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That Was Totally Intense! A Study of Emphatic Adverbial Modifiers in Male and Female Speech

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—Shellie Chiavetta

Emphatic adverbial modifiers, or intensifiers, are adverbs that emphasize an adjective or verb in written or oral language. These intensifiers include words such as “really” or “very,” used in such contexts as: “That party was **really** awesome,” or “I’m **very** tired today.” This study focused on the influence of age and gender on the frequency of intensifier usage in everyday speech.

I interviewed three groups of eight informants, each group consisting of four males and four females. The groups were divided by age: 11–20 years of age, 21–32 years of age, and 33–50 years of age. The same interview prompts were used with all participants. There were questions pertaining to entertainment and media, a subject that would be easy for each age group to talk about. I also set out to determine whether my own intensifier use would affect the informant’s use by including a set number of intensifiers in my verbal introduction to the interview for half of the informant base. The interviews were recorded; afterwards, I listened to them and transcribed relevant portions. I counted the number of times each individual used intensifiers in his or her speech, and then looked at the total intensifier use for each age and gender group.

My results indicate that for this set of informants, males—specifically males 21–32 years of age—used intensifiers with higher frequency than females. Males of the other age groups, while using fewer intensifiers than those aged 21–32, still used intensifiers in higher frequency than their female counterparts. My own intensifier use had no effect on the informants’ intensifier use. These results were counter to my hypothesis that females would use a greater number of intensifiers, which was based on the stereotype that women talk more and become more excited emotionally about what they want to convey to the listener. Similarly, I hypothesized that those of the youngest age group would use intensifiers more frequently than the older informants, due to their tendency to be excited about their thoughts and opinions. However, this research shows that speakers use emphatic adverbial modifiers to provide the most information about their topic rather than to convey their level of emotion. The informants wish their conversation partners to know as much as they can about the topic at hand, and intensifiers are used to accomplish that goal. This method for imparting information is most common among males, and is not affected by age.

I would like to thank my faculty advisor, Naomi Nagy, for the time and energy she devoted to my project; from helping me to develop the scope of the research to providing insight into the research process, and finally, to editing this brief. I would also like to thank my fellow classmates, Terri Heckman and Jake Leopold, for their help initiating this project.

Author Bio

Shellie Chiavetta is a senior linguistics major from Derry, NH. After completing field research for the course “A Sociolinguistic Survey,” she was inspired to expand her study on adverbial modifiers and gender, and applied for a Summer Undergraduate Research Fellowship (SURF) award. She was interested in uncovering any pattern of usage, and in discovering “if age or external influence would have any effect on that usage.” Shellie explains, “I learned a great deal about the ‘layering’ of language; so much can be conveyed in the smallest units of speech. I also learned a lot about doing field research on my own: setting up a study and executing it, analyzing the results and discovering something—all of which was highly rewarding.” She found it interesting to have her hypotheses proved incorrect, and says she “learned that much more from the project by getting unexpected results.” After graduating in May, 2006, Shellie hopes to work with languages, specifically Japanese, and become involved with translation. Her ultimate goal is to live and work in Japan for a few years.

Mentor Bio

Dr. Naomi Nagy, associate professor in the English department and linguistics program coordinator, has taught at UNH for ten years. She specializes in sociolinguistics, studying “variation in how people speak and how that is used to represent identity.” A seasoned mentor, she has worked with five SURF awardees, as well as with several students on honors projects, theses, and independent studies. Regarding Shellie’s research, Dr. Nagy says, “I very much enjoyed this project. I like thinking about research designs and I enjoyed helping Shellie interpret her data, especially since that type of data hadn’t been collected before.”