier, *really*, and the least used intensifier, *very*. In the ranges between females and males, there was a seven-point difference. While the males did use *really* the

most, so did the females. The males' second choice for intensifiers was *so*, not my predicted *pretty*. The preferred choice of modifiers were in the same order for both females and males: (1) *Really*, (2) *So*, (3) *Pretty*, (4) *Very*.

## Analysis

This simple study does not support the belief that females use intensifiers more often than males do. Looking at the totals presented from all the intensifiers used illustrates that males used more intensifiers (102) than females (52), and the females lie at half the frequency of the males.

This study also did not support my hypothesis that females use the intensifiers *so* and *very* most often. *So* was the females' second choice for intensifiers, providing evidence that *so* is a commonly used female intensifier, being used more than it was by the males. However, *really* was used the most by both the males and the females of this group. In this study, while both genders did differ in their usage of intensifiers, they were similar in that their most preferred intensifiers were the same.

My data also does not support the idea that *very* and *so* are the two most commonly used intensifiers, in contrast to previous studies. Instead, for both genders, the intensifier *really* was most common. This may show that another shift is occurring in the use of amplifiers; younger generations are gravitating toward using one intensifier. This gravitation may cause a resulting shift in general use of *really* as the intensifier used by all ages, genders, and groups.

Contrary to earlier research, the females in my research were not the innovators. The males were the speakers that used a wider variety of intensifiers along with using more of them overall. However, I did not record the other intensifiers used by the females that were not in the four listed previously. The females did tend to use other amplifiers

such as *super* and *way*. These could be the next forms to be introduced to the language.

I think the Cultural Gender Difference Approach still holds some ground because of the vast difference in numbers that were seen between the genders. When all variables were the same, the males and females still responded differently, not in the choice of modifiers, but in the total times each intensifier was used. This indicates that there is another variable here, but if it is solely based on gender, it cannot be shown with the narrow scope of this present data.

A possible answer to this variability is that males will use more intensifiers when they are addressing a female audience. Seeing as I, a female, was the interviewer, I may have had some effect on the males of this research. Even though I never spoke during the interviews, participants tended to address their remarks towards me. Based off of Xiao and Tao's research (2007) this adaptation in speech would include using more intensifiers in their speech (Xiao and Tao 2007).

## Conclusion

According to these results, males and females do act differently in the same type of situation, but they also act similarly. Both genders favored the use of *really* as their intensifier. I think this shows that while males and females are different, they do share similar aspects of language. When all variables were the same, the males and females still responded differently; however, I don't think that judgments can be based off of such a small sample size, and more research should be done before coming to a concrete conclusion.

Further research could be done on the same age group to avoid age influencing the use of intensifiers, but the study would be expanded to a much larger sample size. I think that a male and a female interviewer should be present for the interviews; this would ensure that a one-gender audience would not change the results of

the intensifiers used by each gender. Looking at additional modifiers used in the interviews would be beneficial in order to see if females use more intensifiers or downtoners total compared to just more than four intensifiers, specifically *kinda*, *way*, and *super*, which were all present in my study but not explicitly analyzed.

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# Appendix

Questions given to interviewees before starting the recording:

You may answer one or all of these questions as long as you talk for five minutes total. You are welcome to skip in between questions, and you are not required to answer them all.

1. Tell me about your favorite family vacation.
2. Tell me about your favorite vacation.
3. Tell me about your best day ever.
4. Tell me about your worst day ever.

