

## Dealing with Historical Corpus Data: Investigating the Adjective Intensifier *well* from Early Modern English to Present Day English

While intensifiers are known to wax and wane throughout time, the underlying mechanisms responsible for their recycling are not entirely transparent (Mustanoja 1960; Ito & Tagliamonte 2003; Barnfield & Buchstaller 2010: 254). While *well* was used as an intensifier of regular adjectives in Old and Middle English, as in (1), according to Fettig (1935:15-21) and Mustanoja (1960: 319-327) its highly frequent use had declined by the mid-14<sup>th</sup> century, and was rarely used outside collocations such as *wel worth*, *wel aware* and *wel content*. Despite this, Stenström (2000) documented its apparent “revival” in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. Recent studies have noted an increase in its frequency in the last 20 years, as in (2) (Stratton 2018).

- (1) (a) in þat forest...þer woned a **wel old** cherl  
‘a very old man lived in that forest’ [ca. 1375, cited in OED]  
(b) he was **well joyous**  
‘he was very happy’ [ca. 1477, cited in Kühner 1934]
- (2) (a) luckily it had been emptied, it was still **well mucky** (BNC1994)  
(b) that’s **well dirty** (BNC2014)

Referring to its present-day use as a “revival” (Stenström, Andersen & Hasund 2002: 158; Méndez-Naya 2003: 377; Ito & Tagliamonte 2003: 278) suggests that between its decrease in frequency in the mid-14<sup>th</sup> century (Mustanoja 1960: 319-327), and its apparent resurgence in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century (Stenström 2000), its use as an intensifier of regular adjectives ceased to exist. However, this is a diachronic question which has not yet been investigated.

To answer this question, the present study traces its use from Early Modern English (1560) to Present Day English (2014) using five speech-related corpora: the Corpus of English Dialogues (1560-1760), the Old Bailey Corpus (1674-1913), the Diachronic Corpus of Present-Day Spoken English (1953-1987), the spoken component of the British National Corpus 1994, and the Spoken British National Corpus 2014. The present study also makes use of two written corpora: EEBO (Early English Books Online) and the CEEC (Corpus of Early English Correspondence). Finally, because it is possible that its use was only retained in vestigial varieties of British English, these corpora are also supplemented with dialectal sources such as Wright’s English Dialect Dictionary (EDD).

Results indicate that despite its decrease in frequency in the mid-14<sup>th</sup> century, this use of *well* did not completely disappear from dialects of English. However, even though its use was retained, it was not used frequently until the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. Nonetheless, during Early Modern English *well* typically only intensified adjectives with a closed scale structure (such as *well aware*, *well able* and *well capable*), but this changes by the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to include adjectives with an open scale structure (such as *well hot*, *well good* and *well big*). In light of the diachronic evidence, the present study draws attention to two constraints of corpus-informed research: (1) incorrect automatic POS (Part of Speech) tagging as a result of orthographic variation, and (2) making broader claims about a population based on a sample.

**SELECTED REFERENCES**

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