

You're really so very pretty: Intensifiers in Oregon

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1 Introduction

The term ‘intensifier’ describes the linguistic expression of amplifying meaning of a descriptive word, often an adjective or adverb, within an utterance. Sociolinguists and grammarians dispute the term, so this function can be described in many ways, such as “intensive adverbs”, “amplifiers” or “maximizers” (Tagliamonte & Roberts 2005, Tagliamonte 2008). In order to maintain a level of uniformity in this paper we refer to them collectively as “intensifiers” and studied them specifically in the context of adjective intensification. Here are some examples of intensifiers from our work:

- (a) I was *very* nervous walking out with \$10,000
- (b) I was just *super* confused
- (d) I’m *really* excited to start fresh

The motivation for this study stems primarily from the versatility of the intensifiers observed in Pacific Northwest dialects. Similar to patterns observed in Toronto, Canada (Tagliamonte 2008), and in the TV Show *Friends* (Tagliamonte & Roberts 2005) *pretty*, *really*, *very*, and *so* are the most commonly used intensifiers. In addition to this, words undergoing change from an adjective category, for example, can also function as intensifiers (eg. That was *crazy* good!). There are also relatively novel forms used in this capacity (Campus is *hella* far). These forms are interesting and relatively understudied.

In addition to their versatility in form and function, intensifiers have demonstrated the ability to undergo quick change and the popularity of certain forms tend to be recycled over time (Tagliamonte & Roberts 2005, Tagliamonte 2008). Intensifier variation and innovation has been closely tied to the speech varieties used by adolescents. Furthermore, different variables tend to act as signals of covert prestige in some cases (Macaulay 2006, Partington 1993).

Looking to previous studies has aided us in the direction of our inquiries. Macaulay’s (2002) study examines data from Ayr and Glasgow Scotland at different points in time and compares Middle Class (MC) and Lower Class (LC) intensifier use. He measures each variable by how often adverb

intensification occurred within 1000 words. In his research, he notes that *very* and *quite* are used far more for MC speakers. In this study, MC speakers use a larger variety of intensifiers and, in terms of pragmatic use, are more concerned with making their attitude and stance about an event known. On the other hand LC speakers are more concerned with attention to details and achieve this through other means, in some cases sentence restructuring.

A more recent study done by Sali Tagliamonte (2008) looks at intensifiers in Toronto, Canada. In her research, she focused on intensifier variation between the factors of age and sex across a population and analyzes intensifier use by noting all instances where an intensifier could have been used, then documenting whether it did or did not occur. Her overall findings show that adolescent males use *pretty* most often, while adolescent females use *so* most often. *Really* aligns with speech use of adolescent speakers while *very* is used primarily by the older population. She also discovered evidence of intensifier recycling, where some forms had lost popularity in the past but are seeing a spike in recent speech. This Toronto study was based off of a previous study that she had done in 2005, where she looked at intensifier use and variation in the TV show *Friends* across 8 seasons. It demonstrated that media-based data can closely reflect data in the real world, and that *so* was becoming more dominant than *really*, particularly by the female characters.

The present study we undertook is closely modeled after Tagliamonte's 2008 study and explores adjective intensifier use in the Pacific Northwest, specifically in regards to how age and sex can determine specific intensifiers used and the frequency of intensifiers in speech.

2 Data and research questions

We hypothesize that across a given population, intensifier use will vary both in frequency and in choice of intensifier across age and gender. Through some background research (specifically the study conducted by Tagliamonte 2008, Tagliamonte & Roberts 2005), we know that certain intensifiers are favored by older speakers, so we expect to see this same trend in our study. We also expect that new variants will be used more by younger speakers, and that female speakers in particular will use them most frequently and in the most variable contexts.

The speakers we examined are all white native Oregonians. Status as "native" was determined simply by asking participants how long they had lived in Oregon, and specifically what region. All speakers included in the study have lived in the region since before the age of 7 to discount external regional variants. The majority of our speakers are from the Willamette Valley, but several are from Southern Oregon and Portland area, and one is from Central Oregon. However, we did not record data on the speaker's social class, so that is undetermined and will not be compared in this study.

We received data from a corpus of interviews conducted by students and professors at the University of Oregon from 2012-2014. From these interviews, we analyzed the intensification patterns of three older male speakers and four older female speakers. The age range of these individuals is from 43 to 66 years. In addition, each member of our research group conducted an interview with younger speakers with ages ranging from 20 to 23 years. All interview subjects in this group of interviewees are college students, and all but one interviewee did not know the interviewer. Most interviewees and interviewers had been previously acquainted, but were not close friends. The young speakers are composed of four males and three females.

In this study, we are interested in the use of lexical intensifiers because we know that speakers make lexical choices every day, and that age and gender are strong indicators of what these choices may be. In the case of intensification, the studied trend is exhibited, but also demonstrates what features within a clause these groups believe are most important for the listener. Because intensification draws focus to the intensified element, we may learn information about what young women, for instance, find important in a given clause type. Ideally, we would control for clause types, but because the interview style we used was remarkably casual, this was not done.

One element of clausal structure we want to investigate is the distribution of adjectives in attributive and predicative placement, and of course, if these adjectives are intensified.

Predicative adjective: Classes are *really* hard.

Attributive adjective: Students take *really* hard classes.

Another element we are curious to investigate is if there are certain types of adjectives which are more likely to be intensified for groups of speakers, specifically in regards to semantic classification. For example, we expect that emotive adjectives will likely be intensified to a greater degree than adjectives which describe dimension. The specific types of adjectives we investigated will be discussed in the methodology section of this paper, but this element of the study is very interesting to our group because it may show what sort of topics speakers find particularly important.

Perhaps the most important feature we are investigating is which intensifiers speakers use most, especially in regards to younger and older speakers. Tagliamonte demonstrated in her (2008) study that intensifiers can be recycled over time, meaning that old forms can drop in usage, and then regain popularity. Looking at these two age groups of speakers may show if choice of intensifier is an age-graded phenomenon. We expect to see speakers prioritize intensifiers that are relatively time-stable such as *so* and *really*, while intensifiers like *very* and *super* may be used exclusively by certain age groups. It will also be interesting to see if novel intensifiers such as *hella*, *crazy*, and *fucking* are used by younger

speakers as well. By analyzing data according to age and gender groups, we may see trends across these different elements (clause structure, intensifier type, etc) that are specific to groups in Oregon.

3 Methods

3.1 Approach

Modeled after Tagliamonte's (2008) study, our group looked into distribution and use of adjective intensifiers such as *really*, *very*, *pretty*, *so* or *completely*. For the seven one-on-one interviews conducted by our team, Tagliamonte's (2006) appendix of interview questions was referenced with a combination of conversational interview techniques necessitated by each unique interview situation. In addition, seven interviews not directly carried out by our team were used in the analysis. To control for variation, Tagliamonte's (2006) appendix and (2008) study were also referenced to carry out these interviews. Professional grade voice recorders were used for all fourteen of the interviews examined, and all were in WAV format with the exception of one entitled 'ZOOM002' which was an MP3 file.

3.2 What was measured

As in the study conducted by Sali Tagliamonte (2008), the variable context we are interested in studying is any instance where adjective intensification is possible. For each interview, we collected a minimum of 50 adjective tokens, resulting in 718 possible instances of adjective intensification. Afterwards, we recorded each context to examine whether or not it was intensified, and what the semantic nature of the intensification was by following the semantic value categories used in Tagliamonte (2008). We also separated attributive versus predicative adjectives as discussed earlier. We then subdivided the types of adjectives by function: emotion or nonemotion. We not only coded adjectives such as sad, happy, etc. with the emotion function, but also less straight-forward emotional expressions such as, “It was nasty” and “We were very tight” (i.e. very close). These are considered emotion adjectives based on the assumption and observation that the speaker has an emotional evaluation of the particular event being discussed. It was up to the discretion of each team member to listen to the greater context and become familiar with the interview in order to make the final emotion/nonemotion decision. All of these categories (adjective function, semantic classification and emotional value) were then cross-checked by another member for the sake of consistency across all the data.

Our final evaluation of the variable context includes coding the semantic classification of each adjective extracted. These categories include: dimension, physical property, color, human propensity, age,

value, speed, position and other in line with Dixon's (1977) study. Below are examples from our data to illustrate each category.

Dimension: Picture a *small* neighborhood floating on water.

Physical Property: ... warmed up to it if they're *cold*?

Color: It tends to be pretty *white*.

Human Propensity: I was so *drunk*.

Age: ... 'cause it's a really *old* house

Value: ...color was very *poor*.

Position: ...so the house to the *right*...

Speed: It was a *slow* drive.

As far as the subjects studied, half of the interview subjects are between the ages of 43 and 66, with the remaining half between the ages of 20 and 23. We were careful to balance our number of male and female speakers in order to look at variation across age and gender specifically.

3.3 What we did not code

Lexical intensification is not the only semantically significant strategy that speakers use. Emphatic intensification is another form that English speakers can use to amplify the meaning of an adjective. This is achieved through vowel lengthening and an increase in volume (for example "It was *aaaaaawesome*"). Emphatic intensification is not within the scope of our study though it appeared in some of our interviews. It was not included or analyzed in the data.

We also disregard phrasal intensifiers like *such a* and *kind of* as intensifiers of adjectives because they appear to be downtoners in English speech. Because of this we do not consider them good prototypical intensifiers. An example of this would be "He was a *kind of* cute hockey player."

We also excluded contexts in which speakers use adjectives in place of an adverb. So contexts such as, "It hurt *bad*" are not included in our extraction. Even though "badly" surfaces as "bad", it is still being used as an adverb in these contexts. We also do not code data from propositions in the superlative or comparative forms since these cannot typically be intensified. For example, "I had an *older* sister" was not included in the data, even though "older" is technically an adjective. If we had recorded these cases as "not intensified", it would skew the data because they cannot be intensified in the same manner as other adjectives that were included.

Additionally, we did not include negated contexts like "It was not fun". The reason for this is that negated propositions most likely have a distinct pattern of intensification and so mixing the two would result in findings that aren't relevant.

Finally, any false starts performed by the interviewee were ignored if they included in an adjective context. The speaker either reformulates a new context in which we were then able to code for, or they decided on a different form of expression, which by our interpretation means that the speaker considered the false start invalid.

Table 1. *Overall distribution of intensification in Oregon English*

Total N = 718			
<i>Intensified</i>		<i>Not intensified</i>	
%	N	%	N
28.0	201	72.0	517

4 Results

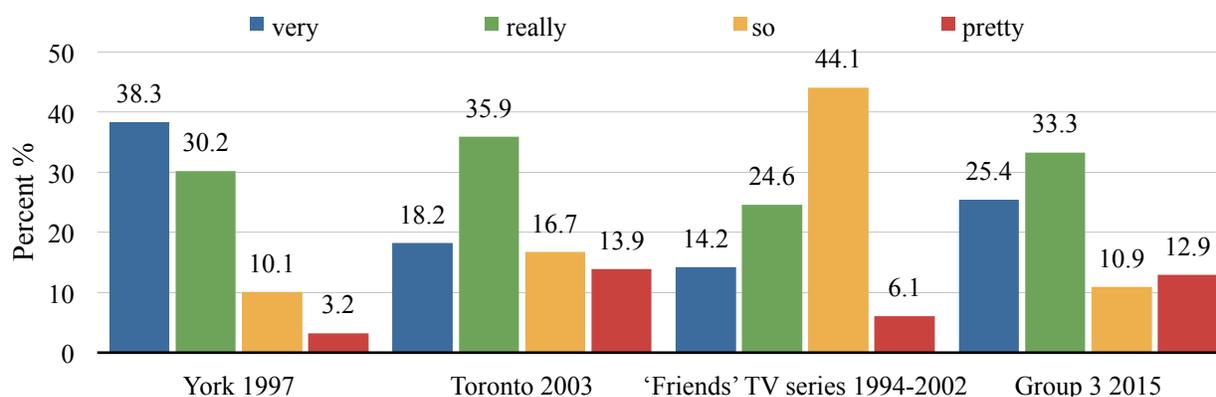
Our results show that across 718 relevant adjectival contexts, 28% were intensified (see Table 1). This is much lower than Canadian English at 36% (Tagliamonte 2008: 366), but higher than British English at 24% (Ito & Tagliamonte 2003: 265) and the previous American English study at 22% (Tagliamonte & Roberts 2005: 287). In Table 2, we can see the distribution of various intensifiers across the 201 intensified adjectives. The most common intensifiers are *really* at 33% and *very* at 25%, while *pretty* and *so* are close at 13% and 11% respectively. All other lexical items occur far less than 10% of the time, with the next most frequent word *just* appearing in just 4.5% of the intensified contexts.

To put our data in context, we present the distribution of *really*, *very*, *pretty*, and *so* in the British, Canadian, and American English studies presented in Tagliamonte (2008). Figure 1 represents the percentage of the four preceding intensifiers relative to all intensified contexts across all four studies. In addition to the intensifiers used by Tagliamonte, we added *pretty* because it occurred quite frequently in our data and this makes for an interesting extension to her original figure. Our data most closely matches the Toronto data in that *really* occurs most often (about one-third of the time) with *very* in second place. There are two main differences in the two sets of data: first, in Oregon English *very* is favored over both *so* and *pretty*, where in Toronto all three are more closely ranked. Second, *pretty* occurs slightly more often than *so* in Oregon English, while the opposite is true in Toronto English. Interestingly, our data did not fall in line with the previous American English data. Most strikingly, we saw *so* incredibly disfavored where it was the most common in the *Friends* data.

Table 2. *Distribution of intensifiers by lexical item*
($N \geq 7$)

Lexical identity	%	N
<i>really</i>	9.3	67
<i>very</i>	7.1	51
<i>pretty</i>	3.6	26
<i>so</i>	3.1	22
<i>just</i>	1.3	9
<i>super</i>	1.0	7
Other intensifier [-ly]	2.6	19
Other intensifier [+ly]	1.3	9
Ø intensification	72.0	517
Total		718

Figure 1. *Use of very, really, so, and pretty across multiple studies.*



When we compare our four most common intensifiers across our two age groups, we see a definitive generational difference (Figure 2). In the younger group, *really* appeared over twice as often as the next most common intensifier *very* (42% compared with 18%); in the older group, *very* was the most common, but by a smaller margin. Notably, the prevalence of *pretty* was driven mainly by the younger group: the older speakers conformed to all of the other English studies in that *so* outperformed *pretty*.

We found a clear relationship between sex, age, and the amount of intensification. Table 3 shows the number and percentage of intensified contexts by younger women, younger men, older women, and older men. Younger women intensified a full 40% of all possible contexts, while older men only intensified

12% of these contexts ionship between sex, age, and the amount of intensification. Table 3 shows the number and percentage of intensified contexts by younger women, younger men, older women, and older men. Younger women intdependently affect the amount of intensification used.

Figure 2. *Use of very, really, so, and pretty across age groups.*

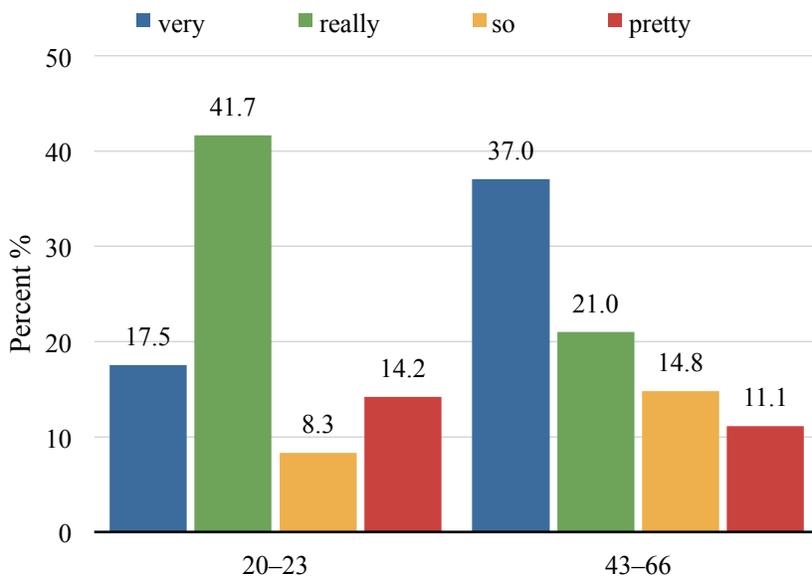


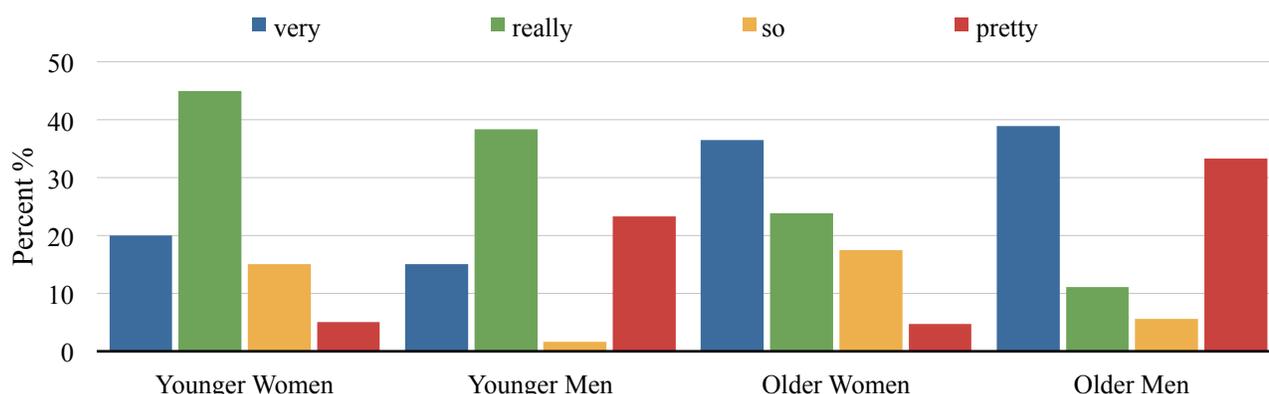
Table 3. *Distribution of intensifiers by age-sex category*

	Total	Intensified	%
Younger Women	150	60	40.0
Younger Men	201	60	29.9
Older Women	218	63	28.9
Older Men	149	18	12.1

We show this is indeed the case in Table 4. Here we present amount of intensification by each paradigm: sex, age group, adjective emotion, and adjective function. Since each is a binary variable (female/male, younger/older, emotion/non-emotion, and predicative/attributive), we can compare each paradigm in how much it affects intensification. It appears that sex and age do indeed have an independent affect on intensification, though these categories are not the most predictive. In fact, adjective function was the single most predictive paradigm: a full 44% of all predicative adjectives were intensified, while only 14% of all attributive adjectives were intensified. However, this observation falls outside of a pure sociolinguistic endeavor, and we will merely make note of it here.

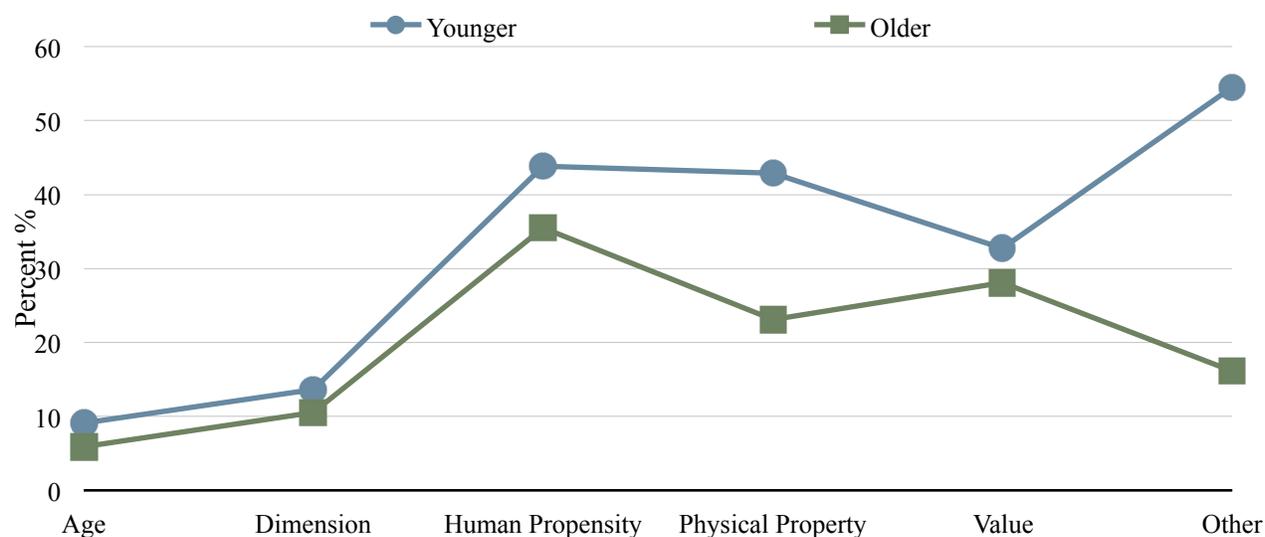
Table 4. *Distribution of intensifiers by paradigm*

Paradigm	Category	Total	Intensified	%
Sex	Female	368	123	33.4
	Male	350	78	22.3
Age	23 & under	351	120	34.2
	43 & older	367	81	22.1
Emotion	Emotion	244	89	36.5
	Non-emotion	474	112	23.6
Function	Predicative	338	147	43.5
	Attributive	380	54	14.2
Overall		718	201	28.0

Figure 3. *Intensifier use across age-sex groupings*

Returning to our four most popular intensifiers, age-sex groupings shed further light on what is happening in our data. Figure 3 shows the number of times *very*, *really*, *so*, and *pretty* are used by younger women, younger men, older women, and older men. There are several interesting observations that can be made from this chart. Younger people not only use *really* more than other intensifiers, but they also use it far more often than the older group. Older women are the most frequent users of *very*, more than any other grouping ut they also use it far more often than the older group. Older women are the most frequent users of m *so* and *pretty*: *so* is used almost exclusively by women, and *pretty* is used almost exclusively by men. In fact, 75% of all occurrences of *pretty* in this data were uttered by men, despite the fact that only 39% of all intensifiers were produced by men. Men are over 6.5 times as likely to use *pretty* as women are. Conversely, the use of *so* follows gender lines to a lesser extreme: women are about 5 times more likely to use *so* as men are.

Figure 4 shows the proportional distribution of semantic classifications measured for younger and

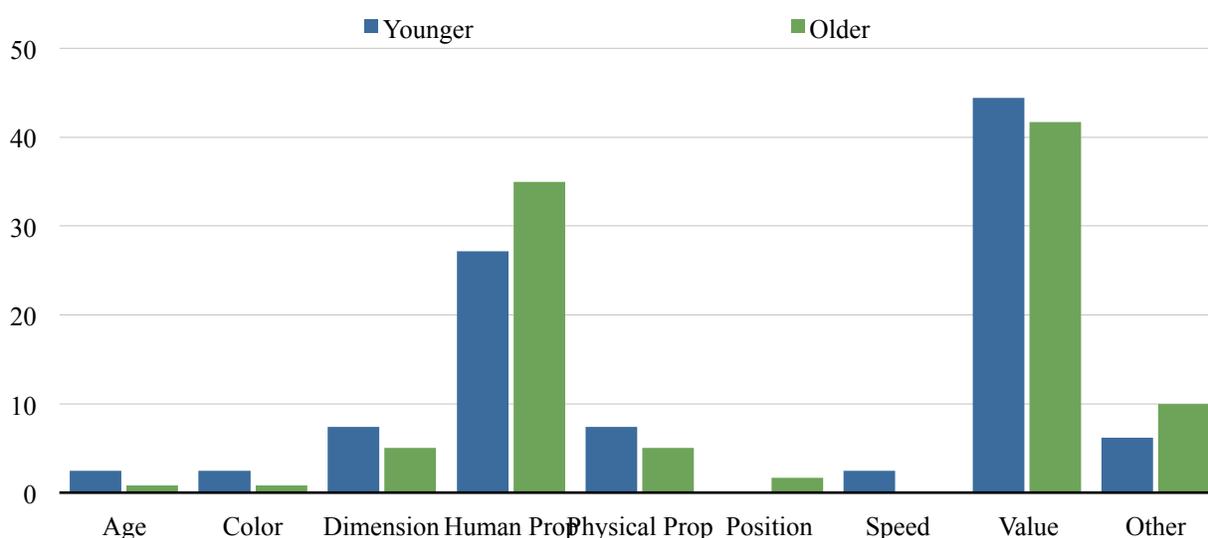
Figure 4. *Percentage of intensified contexts by semantic classification*

older age groups. This data displays only internal semantic classifications, and does not account for external factors such as sex and region. The semantic category of *other* was intensified the most for the younger speakers at 54.5%, while *human propensity* was intensified the most for older speakers at 35.5%. An important thing to note is that both *position* and *speed* were excluded from this graph. Older speakers had no *position* tokens, and younger speakers had no *speed* tokens; including these points would falsely represent the intensification at 0%, when in fact this calculation is not applicable here.

Human propensity and *physical property* were coded nearly the same for younger speakers at 43.8% and 42.9% respectively. This was not the case for older speakers who relied more on *human propensity* than *physical property*.

Figure 5 is as bar graph representing the 201 intensified contexts between younger and older speakers

Figure 5. *Distribution of intensified contexts by semantic classification*



and shows the relative likelihood of any semantic category to be intensified. The graph also illustrates that there is a significant concentration of intensified variables for the semantic classifications of *value* and *human propensity*. Younger speakers have a tendency to intensify almost every semantic category more than the older speakers do, except for *human propensity*.

5 Conclusion

The examination of Oregon English speakers reveals a difference between the gender and age groups. Younger speakers used more (23 & under 34.2%) than older speakers (43 & older 22.1%). Females used more (33.4%) than males (22.3%). The younger females used the most amount of intensification (40%).

This is inline with Taglimonte's (2008) study. The overall intensification for our group is 28%, which is less than Taglimonte's 36% for Canadian English, but still more than her predication for American English (Tagliamonte & Roberts 2005); which is at 22%. The intensifier word choice matched Taglimonte's for the most part; with *really* the most occurring intensifier followed by *very*. Exceptions were *pretty* was ranked higher than *so*. Our speaker's used *pretty* and *very* more so than Taglimonte's *so*.

The study we conducted is in *apparent time*. If we are to do this study in *real time* we would be able to better answer the question as to whether this is an *age-graded* variable (Wolfram and Van Hofwegen 2010). Our study only used interview style data collection. If we are to do this study differently we would look at different styles (e.g. *careful* vs *casual*) (Schilling-Estes 2002). This can be applied by, besides interview style, using self-recording devices (Podesva 2007). This allows for a more *casual* speech than the one we did, which is more *careful* speech. Another way this study could be done is looking at if this pattern would stay true in standard vs non-standard English (e.g. AAE) where intensification can be expressed in different ways lexically (e.g. *sweet-ass car*) and non-lexically (and emphatic intensification as in Macaulay 2002). Furthermore, this study could be done on a much greater scale, looking at other languages. A question that this greater scale, first wave, look at intensifiers would give a better look at social and network relationship to how frequent lexical variables, like intensifiers, occur in certain groups and whether this variable says something about how whether or whether not members of that group will have comparable rates. "A close knit group has the power to impose behavioral norms of all kinds on its members" (Milroy & Milroy 1978).

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