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Wicked intense: the grammaticalization of wicked and other intensifiers in New Hampshire

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ABSTRACT

This article presents a synchronic study of *wicked* and other intensifiers in Southern New Hampshire. Two sets of data were collected: one from the social media website Twitter, and the other from spoken casual interviews conducted by students at the University of New Hampshire. In all, more than 9000 intensifiable adjectives and verbs were collected, with rates of 22 and 24 per cent intensification for the Twitter and spoken data, respectively. The first goal of this paper is to show that one intensifier in particular, *wicked*, is in the process of grammaticalizing through the mechanisms of *desemanticization* and *extension*. The second goal of the paper is to provide an overview of the current system of intensifiers in New Hampshire.

I. INTRODUCTION

An intensifier is an adverb which maximizes or boosts meaning, typically modifying adjectives of degree (Ito & Tagliamonte 258). There are two types of adverbial intensifiers: maximizers (*extremely, absolutely*) and boosters (*really, very*). In New England, intensification is stereotypically – and proudly – marked by the use of *wicked*. As an intensifier, *wicked* can be found abundantly in various regional product names, restaurants, and tourist merchandise, as well as in the everyday speech of New Englanders. This usage seems to date back several centuries, as in the following OED example,

(a) Yesterday was...a wicked hot day.

(1663 T. Porter *Witty Combat* iv. i. sig. D4)

As an adverbial intensifier, *wicked* has only recently been studied (Ravindranath), and there is evidence that it is grammaticalizing. This evidence can be found in the current ways in which *wicked* is used: whether it's used positively or negatively, the types of adjectives that it's used with, and the function of those adjectives it's used with. Previous studies (Tagliamonte 2008; Ito & Tagliamonte; Macaulay, etc) have shown that these contexts expand for intensifiers as they grammaticalize, and as such, this paper presents a synchronic study of *wicked* and examines it in these contexts. The first goal of this paper is to provide evidence for the grammaticalization of *wicked* and its possible sociolinguistic implications. The second goal is to present a current snapshot of intensification in New England.

II. GRAMMATICALIZATION

Grammaticalization is the process by which lexical items become functional or grammatical items. Heine outlines the following four mechanisms of grammaticalization (Heine 279):

- i. Desemanticization (or “bleaching,” semantic reduction): loss in meaning content; [a matter of semantics]
- ii. Extension (or context generalization): use in new contexts; [a matter of pragmatics]

- iii. Decategorialization: loss in morphosyntactic properties characteristic of the source forms, including the loss of independent word status (cliticization, affixation); [a matter of morphosyntax]
- iv. Erosion (or “phonetic reduction”), that is, loss in phonetic substance [a matter of phonetics]

Additionally, Heine, Bybee, and Traugott argue that the grammaticalization process “occurs in the context of a particular construction” (Bybee 602). In other words, phrases [with particular lexical items] become grammaticalized more so than individual items become grammaticalized. Consider, for example, the grammaticalization of *going to* > *gonna* in conversational/ informal English. Bybee describes the circumstances in which *going to* grammaticalized as follows: [movement verb + progressive] + purpose clause (*to* + infinitive) (Bybee 603). It is not the case that the verb *go* always takes the form *gonna* [it only does so in the progressive]. It also is not the case that any verb showing movement (for example, *traveling, riding*) plus the preposition *to* will undergo the same phonological reduction that *gonna* underwent: **travelinna* or **ridinna*. However, the use of *gonna* has expanded beyond the specific purpose clause *to* + infinitive. It is also possible to use *gonna* with a purpose clause such as: *I’m gonna catch the ball*, or *I’m gonna eat that*. Perhaps, then, it is possible to edit Bybee’s claim to: [*go* + progressive] + purpose clause.

Bybee also claims that “frequency is not just a result of grammaticalization, it is also a primary contributor to the process” (Bybee 602), though counter-examples are numerous. Fortson gives the example of *pitch-black* (Fortson 659), which is used relatively infrequently. Consider that *pitch* refers to ‘tar’, so *pitch-black* originally meant ‘black as tar’ before grammaticalization occurred. After reanalysis, *pitch-black* is understood as ‘very black.’ Fortson argues that some speakers of English can use constructions such as *pitch-red* to mean ‘very red’ (Fortson 659) (though, I do not find it very acceptable). The desemanticization of *pitch* indicates that it may be in the process of grammaticalization, even though *pitch-black* is not very frequent, and *pitch-red* (or other colors) are even less frequent.

The most often cited example of the grammaticalization of an intensifier is *very*, which was borrowed into English as a truth-averring adjective (Tagliamonte 2008 363), as in example (a). *Very* was later used with attributive adjectives, with some semantic ambiguity, as in (b). Finally, *very* was used with predicative adjectives and no longer carried any semantic weight, instead functioning only as an intensifier, as in (c), it’s current use.

(a) Grant me confort this day, As thow art God **verray**!

(c.1470, Gol. & Gaw 957; *OED very* a., adv. n.¹ A.I.1.a)¹

(b) He was a **verray** parfit gentil knyght.

(Chaucer, *Canterbury Tales*, A Prol. 72)¹

(c) She’s very cute.

SP_MLC

¹ Examples from Tagliamonte 2008 363

If *wicked* is grammaticalizing, we would expect the following: positive and negative evaluations; predicative and attributive collocations; and collocations with a wide range of adjectives. Because *wicked* originally was an adjective that meant something like ‘evil’ or ‘terrible to a great degree,’ if it can collocate with adjectives varying in positive/negative evaluation, it should also be taken as evidence of desemantization. Some researchers claim that the intensifier *very* was more developed once it modified predicative adjectives (Tagliamonte 2008 373). So, if *wicked* is used comparably with predicative and attributive adjectives, it should be evidence of extension. Likewise, if *wicked* can collocate with all of the Dixon Semantic Types, it should also be taken as evidence of extension. The Dixon Semantic Types are seven classes used to categorize adjectives in English, and are as follows:

Dixon Semantic Types (Dixon 1977; Rickford et al. 2007):

Color – red, bluish

Age – young, middle aged

Dimension – tall, big

Speed – fast, slow

Human propensity – upset, excited

Physical property – loud, empty

Value – awesome, depressing

In the data collected for this study, we find the following examples of *wicked* used with the different semantic types and functions:

Dimension/predicative: “it’s like wicked far away”	(SP_SM)
Human Propensity/predicative: “he’s wicked selfish”	(SP_AF)
Physical Property/predicative: “yeah it was wicked cold”	(IV_KM)
Speed/attributive: “there were wicked fast teams”	(SP_AN)
Value/attributive: “I mean not like wicked good money”	(SP_SM)
Age/attributive: “Looking back on wicked old Facebook posts and pictures”	(Twitter)

III. DATA AND METHODS

This study uses two sets of data from a wide range of speakers. The first set of data is composed of Tweets (messages from the social media website Twitter). The Twitter Streaming API allows registered users to find Tweets in a number of different ways. For this data set, I filtered for *wicked* and for location, specifying a box around the state of New Hampshire. Unfortunately, the command for location filtering (POST statuses/filter locations) did not work as accurately as hoped. Several tests showed that Tweets were returned from all over the United States, even with the specified bounding box around New Hampshire. Additionally, the bounding box seemed to limit the number of Tweets returned in my search, which ran for about 90 minutes. After discovering these facts, a new search was conducted, still using the Streaming API, and only filtered for *wicked*, leaving out a location filter. This time, the search ran for almost three hours and returned an initial 4,638 Tweets in total.

Next, I filtered the Tweets and eliminated about two-thirds of them for a number of different reasons. I eliminated all Re-tweets, as they were not unique Tweets but merely copies of Tweets. I also eliminated Tweets referencing the musical “Wicked”, *The Wizard of Oz*, and Tweets with song lyrics or song titles, such as the popular “Ain’t No Rest for the Wicked” by Cage the Elephant and “Wicked Games” by the Weeknd. After eliminating these, I was left with a total of 1,540 unique, anonymous speech samples containing *wicked* in various contexts.

The second set of data is taken from interviews conducted at the University of New Hampshire by Professor Maya Ravindranath’s Fall 2013 Sociolinguistics class (LING 719). Eleven students in the class conducted a total of forty-four casual interviews. I listened to each interview and transcribed all examples of intensifiable adjectives and verbs, some of which were intensified and some of which were not. This yielded a total of 7,660 speech samples by fifty-one different speakers (some interviews were done in groups of three, and the speech of interviewers from the state of New Hampshire were included in the data set).

The breakdown of speakers included in this study is as follows (a full list of speakers may be found in the appendix):

Table 1. M/F Ratio

Female Speakers	29
Male Speakers	22
Total	51

Table 2. Age distribution

Age 0-24	41
Age 25-30	2
Age 31+	8

The interviews ranged widely in length and seriousness; topics ranged and included school, extracurricular activities, politics, drinking, childhood memories, and frightening or near-death situations, among others. Interviewers were given instructions to elicit speech that was emotionally heightened or extreme in some way, as this type of context seems more successful at eliciting intensified speech. Interviewers were also instructed to elicit specific stories, per recommendation of Tagliamonte.

Both data sets were coded for the same variable context, described as follows. Nearly all adjectives, regardless of (Dixon) Semantic Type or functional use (attributive or predicative) were included. Some types of adjectives were not included, as they do not allow for intensification; these were predominantly comparatives and superlatives. Typically the adjectives included in the data sets allowed for any intensifier: *That’s really/very/extremely/incredibly/wicked nice.*

In addition to adjective contexts, some verbs are able to be intensified and were included in the variable context. These are verbs include *to want, to like, to love, to hate, to need, to miss* and *to care*. These verbs were chosen based on their ability to be expressed on a scale, and they occurred naturally and abundantly in both data sets, both with and without intensification. Non-scalar verbs were not included in the data. Interestingly, scalar

verbs do not take just any intensifier, but are limited to a small set of intensifiers. For example:

(d) I really wanna go to bed

IV_AF

(e) Starting to get very excited for Friday... I actually wicked miss @GlebusTwoThree
Twitter user @jcasarella

Compare speech samples (d) and (e) with *I very wanna go to bed. This construction is ungrammatical and never occurs in either data set. The fact that *wicked* is one of the intensifiers which does occur with verbs seems promising as evidence toward grammaticalization, which I will discuss in further detail below.

All of the Tweets and spoken examples were coded in the following ways. First, the following word was marked by its part of speech: noun (N), verb (V), adjective (A), adverb (D), preposition (P), or nothing, if there was no following word (Z). Next, the use of *wicked* was marked as being adjectival (Q) or adverbial (R). In cases where *wicked* was used as an adjective, it was marked for meaning/connotation: great, evil, a lot, dirty, or unclear. In cases where *wicked* was used as an adverb (and in the spoken data, the other intensifiers as well), the following adjective was marked as being attributive (9) or predicative (0), and was marked for its Dixon Semantic Type: age, color, dimension, physical property, human propensity, speed, or value. Finally, the overall sense of each sample was marked as being positive (G), negative (B), or neutral (E).

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In 334 of 1,540 Tweets, *wicked* was used as an adverbial intensifier rather than as an adjective, about 22% of all *wicked* uses. Tagliamonte argues, “if an intensifier has arisen and developed in a short period, say 100 years, the underlying mechanisms of that change should remain accessible in the speech community” (2008 364). She continues that these mechanisms are available through an apparent time construct and analysis of the form by speaker age. So, if *wicked* has arisen in the last 100 years, which certainly seems to be true, then it makes sense that the youngest speakers are using it as an intensifier, while others continue to use it as an adjective. Further, it’s important to remember with this data set that these are not only speakers from New England – they’re speakers from all over the world, and not all speech communities use *wicked* in the way that New England uses it. For example, a friend of mine from Liverpool can use *wicked* as an adjective with a positive sense, as in, ‘that’s wicked!’ to mean, ‘that’s cool!’

In the spoken data, 30 of the 1,796 intensifiers were uses of *wicked*, or about two per cent of all intensification. Of those 30 examples of *wicked*, 29 of them were spoken by the youngest age group, and only one was spoken by the middle age group. Comparing all intensification in the spoken data, 1,796 of the 7,660 speech samples contained intensification (both adjectival and verbal), yielding an intensification rate of approximately 23.4%, comparable to the 24% that Ito & Tagliamonte found in York, England in 2003 (264) and the 22% that Tagliamonte & Roberts found for the television show, *Friends*, in 2005 (287). However, in her 2008 study, Tagliamonte suggested that

intensification seems to be rising, at least in Toronto English, and reported an overall/mean rate of 36.1% intensification (366). When the intensified and intensifiable verbs were filtered out of the spoken data, 6,752 speech samples remained with 1,661 intensified adjectives, about 24.6% intensification. While this data does not compare to the extremely high rate of intensification in Toronto (Tagliamonte 2008), which also did not include verbs in the envelope of variation, it is still consistent with intensification in York, England (Ito & Tagliamonte 2003) and in the American television show, *Friends* (Tagliamonte & Roberts 2005).

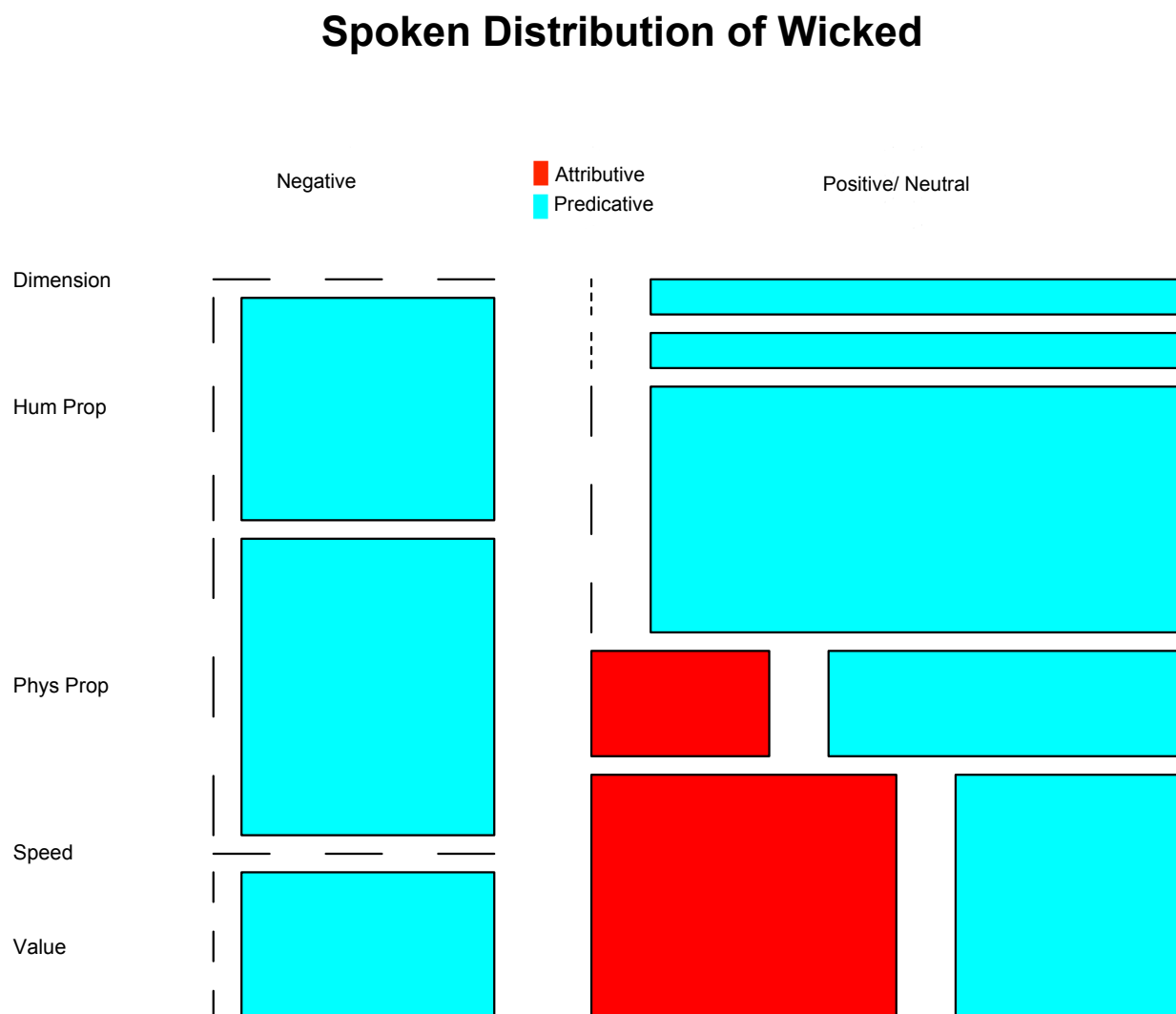
To graphically represent different aspects of the results of each study, I created mosaic plots using the program R. Mosaic plots are a graphical display of frequencies. The area of each box is proportional to that value's frequency. Mosaic plots can compare up to four factors in one graphical display. X- and Y-axis variables are displayed in the order in which they're listed. A dotted line indicates zero frequency for that combination of variables. Figures 1, 2, and 3 below look specifically at *wicked*. Figures 4 and 5 are an overview of all the intensifiers.

The mosaic plot in Figure 1 is broken up in three ways: the X-axis shows the relationship of positive and negative evaluation; the Y-axis shows the Dixon Semantic Types which were used with *wicked*; and the colors show whether the adjective was used attributively or predicatively. In this case, we see most clearly that *wicked* was used with predicative adjectives, due to the abundance of the light blue color throughout the entire plot. Looking at the negative contexts, the 'Physical Property' semantic type was used most often with *wicked*, for example, "he's wicked selfish" (SP_JC_2). It was used next-most with 'Human Propensity' and then 'Value'; it was not used with 'Dimension,' 'Speed,' 'Age,' or 'Color'² and thus were not included in the plot. On the positive/neutral side, 'Value' and 'Physical Property' were used most often. There were more attributive 'Value' adjectives than there were predicative, however more predicative adjectives in the other four categories. 'Dimension' and 'Human Propensity' were used the least (n=1 for each). Because there were so few spoken examples of *wicked*, the test for independence of all variables yielded a p-value of 0.1068, which is not significant.

Because the p-value was so high for this data set, it's impossible to say with any certainty that these three factors – positive/negative evaluation, attributive/predicative function, and Dixon Type – don't exist independently of each other. In other words, because this data doesn't prove that, for example, *wicked* isn't always used positively and predicatively with a 'Dimension' type adjective. To answer this, we must look at a larger data set.

² Note: 'Age' and 'Color' did not occur at all with *wicked* in the spoken data.

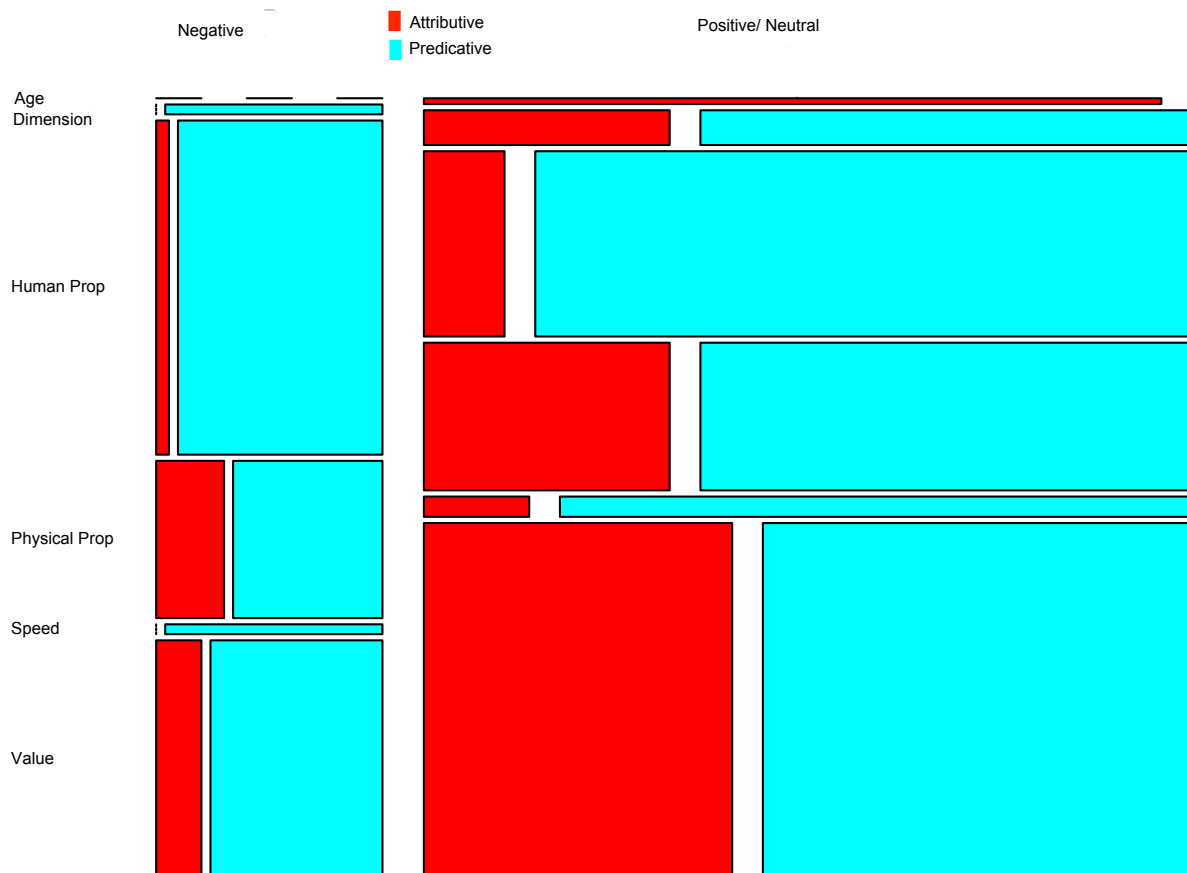
Figure 1.



On the other hand, some parts of this data are notable in comparison to other studies. Only about 18% of adjectives [modified by *wicked*] are used attributively, while the majority, 82%, are used predicatively. This is comparable to what Macaulay reported for *pure* in Glasgow, Scotland speech in 2006 (272) and what Ito & Tagliamonte reported for *really* and *very* for York, England, speech in 2003 (271-273). Similarly, the lack of 'Dimension,' 'Speed,' 'Age,' and 'Color' type adjectives is not entirely surprising. Macaulay reported that the 'Color' category represents only 5% of collocations with *pure* in Glasgow youth speech (271). Ito and Tagliamonte reported few examples of *really* and *very* with the 'Dimension,' 'Speed,' and 'Age' categories for their youngest age group (17-34; most comparable to the speakers in this data set). They reported slightly more examples of *really* with 'Color' type adjectives, a major increase from their older two age groups (270). Considering that their data showed a synchronic variation, we could say that intensifiers tend to spread to these four categories later than 'Physical Property,' 'Value,' and 'Human Propensity,' and that *wicked* has not yet spread this far.

Figure 2.

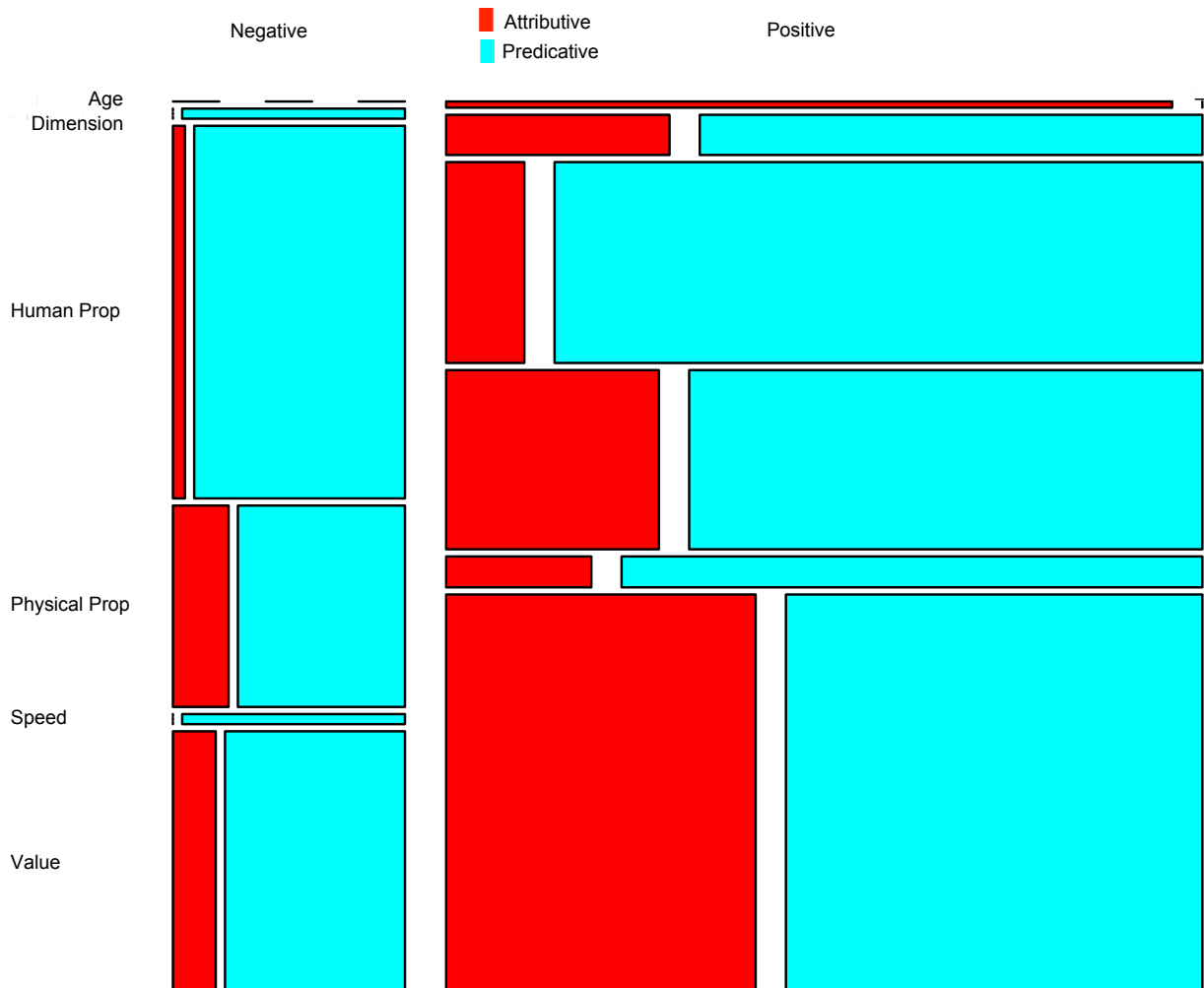
Twitter Distribution of Wicked



The data from Twitter is more interesting in that we immediately notice that there is a higher percentage of attributive contexts than there were in the spoken data. However, the blue still dominates and most of the contexts with *wicked* were used predicatively. Again, 'Value,' 'Physical Property,' and 'Human Propensity' were used most often with *wicked*, while 'Speed,' 'Age,' and 'Dimension' were all used less frequently. Interestingly, the only examples of *wicked* with 'Age' category adjectives were attributive, while all of the other categories have been overwhelmingly predicative. As 'Age' seems to be a later-usage category, it makes sense that its first uses would be attributive rather than predicative. It is also even clearer here that the vast majority of the Tweets were either positive or neutral in evaluation. The test for independence of all variables yielded a p-value of 2.465×10^{-6} , which is significant.

Figure 3.

Distribution of Wicked



Because the number of Twitter examples far exceeded the number of spoken examples (334:30), the combined distribution of *wicked* looks much like the Twitter distribution. This time, the test for independence of all variables yielded a p-value of 1.288×10^{-7} , which is, again, significant.

The overall distribution of positive versus negative evaluations in Figures 1 through 3 indicates that *wicked* is used significantly more in positive or neutral uses rather than negative uses. Because *wicked* is historically negative, this is indicative of the first mechanism of grammaticalization, *desemanticization*.

Figures 1 – 3 also show that *wicked* overwhelmingly collocates with predicative adjectives rather than attributive adjectives. Figures 4 and 5 below show that almost all other (spoken) intensifiers exhibit this same behavior (with the exception of the other

category in Figure 5). This is evidence toward the second mechanism of grammaticalization, *extension*.

Finally, Figures 1 and 3 show that *wicked* collocates with six of the seven Dixon Semantic Types. This wide range also indicates the mechanism of *extension*, as *wicked*'s original adjectival meaning is probably classified as a 'value' according to the Dixon Semantic Types.

Though it is not graphically represented, the distribution of *wicked* by age in the spoken data is almost exclusively in the youngest group. That is to say, of the thirty examples of *wicked* as an intensifier, twenty-nine of those examples were spoken by members of the youngest age group. The other example came from a male in the oldest age group. This seems to indicate that *wicked* as an intensifier is a rising form, or that it may be increasing in apparent time – with the caveat that it may be age graded. It is still possible – and it's true – that the older age groups use *wicked* in various other contexts.

Table 4. Numerical Distribution of All Intensifiers

Intensifier	N
Really	667
So	523
Pretty	177
Very	175
Too	79
Wicked	30
Super	28
Other Intensifiers	117
Total	1796

Figure 4 illustrates the distribution of all intensifiers from the spoken data set. Here, the intensifiers are compared with speaker gender and age. It's immediately obvious that females lead in intensification use in the youngest age group; however, males generally lead or equal the females in the middle and oldest age groups. This is interesting especially in context of *wicked*, the bottom-most intensifier shown, where males lead females in the oldest age group. Tagliamonte claims that females often lead males in intensification, particularly with incoming forms (2008 383). If this is true, this may be indication that the form is further grammaticalized than previously thought. The test for independence of all variables yielded a p-value of 5.224×10^{-57} , which is, again, significant.

Figure 4.

Distribution of Intensifiers

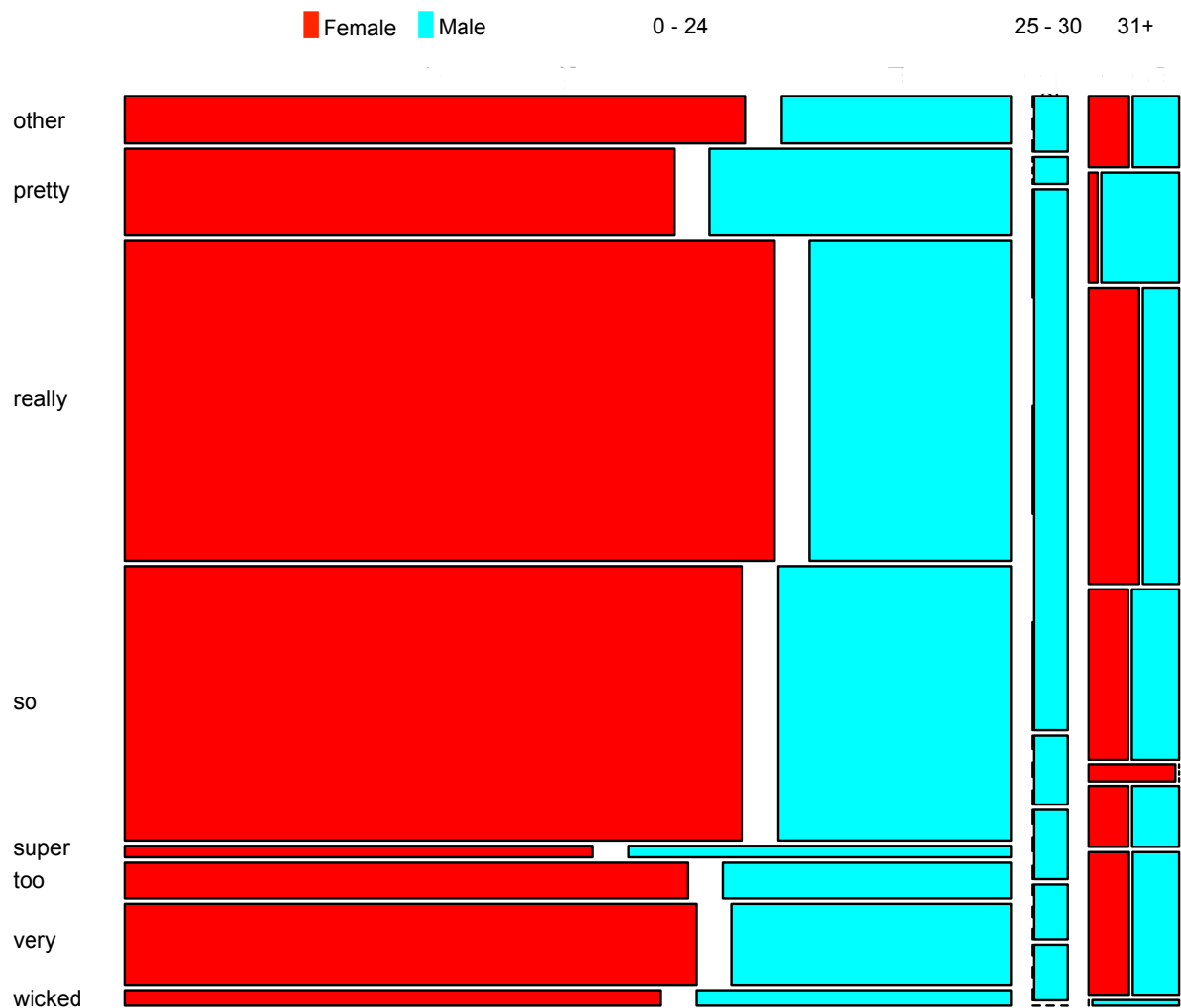


Figure 5.

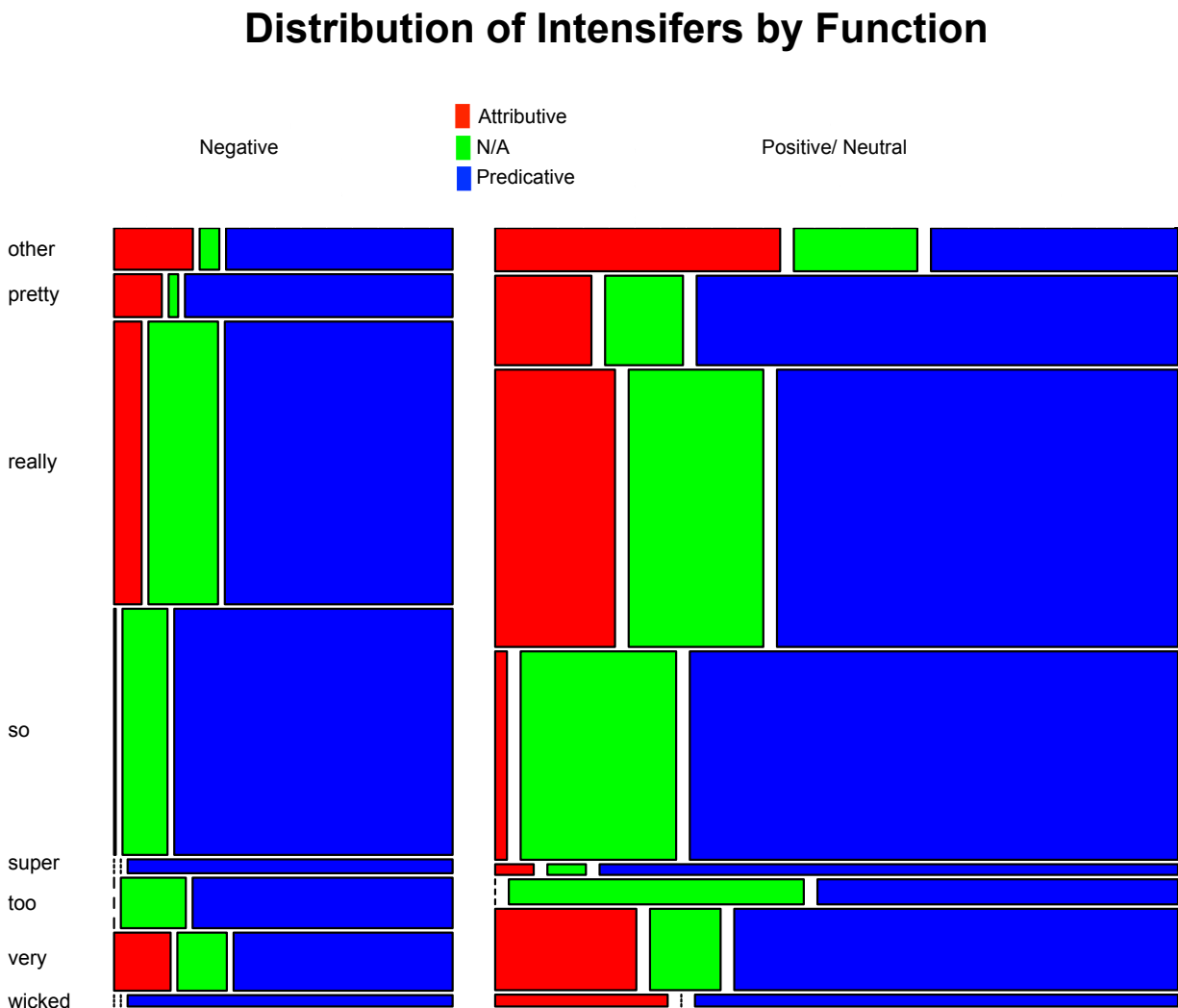


Figure 5 shows the distribution of intensifiers by positive/negative evaluation and by attributive/predicative function. Because some verbs were intensified and included in this plot, the functional category “N/A” is used to represent those verbs, which do not take an attributive or predicative role. The positive/neutral evaluations far outweighed the negative evaluations, and the predicative uses far outweighed the attributive (and N/A) uses. The test for independence of all variables yielded a p-value of 5.922×10^{-37} .

In 2005 with Roberts and in 2008, Tagliamonte shows that the top intensifiers are *really*, *very*, *so*, and *pretty* with her population. They show in apparent time that *very* is receding, and *so* and *pretty* are increasing in usage. Figures 4 and 5 support these claims; generally females lead in intensification use, except for the oldest group, in which males lead females in use of *pretty*. Table 4 also supports these claims; if we look back at Table 4, *very* and *pretty* have approximately the same frequency (175 and 177, respectively). Because *very* has a history of recycling (that is, it goes through cycles of high and low frequency) (Tagliamonte 2008 370), it's likely that *very* is at a low-frequency stage and may

increase again sometime in the future. On the other hand, *pretty* is an incoming form and may grow in frequency with, or surpass, the frequency of *very* (at least in the short term).

V. CONCLUSION

We've seen that *wicked* collocates widely with the Dixon Semantic Types, that it functions both attributively and predicatively, and that it is used in both positive and negative contexts – three indications of the first two mechanisms of grammaticalization, *desemanticization* and *extension*. The data does not confirm nor deny the third nor fourth mechanisms of grammaticalization, *cliticization* and *erosion*, but this is not entirely surprising. Considering that *wicked* is only a two-syllable word and doesn't currently have any regular compounds, there isn't much to be cliticized or eroded. Compare to the example of *gonna*, the product of 'going + to' after erosion and cliticization. While 'going to' is regularly used to express an aspect of the future, *wicked* is predominantly used to modify other forms in a wide variety of contexts. Compare also with *really* and *very*, two fully grammaticalized intensifiers in English: neither has undergone cliticization or erosion. That isn't to say that it isn't possible for this to happen; and indeed, if a compound with *wicked* were to arise and become popular, it would quite likely undergo cliticization and/or erosion. However, the first two mechanisms do indicate that *wicked* has, at the very least, begun the process of grammaticalization and will likely further grammaticalize over time.

Looking more widely at the intensifiers currently used in New Hampshire, we found that the rate of intensification is comparable to those found in other studies (Ito & Tagliamonte 2003; Tagliamonte & Roberts 2005). Additionally, *really*, *pretty*, and *so* are currently the leading intensifiers, while *very* seems to be receding. It seems likely, but is up not certain, that *wicked* (and perhaps even *super*) will increase in usage. Consider again that speakers of the youngest age group produced 29 of 30 examples of *wicked* as an intensifier, and the middle age group produced the only other example. In apparent time, this indicates that *wicked* has rapidly increased in usage over the last two or three decades, and thus seems likely to continue increasing. This process may be aided by a regional sense of pride: while New England speech may continue to diverge phonologically, *wicked* unites the region lexically. In his 2006 study of *pure* in Glasgow youth speech, Macaulay speculates that *pure* is a booster "that might function effectively as a sign of group identification" (276), supported by Peters' 1994 claim that "boosters frequently function as symbols of group identification" (271). While *pure* is strictly limited to Glasgow youth speech (Macaulay 276), it's not implausible that *wicked* functions similarly as a New England in-group speech marker. Indeed, in discussing this study with non-native New Englanders, many have commented on their desire and effort to use *wicked* as a native would.

Of course, *wicked* and *pure* aren't the only nonstandard, regional intensifiers in English. There is some speculation that *hella* originated in northern California, and various other speech regions have "claimed" *mad* as a regional intensifier (where these two intensifiers actually originated is debatable, and the current literature is lacking). While much attention has been given to common intensifiers such as *really* and *very*, not nearly enough attention has been given to nonstandard, regional intensifiers, which can be overtly connected with regional culture. Perhaps it is this connection with culture that fuels linguistic innovation, and more particularly, the grammaticalization of regional intensifiers.

VI. APPENDIX

Table 1. Speakers

Speaker/ Interviewer ID	Birth Year	Gender
IV_AC	1992	F
IV_AF	1992	F
IV_EN	1992	M
IV_GH	1992	M
IV_JL	1992	F
IV_KM	1992	F
IV_KT	1992	F
IV_LB_1	1992	F
IV_LB_2	1992	F
IV_RS	1992	M
SP_MC	1964	M
SP_CR	1993	M
SP_MLC	1964	F
SP_TP	1993	F
SP_CF	1992	M
SP_KL_1	1992	F
SP_MM	1992	F
SP_BN	1963	F
SP_GN	1963	M
SP_BR	1993	M
SP_CW	1993	M
SP_EV	1994	M
SP_GG	1993	M
SP_SH	1951	M
SP_ER	1993	F
SP_SD	1992	M

Speaker/ Interviewer ID	Birth Year	Gender
SP_SF	1993	F
SP_CS_1	1991	M
SP_JR	1995	M
SP_MR	1959	F
SP_SR	1991	M
SP_AN	1992	M
SP_AS_1	1990	F
SP_EM	1985	M
SP_KP	1993	F
SP_SM	1991	M
SP_CS_2	1993	F
SP_HM	1993	F
SP_JS	1976	M
SP_MB	1990	F
SP_SS	1993	F
SP_DD	1991	F
SP_RM	1991	F
SP_VS	1992	F
SP_AS_2	1990	F
SP_JC	1995	F
SP_JC_2	1992	F
SP_AF	1993	F
SP_JF	1991	F
SP_KL_2	1985	M
SP_KO	1979	F

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