

## Intensifiers in Swabian German: changes in social meaning

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Intensifiers (e.g., *very*, *really*, *so*) provide speakers with the opportunity to impress, persuade, praise, and generally influence the interlocutor's reception of a message. It therefore comes as no surprise that intensifiers index social meaning, with factors such as gender and age influencing their use (e.g., Fuchs, 2017; Stratton, 2020; Stratton & Sundquist, 2022). While intensifier variation has been explored widely in English (e.g., Tagliamonte, 2008; Fuchs, 2017), research on intensifiers in German is impoverished (cf. Stratton, 2020), with little attention paid to their use in regional varieties of German.

The present study uses variationist sociolinguistic methods to examine the use of intensifiers in Swabian German, a variety spoken by approximately 800,000 speakers in southwestern Germany. To examine language use across the lifespan, 20 speakers of Swabian German carried out sociolinguistic interviews in 1982 and were then re-interviewed in 2017. Speakers originated from two speech communities: Stuttgart, an urban center with approximately one million inhabitants, and Schwäbisch Gmünd, a semi-rural town with a population of about 60,000. Each intensifiable adjective that speakers produced was coded binomially for intensification, as well as linguistic (e.g., syntactic position, semantic classification), social (e.g., gender, age, geographic mobility, local orientation, education, community origin), and demographic factors (e.g., place of birth, residences lived, years in each location).

Results indicate that Swabian women use amplifiers (e.g., *so* 'so', *echt* 'really') more frequently than men, while Swabian men use downtoners (e.g., *e bissle* 'a bit') more frequently than women. However, this trend changes across the lifespan. As men age, they decrease their frequency of downtoners whereas women's strategies remain stable. We argue that changes in intensification reflect possible changes in societal pressures, along with the effect of power differentials between cisgender men and women. Women may use amplifiers to project positivity, enthusiasm, and cooperation, traits that Western societies seemingly reinforce in women. In contrast, younger men may use downtoners to project masculinity, nonchalance, toughness, and indifference, characteristics that are reinforced in Western societies in young males. However, as men age, the need to project stances of nonchalance changes and their intensification strategies begin to converge with the strategies employed by women.

Identity and mobility are also found to influence intensification in Swabian German. Speakers from Stuttgart exhibit the highest rate of amplification, suggesting that individuals in urban environments may feel the pressure to use linguistic devices that scale up qualities to impress and persuade more frequently than speakers in semi-rural locations. Based on a Swabian Orientation Index (Beaman, 2024), speakers who identified as "more Swabian" used more dialectal intensifiers (e.g., *fei* 'very', as in *fei schee* 'very nice'), showing that intensifier choices correlate with speaker identity.

All in all, this study shows how speakers use intensifiers to index different types of social meaning as they construct and develop their personae across their lifespans.

## References

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