

German Intensifiers.

The Emergence of German Variationist Sociolinguistics

Everything in the universe has to evolve to survive, and language is no exception. As well as constantly changing, language is also rich in variability, that is, there are several ways of expressing the same thing. The fundamental idea of variationist or Labovian sociolinguistics is that variation is not random, but instead is conditioned by various linguistic and social factors. Intensification is a part of language which is constantly evolving because, as intensifiers become overused, they start to lose their intensifying or persuasive effect. Since intensifiers provide speakers with the opportunity to make their speech more persuasive, credible, and emotional, at any given point in time there are various intensifiers which speakers can choose from.

To describe the weather in German, speakers can say it is *sehr kalt* ‘very cold’, *echt kalt* ‘real cold’, *voll kalt* ‘very cold’ [literally. *full cold*], *richtig kalt* ‘right/proper cold,’ *super kalt* ‘super cold’, *so kalt* ‘so cold’, *wirklich kalt* ‘really cold’ and *recht kalt* ‘real cold’, to name but a few. Speakers can also intentionally choose to not intensify the adjective and say that it is simply *kalt* ‘cold’. Examining the factors which shape the decision to use an intensifier or not, as well as the factors influencing intensifier choice, is a variationist question. In a study published in the *Journal of Germanic Linguistics*, I carried out the first variationist analysis of German intensifiers.

By collecting a list of the contexts in which intensifiers could be used, I was able to quantify the average number of adjectives a speaker intensifies. In doing so, I found that German adjectives were intensified 37 percent of the time. Of the possible choices, *so* ‘so’ has become the most frequent (e.g., *meine Mutter ist so anstrengend* ‘my mother is so tiring’). While *sehr* ‘very’ has been around since Middle High German (e.g., *ir sît sere wunt* ‘you are painfully → sorely → very wounded’), *so* has been coming in and out of fashion throughout the history of Germanic. It can be found in Old English (*he swa ænlic wæs* ‘he was so famous’), in Old High German (*min vater ist so samalih* ‘my father is so similar’) and in Old Saxon (*sô blîdi ward* ‘became so happy’). While it fluctuates in frequency across time and space, it is found today in a number of Germanic languages, such as Dutch (e.g., *hij is zo groot* ‘he is so big’), Norwegian (e.g., *han er så høy* ‘he is so tall’) and Icelandic (e.g., *það er svo hlýtt* ‘it is so warm’). Today, the shift from *sehr* ‘very’ to *so* ‘so’ is a change led by predominantly younger as opposed to elderly speakers. That said, *so* has become so pervasive (as in English!) that it has spread to speakers of all ages.

Intensifiers which scale up the meaning of an adjective (e.g., *der Film war echt langweilig* ‘the movie was real[ly] boring’) are called “amplifiers”, whereas intensifiers which scale down the meaning of an adjective (e.g., *der Film war ein bisschen langweilig* ‘the movie was a little boring’) are called “downtoners”. Consistent with findings from other languages, German amplifiers (67%) were used more frequently than German downtoners (33%). Even though both men and women used amplifiers more frequently than they used downtoners, women used amplifiers more frequently than men did. However, interestingly, men used downtoners more frequently than women did. Therefore, in statistical terms, if you encounter a sentence containing an amplifier (e.g., *so*, *sehr*, *echt*) there is a higher likelihood that it came from a female speaker than a male speaker. In contrast, if you encounter a sentence containing a downtoner (e.g., *ein bisschen*), there is a higher likelihood that it came from a male speaker. On a sociological and anthropological level, this difference may suggest something inherent about the nature of being male or female in modern societies, a difference which is manifest in language itself. In other words, women have a

tendency to describe events as being higher than the assumed norm more often than men do which is reflected in their language (e.g., the movie was not just good, but was *really* good), and while men also prefer to amplify the meaning of an adjective, they tone down its meaning more frequently than women do (e.g., the movie was *kind of* good).

By looking at intensifier use across different age groups, it seems that intensification becomes more common over time. There are several possible reasons for this, one being that the overuse of an intensifier brings about the need for additional ways to intensify one's speech so that a message remains convincing and emotional. However, there is a notable caveat. Very young speakers of German, such as speakers 10 years of age or younger, used intensifiers less frequently than all other age groups. A likely explanation for this is that these speakers are still in the developing stages of language acquisition and therefore first acquire adjectives before the use of optional intensifiers.

This study provides several insights into German intensifier use and its interaction between social factors such as gender and age. In doing so, the study also hopes to have laid the foundation for future work in a field which does yet officially exist, namely German Variationist Sociolinguistics. While Variationist Sociolinguistics is well established for work on English, to date, few studies have employed classical variationist methods to examine German variation and change. For updates on future German variationist work follow me on *Twitter* @JamesMStratton_ and my project "German Variationist Sociolinguistics" on *Researchgate*.

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