

Downtoners and intensifiers in different registers: The Estonian case

Tiit Hennoste, Külli Habicht, Helle Metslang, Külli Prillop (University of Tartu)

The topic of our presentation is the use of downtoners and intensifiers in seven registers of the Estonian language.

The use of downtoners and intensifiers in registers has been studied mainly from two perspectives. One approach focuses on the use of specific downtoners and mainly compares their frequencies in spoken and written communication (Chafe, 1982; Ajmer, 2013). The second group of studies deals with linguistic variation of large groups of particles across registers and situational features that affect particle frequencies (orality, spontaneity, dialogicity, everydayness, and involved production) (Biber, 1988; Biber & Conrad, 2019; Goulart et al., 2020).

Our research questions are: 1) How frequently are the downtoners and intensifiers used in different registers? 2) What situational factors affect the frequencies of use?

We have placed among downtoners and intensifiers three groups of particles: 1) epistemic particles indicating the degree of probability of the proposition (e.g., *vist* ‘probably, possibly’, *kindlasti* ‘certainly, definitely’); 2) vaguely quantifying particles (e.g., *üldiselt* ‘generally’, *absoluutselt* ‘absolutely’); and 3) relational particles that refer to a connection with some knowledge, statement, reasoning, source, context, etc. (e.g., *loodetavasti* ‘to be hoped, hopefully’, *tegelikult* ‘actually’).

The study is based on the Estonian Pragmatic corpus consisting of 0.5 million words from every register (see Prillop et al. 2021): three spontaneous dialogical registers (everyday spoken conversation, institutional interaction, instant messaging), and four editable written monological registers (online news comments, prose fiction, media, and academic prose). The total number of downtoners and intensifiers on the corpus is 28 741.

Our results show that

- the frequency of downtoners falls in the scale from everyday spoken conversation to academic prose, while the frequency of intensifiers is relatively the same in every register except academic prose;
- downtoners dominate in dialogues; in other registers, the frequencies of downtoners and intensifiers are relatively similar;
- epistemic particles are more frequent in dialogues, quantifying particles have relatively the same frequency in every register, and relational particles have relatively the same frequency everywhere except in academic prose;

- ten basic particles stand out clearly, providing 15% of all particles but 76% of usage;
- the dominance of basic particles is most remarkable in dialogues, while in academic prose, they are used equally with other particles;
- the previously proposed situational features that affect particle frequencies work well only for downtoners in online comments, prose fiction, and media.

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