

Fei schee: The social meaning of intensifier use in Swabian

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Intensifiers are devices which 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). While intensifier variation has been explored widely in English (e.g., Tagliamonte, 2008; Fuchs, 2017), to date there has been only one variationist sociolinguistic analysis of German intensifiers (Stratton, 2020), with little to no research on their use in regional German dialects. To this end, the present study uses variationist sociolinguistic methods to examine the use of intensifiers in Swabian German, a variety spoken by about 800,000 speakers in southwestern Germany.

To examine language use across the lifespan, following the traditional sociolinguistic interview, 20 speakers of Swabian German were first recorded in 1982 and then re-recorded in 2017. Speakers originated from two speech communities, Stuttgart, an urban center with approximately one million inhabitants, and Schwäbisch Gmünd, a semi-rural center with a stable population of 60,000. Each intensifiable adjective was coded binomially for intensification, as well as linguistic (e.g., syntactic position, semantic classification), social (e.g., gender, age, geographic mobility, education, community origin), and demographic factors (e.g., place of birth, residences lived, years in each location).

Preliminary results from the distributional analysis indicate that *ganz* 'quite', *so* 'so', and *sehr* 'very' were the top three intensifiers, a finding which is consistent with the general distribution of intensifiers in standard German (Stratton, 2020). However, clear changes can be observed over time, with *ganz* 'quite' and *sehr* 'very' decreasing in popularity, and *so* 'so' and *echt* 'really' increasing in frequency over time. Meanwhile, geographic mobility (i.e., the number and length of residential moves over the speaker's lifespan) appears to play a role in lexical decisions, with *gut* (e.g., *die sind gut froh* 'they are very/well happy') and *fei* (*fei schee* 'very nice') retained in the repertoires of speakers with the lowest mobility indices.

For the multivariate analysis, a binary mixed effects logistic regression was run in *Rbrul* (Johnson, 2009), with intensification as the dependent variable. Gender was found to have a significant effect, with women using amplifiers (e.g., *so* 'so', *echt* 'really') more frequently than men, and men using downtoners (e.g., *e bissle* 'a bit') more frequently than women. This finding corroborates Stratton (2020) which found women to have a tendency to scale up the meaning of an adjective more frequently than men, while men tend to scale down the meaning of an adjective more frequently than women. Speaker community also demonstrated a significant effect, with speakers from Stuttgart showing the highest intensification rate, suggesting that speakers in urban environments feel the pressure to intensify more frequently than speakers in semi-rural centers. All in all, this study shows that speakers use intensifiers to index different social meanings (i.e., gender identity, sense of place and belonging) as they construct their own identities.

Selected References

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