

**A Diachronic Analysis of the  
Adjective Intensifier *well* from  
Early Modern English to Present  
Day English**

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AACL 2018  
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# What are (adjective) intensifiers?

The terminology is not always uniform:

- For **Stoffel** (1901) they are “**intensive adverbs**”
- For **Bolinger** (1972) and **Paradis** (1997) they are “**degree modifiers**”
- For **Quirk et al.** (1985) they are “**intensifiers**”

> Adjective Intensifiers: an adverbial which intensifies an adjective

It is hot

(In theoretical terms: *it is ∅ hot*)

It is *very* hot

It is *really* hot

# Quirk et al. (1985)

Quirk et al. (1985: 590) divide **intensifiers** into **two sub-categories** depending on their intensifying function

**Amplifiers:** “scale upwards from the assumed norm”

e.g., *hot* > *very hot*

*hot* > *really hot*

**Downtoners:** “scale down from the assumed norm”

e.g., *hot* > *a little bit hot*

*hot* > *relatively hot*

# Amplifiers

Quirk et al. (1985) subdivide **amplifiers** further depending on their **semantic function** into *boosters* and *maximisers*

**Boosters:** “a high point on the scale”  
e.g., it is *really* hot  
it was *very* warm

**Maximizers:** “upper extreme point on the scale”  
e.g., it is *completely* ridiculous  
it was *absolutely* insane

# The Adjective Intensifier *well* in British English

## The Adjective Intensifier *well*

(1a) It's *well* hot today

(1b) That bag is *well* stinky

(1c) This film is *well* funny

(1d) That *well* funny film we watched

- This intensifier can modify both **predicative** (1a-c) and **attributive** adjectival heads (1d)
- Recent studies suggest that **its use** has significantly **increased** in the **last two decades**

(Stenström 2000; Aijmer 2018; Stratton 2018)

# Is this Use of *well* an Innovation?

- It has been used as an **adjective intensifier** since **Old English** and was reportedly frequent in Old English poetry (Peltola, 1971: 656)
- According Fettig (1935: 15-21) and Mustanoja (1960: 319–327), the adjective intensifier *well* **became most popular** in the **13<sup>th</sup> century** in the South and South Midlands of England, but by the **mid-14<sup>th</sup> century** it **reduced in frequency** (Fettig 1935: 186)
- After the mid-14<sup>th</sup> century it was **rarely used** and appeared only in **retentions** such as *well aware* and *well worthy* (Ibid).

(1) (a) Engelsond his a **wel** **god** lond  
England is a well good land

‘England is a very good land’

[Robert of Gloucester, *Metrical Chronicle*, 1297; from *Robert of Gloucester’s Chronicle*, (ed.), Thomas Hearne (Oxford), line 1 (cited in *OED2*)]

(b) In þat forest... þer woned a **wel** **old** cherl  
In that forest there lived a well old man

‘A really old common man lived in the forest’

[Walter William Skeat, *a1375*; from *William of Palerne* (cited in *OED2*)]

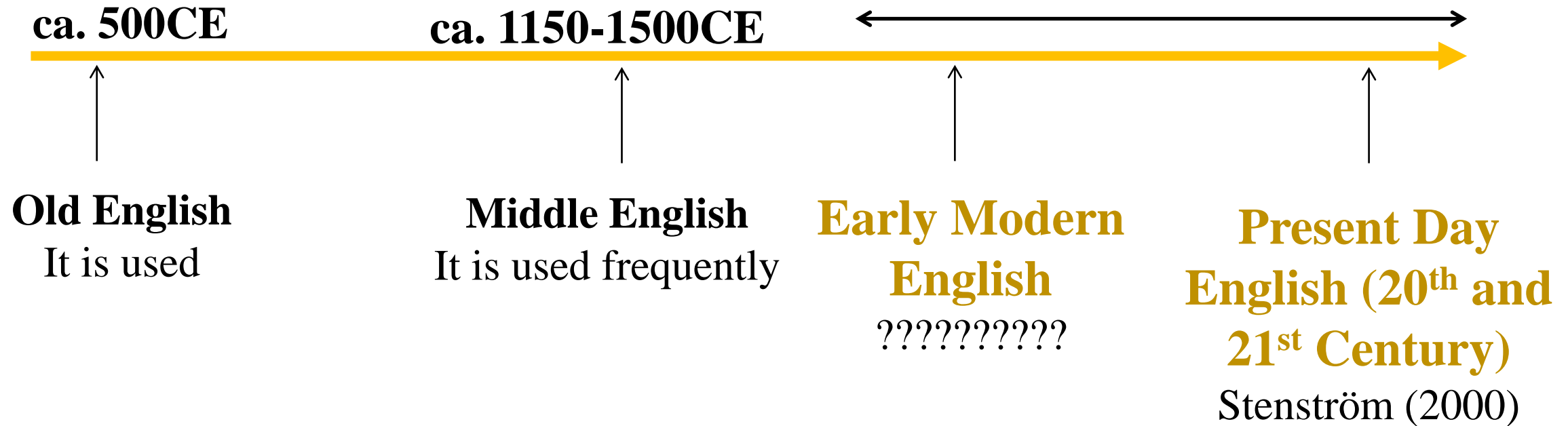
*These examples were extracted from the OED (Oxford English Dictionary)*

# Summary of the Historical Background

- By the 15<sup>th</sup> century, *well* was **rarely used outside collocations** such as *wel worth*, *wel aware* and *wel content*. Its use as an intensifier of other regular adjectives supposedly dies out after the 15<sup>th</sup> century, given the lack of documentation (Fettig: 1934: 186; Mustanoja 1960: 327).
- Stenström (2000) notes its “**revival**” in British English in the late **20<sup>th</sup> century** ‘*they’re well nice*’



# Timeline



## Research Question

- > What happened in Early Modern English?

# Research Question

**R1:** Other than being an intensifier of a limited set of regular adjectives such as *aware* and *able* (Stenström 2000), is there any **evidence** to suggest that *well* as an intensifier of other regular adjectives **really disappeared** between **EModE** (Early Modern English) and **PDE** (Present Day English)?

# Methodology (Corpora)

Table 1. The Corpora Used in the Present Study

Corpus	Geographical Area	Word Count	Text Type	Dates	Period
CED (Corpus of English Dialogues)	Britain	1,183,690 words	Dialogues from face-to-face communication	1560- 1760	EModE
OBC (Old Bailey Corpus 2.0)	London	21,023,241 words	Criminal court trial proceedings.	1674-1913 <sup>o</sup>	EModE + PDE
DCPSE (The Diachronic Corpus of Present-Day Spoken English)	Britain	885,436 words	Recordings of spontaneous speech	1958- 1990	PDE
Spoken component of the BNC (British National Corpus 1994)	Britain	10,585,847 words	Recordings of spoken conversations	1994	PDE
Spoken BNC (British National Corpus 2014)	Britain	11,209,172 words	Recordings of spontaneous speech	2014	PDE

- **Corpus-Based Study**
- **Used 5 Spoken/Speech Related Corpora from 1560-2014**
- **Normalized the frequency**  
(per 100,000 words)

# Methodology (Corpora)

- The spoken corpora most represent mostly south-eastern British English and mostly the incipient standard variety
- **Corpus data** are also supplemented with **dialectal sources** such as Wright's 5000-page *English Dialect Dictionary*
- Others: > Tim Bobin's comic dialogue *Tummus and Meary* written in Lancashire dialect (1819)
  - > Sternberg's *The Dialect and Folklore of Northhamptonshire* (1851)
  - > Ferguson's *The Dialect of Cumberland* (1873)

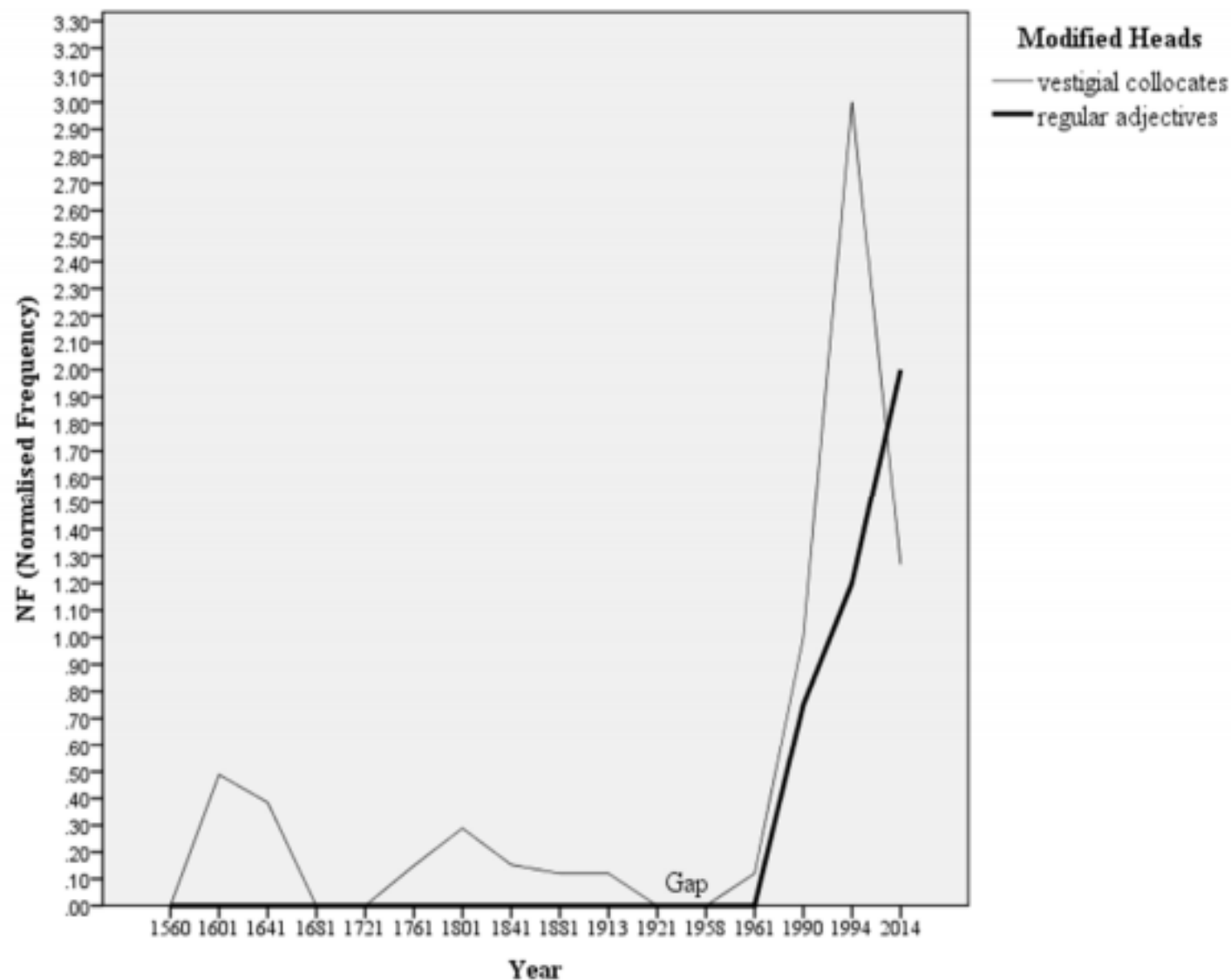
QUALITATIVE NOT QUANTITATIVE

# Methodology (Search Queries)

- To elicit tokens of *well* as an adjective intensifier: *well* + **adjective**, which varied from corpus to corpus depending on the **POS (Part of Speech)** tagging:
- The spoken component of the BNC1994 = the query '*well* \_**AJ0**'
- In the OBC and the CED the query '*well* \_**JJ**' was necessary
- To ensure that tokens were not missed, a search was run for the lexical entry '**well**' in each corpus, which were manually inspected – to check for instances of *well* + **adjective**
- In doing so, was able find, for instance, that in the CED *woorthie* was incorrectly tagged as a noun, which meant that *well woorthie* did not appear in the initial search query '*well* \_**JJ**'.

# RESULTS

**Figure 1.** The Frequency of the Adjective Intensifier *well* from Early Modern English to Present Day English



# What about Dialectal Sources?

Some attestations of its use can be found in dialectal sources between Middle English and the late 20<sup>th</sup> century:

- (a) “came **well wet** to the Callander” (Kühner 1566)
- (b) “it were **well waird** to take mell and knock out his harns” (Ferguson Prov [1641])
- (c) “this appareth to be **well hard**” (Ruce, Sermons (1631)
- (d) “A’d get **well drunk**, if a tho’t it ud do my head good” (1843)



# Lancashire Dialect

- (a) I steart like o wil cat un wur **welly gaumless** (1819: 16)
- (b) ‘I tell the Meary, I’r **welly moydart** (1819: 19)

# Cumberland Dialect

- (a) the University troop dined with the Earl of Abingdon, and came back  
**well fuzzed** (1873: 50)

# Scottish and English Ballads (18<sup>th</sup>/19<sup>th</sup> century)

(a) “And set him on a **well good steade**”

‘and set him on a really good horse’

(b) “the litle one pulld forth a **well good sword**”

‘the little one pulled out a really good sword’

# R1: Did this intensifying use of *well* really disappear?

- No, the evidence suggests that **it remained** in vestigial varieties of English
- However, we know **little about how frequent** it was
- Several researchers have **explicitly** referred to this ‘**newer**’ use (Aijmer 2018) as an innovation (Milroy 1992: 198; Paradis 2008: 322)
- Stenström (2000: 177) mentions that adults seem to believe this use was ‘**new**’ or ‘**innovative**’

“My mum says, I go yeah that’s **well nice**, and she goes erm **well nice...(?)....**  
That’s it yeah I know I’m always saying **well, well cool** and I keep on saying  
that, I’ve said it like, about so many things when we’re home, and she goes, **what**  
**is this you always saying well with everything”**

(Taken from Stenström 2000: 177)

# R1: Did this intensifying use of *well* really disappear?

- The use of this intensifier **remained in vestigial varieties of English**, but given its **lack of attestation in the speech-related corpora**, and the intuition that this use was somehow **innovative** – it was likely used **infrequently** (not part of the repertoire and speech of most British speakers)
- This is backed up with the fact that it supposedly died out (Fettig 1935; Mustanoja 1960; Ito & Tagliamonte 2003)

**What should researchers investigating (historical) language variation and change remember when using Corpora?**

# Using Corpora as Research Tools

1. **POS-Tagging** is not perfect! Incorrect tagging can result in skewed results
2. The **lack of attestation** in a corpus **does not mean** that something did **not exist**  
(language is **infinite** but corpora are **finite**)

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# Thank you for listening!

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