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A Historical Linguistics Detective Story.

This is well confusing!

If you want to convince someone that the book you just read is worth reading, you can intensify your speech. Intensifiers are linguistic devices which allow speakers to impress, praise, persuade, and generally influence a listener's understanding of a message. A sentence like "the book was so interesting" is clearly more convincing than just "the book was interesting". However, specific intensifiers can go stale over time if they are overused, which means that different intensifiers are favored at different points in time.

In Present Day English, the three most frequently used intensifiers are *so*, *really*, and *very*, but this was not always the case. In Old English, the number one choice was *swiðe* (*wæs swiðe bliþe* 'was very happy'), which survives today only in derivative forms, such as *swift* and *swiftly*. In Middle English, *wel* (*a wel old cherl* 'a very old man') became one of the most frequent variants, but by the mid-14th century, its use was thought to have declined in frequency, giving way to competitors such *right* and *very*. By the 15th and 16th century, *wel* was thought to have disappeared, remaining only in fossilized expressions such as *well worth* and *well aware*. Interestingly, however, 500 years after its alleged demise, *well* returned as an intensifier in late 20th and 21st century British English. Today, you might hear Brits refer to that convincing book they read as *well interesting* or *well good*.

The question from a historical standpoint though is, did *well* really disappear after the 15th and 16th century? In a study published in the *Canadian Journal of Linguistics*, I traced the intensifying use of *well* over a 500-year period and found that although it was rarely attested in corpora (collections of digitized machine-readable texts) which document the incipient standard varieties of English, its use was retained in certain dialects of English. In a text from 1631, you can find "it appeareth to be well hard" and "A'd get well drunk" is attested in a text from 1843. When linguists started documenting the current intensifying use of *well* in the late 20th and early 21st century, it was initially proposed that it was British teenagers who innovated (i.e., invented) its use. However, in this study, I found that not only was its use retained in some dialects of English, but its use can also be found in songs and comedy sketches (by adults!) in the 1980s! In the Sitcom Hale and Pale, middle-aged men were found using *well* in a mockingly fashion. But who were they mocking? Clearly if it was used by adults in the 1980s, its use was not innovated by teenagers from London in the 1990s, which is what was initially suggested.

So how did the current use come about? Is it a continuation of its retained use in dialects? Yes and no. While its retention in dialects allowed the intensifier to remain in the system, typically linguistic change does not spread from peripheral rural varieties to urban mainstream varieties, casting some doubt on this initial hypothesis. Moreover, I also discuss an interesting piece of prosodic evidence which might suggest that the current use is not the same as its retained use. Today, unbeknown to the consciousness of speakers of British English, whenever they use *well* as an intensifier, it is stressed. If you listen to how speakers use it, they always stress *well*, not the intensified part of speech (e.g., *it was wéll boring! he's wéll stupid!*). In fact, if *well* is not stressed, it can have a different function (*he's wéll educated* 'he's very educated' VS *he's well éducated* 'he is educated well'). If the current intensifying use of *well* were the same as the former use

documented in Old and Middle English, then we would not expect there to be a difference in stress between *he's well áware* (where *aware* is stressed) and *he's wéll clever* (where *well* is stressed, not *clever*).

This historical study showed that intensifiers can come in and out of vogue over time, but its use may differ across different populations. Methodologically, the study demonstrated the importance of the "leave no stone unturned" principle when carrying out a historical analysis. Had the analysis been restricted to the available digitized texts, one might have concluded that its intensifying use did die out after Middle English, but when all evidence is used, it becomes clear that it did not. The same principle applies in legal settings. For instance, overwhelming evidence such as a defendant's blood, hair, and saliva can be found at the scene of a crime, but it only takes one piece of sufficiently acceptable evidence to refute the hypothesis that they were responsible for the murder. Take for example a video of the murder at the crime scene showing a different perpetrator manually planting the evidence after killing the victim themselves. This evidence invalidates the previous hypothesis while providing support for a different outcome.

Historical Linguistics can be thought of a crime scene where researchers displaced in time are left with the befuddling task of reconstructing what happened based on often a limited footprints of data.

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