

Intensification of Adjectives: The Case of Estonian Young People's Language

Triin Aasa

(University of Tartu)

Intensifiers are used to scale a word's degree of quality upward or downward (Bolinger 1972: 17, Quirk et al. 1985: 590–599). For example, saying *I was extremely frustrated* instead of *I was frustrated* amplifies the quality of *frustrated* and saying *I was a little frustrated* diminishes it. Intensifiers are constantly changing, as they lose their intensity in use and need to be replaced by new stronger words (Stoffel 1901: 2). The versatility and constant renewal make intensifiers a popular topic in language variation and change research (Tagliamonte, 2012: 320).

Research in various languages has revealed that young people use intensifiers the most (e.g. Ito & Tagliamonte 2003; Stratton 2020; Stratton & Sundquist 2022). Although there are some studies on intensifiers in Estonian (e.g. Kotilainen 2006; Metslang 1997; Petron 2023), research on usage patterns in young people's language is insufficient. Moreover, despite change being a key feature of intensifiers, no studies have explored this aspect in spoken Estonian. The aim is to fill gaps in local research, continue the tradition of intensifier studies and contribute to the wider field of intensifier research, which has predominantly focused on Indo-European languages.

This study investigates intensifier usage in Estonian young people's language from 1996–2004 to 2020–2021, examining general patterns and change over time. Using the chi-squared test, standardised Pearson's residuals, Cramér's V, and logistic regression mixed models, I analyse and compare spoken conversations from 14–27-year-olds. More specifically, I focus on vocabulary, intensification rate, and the functions of intensifiers. Additionally, to identify the circumstances in which intensifiers are most often used, I analyse the effects of the gender of the speaker, syntactic position, semantic category, and the type of modified adjective. The data is drawn from the Corpus of Spoken Estonian (CoSE) and the Estonian Teenage Language Corpus (TeKE). The conversations from CoSE consist of 31 612 words (111 speakers) and the conversations from TeKE consist of 203 512 words (39 speakers) in total. This study tests three hypotheses: (1) intensifiers in Estonian function similarly to those in Indo-European languages (e.g. Stratton 2020; Stratton & Sundquist 2022); (2) intensifier vocabulary has changed, other aspects remain relatively stable; (3) intensifiers borrowed from English appear only in the newer data (TeKE).

The results show that the changes are lexical. The most frequently used intensifiers in CoSE are *nii* 'so', *väga* 'very' and *hästi* 'well', while in TeKE, they are *nii* 'so', *väga* 'very' and *suht* 'relatively'. Additionally, six intensifiers borrowed from English occurred in the TeKE conversations (*kind of*, *fucking*, *so*, *full*, *hella*, *next level*), while none appeared in CoSE. The intensification rate has remained consistent (31.9% in CoSE, 34.4% in TeKE).

Analysis of independent variables' effect shows that intensifiers most often modify scalar adjectives, predicative adjectives, and adjectives in independent phrases, words from semantic categories *human propensity* (e.g. *smart*, *happy*) and *evaluation* (e.g. *beautiful*, *difficult*). Amplifying intensifiers

appeared most frequently. These patterns have remained consistent over time and support the hypothesis of similarity between Estonian and Indo-European intensifiers in the aspects analysed.

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CoSE = Corpus of Spoken Estonian. 10.15155/1-00-0000-0000-0000-00077L.

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