

# Intensification and sociolinguistic variation: a corpus study.

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## 1 Introduction

The phenomenon of intensification is pervasive in natural language. At an intuitive level, we can define intensifiers as “linguistic devices that boost the meaning of a property upwards from an assumed norm” (Quirk et al. 1985). Examples of such expressions in English include *very*, *really*, *awfully*, *extremely*, along with many others.

- (1) Mark is very tall (→ more than just *tall*)
- (2) He’s really beautiful. (→ more than just *beautiful*)
- (3) John is awfully good. (→ more than just *good*)

Linguists have addressed intensification from multiple perspectives, with two specific areas drawing the bulk of researchers' interests: intensifiers' semantics, and intensifiers' usage in the social landscape.

Concerning the former, linguists have been concerned with capturing the aforementioned “boosting” effect within a compositional, truth-conditional theory of meaning. In particular, recent findings (McCready and Kaufmann 2013, Bylinina 2011, Irwin 2014, Beltrama and Bochnak, to appear, McNabb 2012) have revealed that the boosting effect can be achieved through a variety of different semantic operations, and that the environments where intensification is found extend well beyond the category of gradable expressions. Concerning the latter, studies within the variationist paradigm have shown that the use of almost any intensifier is not evenly distributed across the social space, but varies across macro-social categories such as gender and age (Macaulay 2006, Tagliamonte 2008, Tagliamonte and Roberts 2005) and textual genres (Biber 1988, Xiao and Tao 2007, Brown and Tagliamonte 2012, see Section 3 for further discussion).

Despite the abundance of work in either subfield, however, a successful integration between these two approaches is currently missing. On the one hand, studies in formal semantics looked at intensifiers as a crystallized and competence-based phenomenon, without much interest in how these expressions are perceived and used in actual language performance. On the other hand, sociolinguistic studies have treated intensifiers as a semantically monolithic category, showing little interest in the nuances lurking beneath the general boosting function performed by these morphemes.

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The current paper constitutes a preliminary attempt towards the goal of exploring the relationship between the semantic and the sociolinguistic relevance of intensification. My leading hypothesis is that the particular kind of semantic scale targeted by an intensifier plays an important role in making the modifier suitable for certain communicative contexts as opposed to other.

## 2 Background: intensifiers between semantics and sociolinguistics

### 2.1 Two modes of semantic composition

Intensifiers such as *very*, *totally*, *so*, have been widely investigated by scholars engaged with providing formal models of meaning composition. Intuitively, these expressions are associated with the function of *boosting* the meaning of another expression (Quirk et al. 1985). Such meaning comes with a straightforward requirement: the modified expression (i.e., the target of the intensifier) must be associated with a *scalar*, non-binary property (Eckardt, 2009). In (4a) and (4b) such requirement is satisfied by the presence of a gradable adjective like *tall* or *big*. By contrast, an absolute property (e.g. *bipedal* or *1-bedroom*) violates the requirement, producing a sentence that is ill-formed and difficult to interpret.

- (4a) Mark is **very** tall (scalar)
- (4b) The house is **super** big (scalar)
- (5a) ?? Mark is very bipedal. (non scalar)
- (5b) ?? The house is **super** 1-bedroom (non scalar)

The mode of composition that has been invoked to account for these cases is known as *degree modification* (Kennedy and McNally 2005). In a nutshell, gradable predicates such as *tall* or *big* are modeled as functions which take an individual as input – e.g Mark, the house etc etc – and return a quantitative degree for this individual along a specific dimension (height for *tall*, size for *big*). The role of an intensifier is to combine with such degree and to impose that it counts as really high in a given context. *Very tall*, therefore, means that the individual Mark possesses a high degree of tallness. By contrast, whenever a predicate is not able to feed a degree to the intensifier – as is the case with discrete properties like *bipedal* and *one-bedroom* – intensification cannot go through due to a mismatch between the intensifier and the features of the targeted predicate.

The empirical picture, instead, is considerably more nuanced. Let us now consider *totally* below. In (6a), the scalarity requirement is satisfied by the meaning of the adjective: *full* refers to an inherently gradable property, whose degrees can be targeted by the intensifier. In the other two examples, though, the meaning of the following word does not supply a degree. Just as it is hard to imagine intermediate stages between going and not going fishing, it is hard to conceive

as something being “more or less” San Francisco. Yet, in both cases the intensifier is perfectly interpretable, and hardly comes across as ungrammatical or ill-formed.

- (6a) The tank is **totally** full (Scale: degree of fullness)
- (6b) I **totally** didn't go fishing ( $\approx$  Scale: speaker's commitment towards the utterance).
- (6c) This bar is **totally** San Francisco (Scale: stereotypical ranking)

More precisely, in (6b), the intensifier involves a scale associated with the speaker's degree of certainty in relation to the content of the sentence, along the lines of what adverbs like *definitely* and *absolutely* would do (Irwin 2014, McCready and Kaufmann 2013). In (6c), instead, *totally* targets a scale that aggregates the set of stereotypical features normally associated with the city San Francisco. Again, however, note that such a ranking does *not* directly come from the semantic meaning of “San Francisco” – which merely denotes a city in California - but is introduced via a complex reasoning that associates a set of scalar attributes to the city (Bylina 2011). What these examples show is that, whatever the mechanism that one posits for accounting for them<sup>2</sup>, intensification *can* also happen in the absence of a gradable predicate. We can conclude that at least two different modes of meaning composition exist for intensifiers: (i) a *lexical* one, where intensifiers boost the scales encoded by a gradable predicate; (ii) a *non-lexical* one, in which intensification operates over a scale that is introduced via pragmatic reasoning (in (6c)), or by shifting the focus on the speaker's commitment towards the sentence (in (6b)).

## 2.2 Intensifiers and sociolinguistic variation

Besides receiving large consideration in the domain of semantics and pragmatics, intensifiers have also long been a fruitful topic of investigation in sociolinguistic research. Authors engaged in this research program observed two facts. First, intensification systems are unstable and tend to change rapidly in any speech community (Macaulay, 2006; Rickford, 2007; Tagliamonte, 2008; Tagliamonte and Roberts 2005). Second, the use of intensifiers tends to vary across demographic categories, especially age and gender. Concerning the former, intensifiers across the board are generally more frequent among young speakers - adolescents in particular - and tend to decrease in the oldest generations (Labov 2001, Tagliamonte and D'Arcy 2009, Kwon 2012), although not all intensifiers display the same strength and direction of correlation. The correlation with age varies from intensifier to intensifier, and from speech community to speech community. Adverbs like *very* and *extremely*, for instance, have been found to be strongly associated with older speakers across communities, while adverbs like *well* in British English (Stenstrom et al., 2002) and *really* in Canadian English (Tagliamonte 2008) are overwhelmingly used by younger speakers. Moreover, gender has also been claimed to correlate with intensifiers distribution. Tagliamonte (2008) suggests that in Toronto currently spreading intensifiers like *so* and *pretty* are predominantly used by women, who are generally assumed to be the forerunners

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of linguistic innovation. These patterns, interestingly, are also reflected in language use in the media. For instance, Tagliamonte (2005) observes that in the series *Friends*, “the once primary intensifier in North America, really, is being usurped by *so*, which is used more often by the female characters than by the males” (Tagliamonte 2005).

Besides being unequally distributed across different from different demographic categories, intensifiers also feature significant variation with respect to the particular context in which they are used. In his pioneering work on the topic, Biber (1988) looked at the distribution of intensifiers across different textual types (e.g. press reports, academic writing, fiction, humor), observing that intensification is most commonly found in discourse contexts where the speaker/author’s communicative intent is to display a high degree of personal involvement. Xiao and Tao (2007) performed a genre-analysis of 33 English intensifiers, looking at the distribution of the morphemes across a wide array of different types of texts, as well as the interaction of this factor with traditional sociological attributes of the speakers. Broadly speaking, their findings confirmed that spoken registers feature a much higher use of intensification than written ones, although the picture unveiled by the authors is not homogenous.<sup>3</sup> More recently, Brown and Tagliamonte (2012) have compared intensification rates of Canadian English in spontaneous narratives and sociolinguistic interviews, showing that intensification is overwhelmingly more common in the former. They explain the finding by arguing that in spontaneous narratives the focus is conventionally shifted from the referential content to the speaker’s feelings and her construction of the self (see Schiffrin 1996 and Labov and Waletzky 1967 for extensive discussion of narratives as a genre), as part of the speaker’s attempt to captivate the audience’s attention. In sociolinguistic interviews, where this goal is not present, the number of these modifiers significantly dwindles. Finally, Lim and Hong (2012) tested commonly used intensifiers in Mandarin Chinese in terms of their distribution across typical genres, concluding that most intensifiers are predominantly found in spoken genres, although a few of them are actually more common in written ones. In sum, these results by and large mirror the findings discussed in the rest of the variationist work on intensifiers. On the one hand, they confirm the association between the use of intensifiers and a high degree of emotional involvement on the part of the speaker, showing that these morphemes are predominantly found in genres where emotional display is foregrounded or encouraged. On the other hand, they also unveil a certain amount of internal diversity in the category. While the general trends are consistent across the different studies, it is always the case that not all intensifiers display the same distributional patterns.

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<sup>3</sup> While expressions such as *really*, *bloody*, *real*, *terribly*, *dead and damn* are indeed more common in oral genres, others (e.g. *enormously* and *incredibly*) show the opposite pattern, pointing to a considerable amount of inter-intensifier variability. As for the interaction between genre and gender, the association between intensifiers’ use and women only emerged in writing, while spoken genres showed no particular preference for gender. Finally, concerning the interaction between genre and age, adolescents turn out to use a handful of intensifiers with very high frequency. Yet, they do not differ from other age categories for the majority of the morphemes investigated in the study.

The broad picture emerging from these investigations is one in which the intensifiers' distribution is strongly conditioned by social factors. At the same time, this body of sociolinguistic work on intensification also raises an issue which deserves further consideration. By treating *very*, *really*, *well*, *bloody*, *so* and other as if they were interchangeable morphemes and exclusively focusing on their occurrence with gradable predicates, most of the studies discussed above failed to take into account the amount of semantic variation within intensification discussed in Section 2. This methodological assumption is certainly reasonable in light of the methodological demands of a variationist study. In particular, as discussed by Ito and Tagliamonte (2003), the necessity to abide to Labov's *accountability principle* makes it necessary to limit the potential environments where intensification might occur to a manageable volume. Limiting the domain of investigation to intensifiers occurring with gradable predicates is the only possible way of accounting for both the cases in which intensification occurred and those in which it did not occur, but *could have* occurred. At the same time, however, the choice to exclude from the picture intensifiers with non-gradable predicates does not do justice to the empirical semantic complexity featured by intensifier. As a consequence, the question remains unanswered as to whether fine-grained distinctions at the semantic level – starting from the distinction between *lexical* and *non-lexical* intensifiers – play a role in how the use of intensification interacts with the social context. The current paper takes a preliminary step in this direction by looking at the use of *totally* in American English.

### 3 **Totally: a case study**

#### 3.1 **Totally: lexical and speaker-oriented usage**

In American English, the intensifier *totally* features a well-attested pattern of semantic variation between lexical and non-lexical usages. In its lexical use, it combines with upper-bounded predicates (7a-b), it operates as a maximizer, ensuring that the property denoted by the predicate holds to a maximum degree (Paradis 2001, Kennedy and McNally 2005 a.o.). In its non-lexical use, it combines with entire propositions (8a-b), maximizing the degree of speaker's commitment (McCready and Kauffman 2013, Irwin 2014) towards the utterance. I shall therefore refer to the non-lexical usage as *speaker-oriented*, following Irwin (2014)

- (7a) But the bus officials do not want us to change our seats. Why? Because the bus  
is totally full. (Bounded adjective)
- (7b) I totally support this movement. (Bounded verb)
- (8a) You should totally click on that link. (Unbounded verb)  
Dude, this is a totally deep hole. (Unbounded adjective)

Interestingly, this difference is not merely a matter of intuition. There is systematic evidence that these two uses of *totally* are encoded by the grammar in different ways, as a series of diagnostics can show. I now proceed to review the most important ones. First, as discussed by Irwin (2014) and McCready and Kaufmann (2013), *lexical totally* can be embedded under negation, while non-lexical one cannot.

(9a) The bus was not totally full.

(9b) I don't totally support you

(10a) ?? The hole is not totally deep.

(10b) ?? You shouldn't totally click on that link

Moreover, only in its lexical usage can *totally* be replaced with *completely*. Whenever *totally* is used in a non-lexical fashion, replacement with *completely* is not possible.

(11a) The bus was completely/entirely full.

(11b) I completely/entirely support you.

(12a) ?? This hole is completely/entirely deep.

(12b) ?? You should completely/entirely clicked on that link.

By the same token, only lexical usages can combine with approximators like *almost*. Speaker-oriented *totally*, instead, cannot co-occur with *almost*.

(13a) The bus was almost totally full.

(13b) He almost totally support you.

(14a) ?? This hole is almost totally deep.

(14b) ?? You should almost totally click on that link.

A further diagnostic to distinguish the two usages is provided by denials to propositions in which the intensifier is used. If a proposition containing a lexical occurrence of *totally* is denied, it is possible for the denial to target the use of *totally* in isolation, independently from the rest of the proposition. However, this is not possible for speaker-oriented *totally*, which cannot be denied in isolation. A denial, here, would force us to reject the proposition altogether. This pattern of behavior has been first noted by McCready and Kauffman (2013).

(15a) A: The bus was totally full.

B: ✓ No, it was partly full, but not totally full.

(15b) A: I totally support you.

B: ✓ No, you only partially support me.

(16a) A: I should totally click on that link.

B: ?? No. You are not certain about the fact that I should click

B: ?? No, you should just partially click on that link.

(16b) A: This is a totally deep hole.

B: ?? No, you are not certain that the hole is deep!

B: ?? No, it's just partially deep, but not totally deep.

Other diagnostics are available to distinguish between the two uses. For reason of space, however, it is not possible to discuss them here. Yet, the tests shown above should be sufficient to show that the two usages of *totally* are differentially encoded in the grammar. The table below summarizes the results.

Table 1: Lexical vs Speaker-oriented *totally*

Type	Predicate	Example	Denial	Negation	Completely	Almost
Lexical	Bounded Adj	Full	✓	✓	✓	✓
Lexical	Bounded verb	Support	✓	✓	✓	✓
Speaker-oriented	Unbounded Adj	Deep	??	??	??	??
Speaker-oriented	Unbounded verb	Click	??	??	??	??

### 3.2 From semantic to sociolinguistic variation

Once we have a firm grasp on the pattern of semantic variation in which *totally* is embedded, it is possible to shift the focus on the use of *totally* in different social contexts. The question underlying the current paper, as formulated at the end of Section 2.2, is the following: is there a principled connection between the semantic flavor of the intensifier and its social distribution? In other words, do lexical and speaker-oriented usages of *totally* significantly differ in their patterns of use with respect to the social context? If this is indeed the case, then it would be possible to provide preliminary evidence supporting the idea that semantic variation *does* impact sociolinguistic variation, opening up a largely unexplored line of research in the domain of intensification. In the remainder of the paper, I aim to test this hypothesis by exploring the

distribution of *totally* across different textual genres in the Corpus of Contemporary American English (Davis 2010-, henceforth COCA).

## 4 The corpus study

### 4.1 COCA and genres

As discussed above, intensifiers have been claimed to be embedded in two (largely orthogonal) axes of sociolinguistic variation: (a) demographic categories of the speakers and (b) different communicative context. While an exhaustive investigation would ideally consider both dimensions, the current paper focuses on the latter. The choice is motivated by the need to find a corpus with the following characteristics: (i) a large enough size to provide a high volume of occurrences of speaker-oriented (ii) a time period that includes contemporary English, (iii) a reliable annotation of either demographic features or different contexts of usage, so as to allow to test the sociolinguistic distribution of the variable. Requirement (i) is motivated by the fact that speaker-oriented *totally*, as I am going to show in the next section, is considerably more rare than lexical one, and therefore requires an extensive database to be found in large numbers; (ii) is motivated by the fact that its use considerably spread in the past years, requiring to focus on a time period that gets as close as possible to contemporary English. In light of these demands, I opted to rely on the Corpus of Contemporary English for the current study. Besides providing a large number of occurrences and containing texts up to 2012, the corpus is balanced between the following textual genres, offering the possibility of testing the use of the variable across different communicative situations: Academic, Newspaper, Spoken, Magazine and Fiction. Following the idea that the reason for variation across contexts “lies not so much in the setting per se, but rather in the *communicative aims* of the situations. (Podesva 2011)”, genre categories provide a promising window to look into whether – and how - different semantic flavors of *totally* can be used to serve different communicative purposes.

A crucial first step, in this regard, is to assess how the different genres in the corpus can indeed be associated with different communicative purposes, with particular attention to the aspects that have been claimed to be associated with the use of intensification. I will focus on two in particular here: one is the combination of “informality” and “expressivity”; the other one is the specific activity of “story-telling”, which, according to Brown and Tagliamonte (2012), represents a particular suitable communicative setting for the use of intensification. How do the different genres differ with respect to these features? Concerning informality and affect sharing, Academic prose, by virtue of exclusively aiming at discussing data in a detached and objective fashion, is likely the lowest ranked genre along these parameters. Concerning more informal genres, it must be pointed out that the Spoken category, contrary to what is normally the case in other corpora, does not include spontaneous conversations in everyday settings. Rather, it features interactions in the media, mainly drawn from TV shows and news broadcasting, which feature a higher level of formality and a lower level of expressivity and affect-sharing than

casual everyday interactions. In the absence of such interactions, the category with the highest levels of informality and expressivity appears to be Fiction, which, although in a scripted fashion, is likely to contain at least some of the informal settings where speakers are more concerned with sharing emotions and performing identity work, as opposed to simply discuss – more or less formally - facts in the world. The predicted continuum, from less formal and expressive to more formal and expressive, is the following:

(17) Academic < Magazine – Newspaper – Spoken < Fiction

As a pilot to assess the reliability of this continuum, I tested the distribution of *dude* and *lame*, two markedly colloquial expressions which should be heavily biased towards informal and highly emotional contexts. A rough count of the occurrences is enough, for both words, to show that Fiction is indeed the contexts with the highest level of informality and expressivity, Academic is the one with the lowest level of the two, and the remaining genres pattern in between.

Table 2: *Dude and lame*: per million frequency across genres

Expression	Fiction	Magazine	Spoken	Newapaper	Academic
Dude	<b>21.40</b>	8.63	5.36	4.82	0.42
Lame	<b>6.85</b>	3.62	3.81	2.95	1.46

Concerning story-telling, the genre of Fiction also appears to be the one where this communicative aim is more likely to be foregrounded, and Academic the one where it is less likely to be relevant.

## 4.2 Extracting lexical and speaker-oriented *totally*

In order to extract occurrences of lexical vs speaker-oriented *totally*, the type of complement of *totally* was used as a clue to classify the semantic type of the intensifier. As discussed above, lexical *totally* combines with adjectives or verbs which encode a bounded scale as part of their meaning. The presence of such a scale can be easily diagnosed by relying on simple semantic tests such as modification with other degree modifiers (e.g. *partly*, *entirely*, *100%*), which are predicted to felicitously combine with bounded predicates. For example, because combinations like *100% full*, *partially full*, *completely agree* and *100% agree* are well-formed, it is possible to conclude that these two predicates indeed encode a bounded scale. Conversely, the observation that clusters like *\*100% tall*, *\*partially hit*, *\*completely will do* are *not* well formed suggests that, whenever *totally* occurs with these predicates, it must be of the speaker-oriented type. Following this procedure, occurrences of *totally* with the 10 most frequent bounded/unbounded adjectives and verbs were extracted from the corpus. In order to control for the effects induced

by the frequency of the predicate, independent of *totally*, the frequency of each [totally X] combination was divided by the frequency of X, and then multiplied by 1000. Data from adjectives and verbs were analyzed separately. The table below reports the predicates that were extracted.

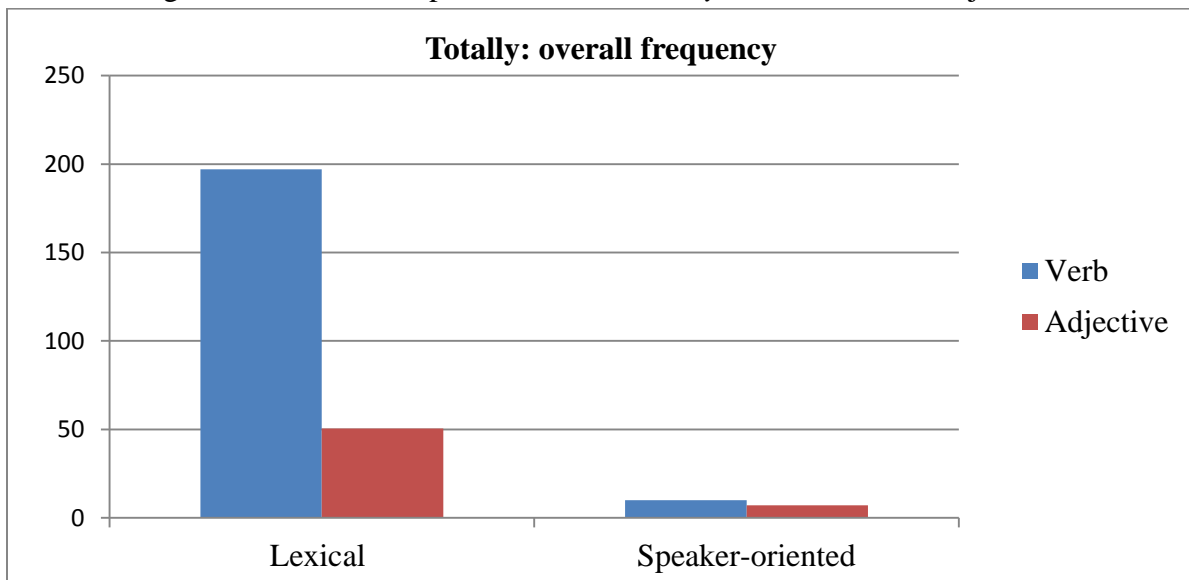
Table 3: Extracted predicates

Predicate type	<i>Totally</i> type	Predicate
Bounded Adj	Lexical	different, new, unacceptable, dependent, inappropriate, honest, free, unrelated, unknown
Unbounded Adj	Sp-oriented	cool, ridiculous, awesome, hot, great, fun, amazing, strange, weird, mad, strange
Bounded Verb	Lexical	understand, support, change, ignore, forget, agree, disagree, destroy, enjoy, accept
Unbounded verb	Sp-oriented	will, should, would, might, hit, win, have, find, think, say

### 4.3 Genres and *totally*

Before testing the actual distribution across genres, it is first important to consider the frequency of the two semantic types for each part of speech. Unsurprisingly, lexical *totally* is overwhelmingly more frequent than speaker-oriented one for both verbs and adjectives, regardless of the distribution across genres.

Figure 1 – Lexical vs speaker-oriented *totally* with Verbs and Adjectives



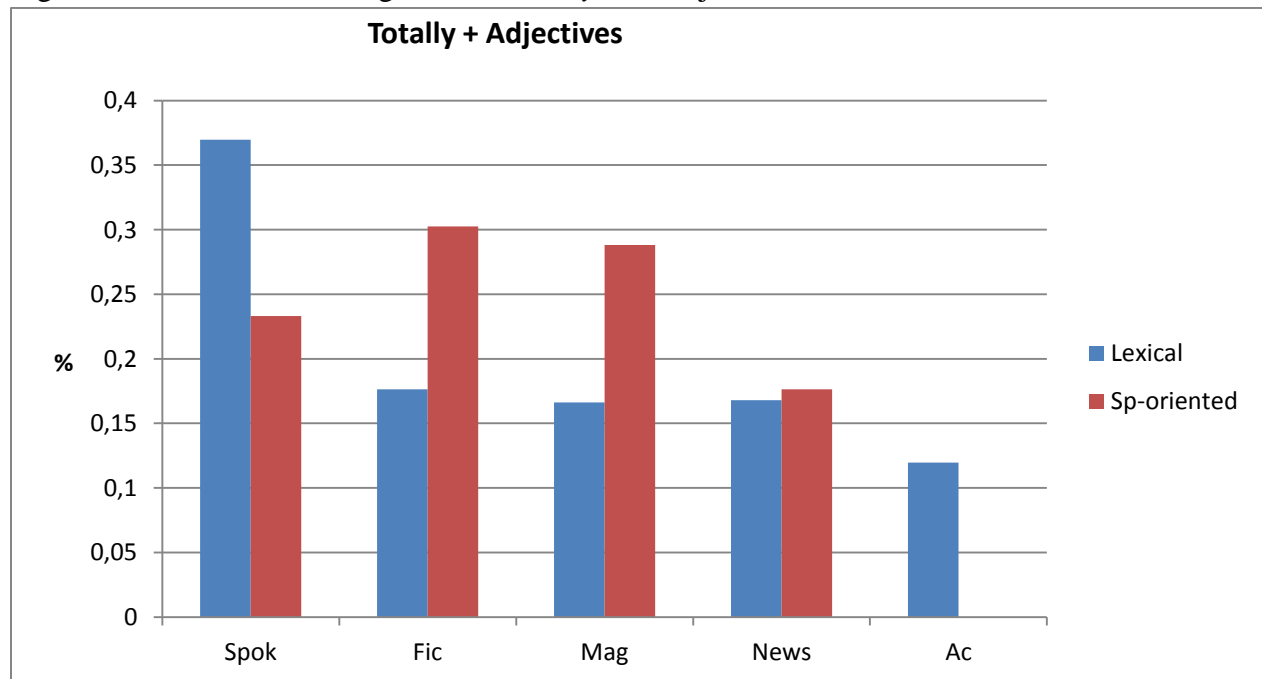
I then proceeded to inspect the distribution across genres for each type of the intensifier. Because the *ratio* across genres for each type of *totally* was considered, the difference in frequency, while potentially revealing to understand other aspects of the sociolinguistic distribution of the two flavors of *totally*, is not predicted to be a factor in the analysis. Table 4 reports the ratio across genres for each type of *totally* for both adjectives and verbs.

Table 4: Percentage of occurrences of *totally* across genres

Part of speech	Type	Spoken %	Fiction %	Newspaper %	Magazine %	Academic %
Adjectives	Lexical	37	18	17	17	11
	Sp-oriented	23	30	18	29	00
Verbs	Lexical	40	15	17	15	13
	Sp-oriented	29	38	19	14	00

I now move on to discuss the distribution for adjectival and verbal contexts separately. Starting from adjectives, a Chi-Square tests revealed a significant difference (Adj:  $n=2475$ ,  $df=4$ ,  $X^2=34$ ,  $p < .0001$ ) showing that different semantic types of *totally* differ in how their frequency is distributed across different communicative settings. Figure 2 below illustrates the distribution of the intensifier.

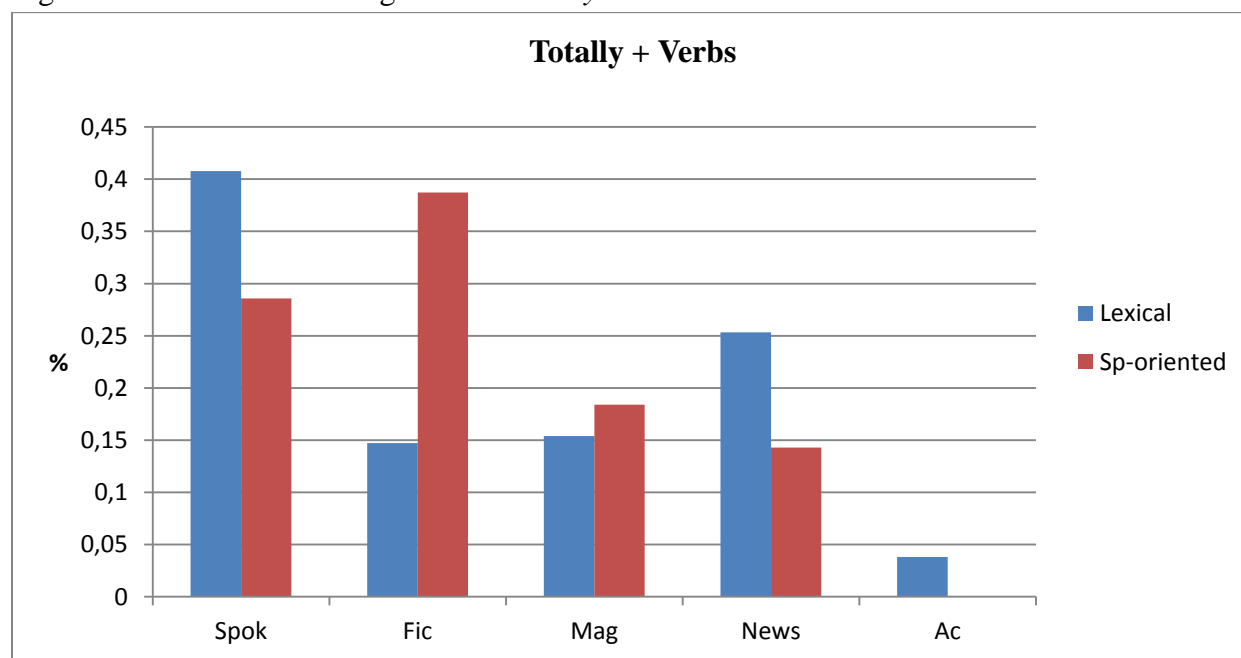
Figure 2: distribution across genres for *totally* with adjectives



Lexical *totally* is overwhelmingly more frequent in Spoken, and less frequent in Academic prose. Despite the relatively low frequency in this genre, however, occurrences of *totally* amount to 14%, roughly 1/7 of the total. This contrasts with what we observe for speaker-oriented *totally*, which is never attested in Academic prose and is predominantly featured in Fiction and Magazine. While largely attested in Spoken as well, its presence in this genre is smaller than the one of lexical *totally*.

Considering now *totally* with verbs, a similar pattern emerges. Figure 3 illustrates the distribution.

Figure 3: distribution across genres for *totally* with verbs



As observed for adjectives, lexical *totally* is overwhelmingly more common in Spoken, it is relatively common in Fiction, Magazine and Newspaper, and least frequent in Academic. Yet, despite the small fraction of occurrences of lexical *totally* in Academic, it is worth observing that, once again, speaker-oriented *totally* is completely absent in this genre. By contrast, speaker-oriented *totally* is considerably more frequent in Fiction, less frequent in Spoken and least frequent in Magazine and Newspaper.

## 5 Discussion

The present study provides evidence that the distribution of *totally* across different textual genres is different depending on the semantic type of the intensifier. We can now evaluate these observations in light of the continuum outlined in Section 2 and reproduced here, where genres are ranked in increasing order in terms of their level of informality/room for expressivity.

(19) Academic < Magazine – Newspaper – Spoken < Fiction

In both of its semantic flavors - and with both adjectives and verbs – *totally* is least common in Academic prose. In light of the claim that intensification is usually associated with communicative contexts which feature high levels of informality and expressivity (see Section 2), this result is rather predictable, confirming the idea that, across the board, intensifiers tend to be rare in settings where the emphasis is on conveying informational content in a detached and objective fashion. At the same time, it is remarkable that, while lexical *totally* is still used in this genre, speaker-oriented *totally* is never attested, either with verbs or with adjectives. This suggests that, despite the similar overall pattern, the two semantic types are not identical in terms of the communicative purposes that they serve. This is confirmed by the observation that their distribution peaks is found in different genres. Lexical *totally* is found most frequently in Spoken, which appears to be relatively unmarked in terms of expressivity/informality, as it collects conversations from TV broadcasts and shows. While this setting certainly ranks higher than Academic, it is not more informal than any of the other genres. By contrast, the frequency of speaker-oriented *totally* peaks in Fiction. This genre is rather heterogeneous, including texts ranging from movie scripts to TV series to novels. Yet, it is also the genre that is more likely to feature interactions resembling everyday colloquial interactions, which have been by and large claimed to represent a fruitful context of use for intensification. Moreover, it is the genre that most closely resembles the narratives discussed by Brown and Tagliamonte (2012). As it can be recalled, the authors argue that in this setting the focus of the speaker is focused on attention-grabbing and identity work, as opposed to mere communication of information. Due to their expressive charge and affective weight, intensifiers emerge as a suitable linguistic resource to be used in this context, and are considerably more frequent than in other settings. In light of this discussion, it is interesting to observe that speaker-oriented *totally* appears to fit this pattern better than lexical *totally*. While this does not invalidate the general point that intensification is a fruitful resource to be used in this setting, it also suggests that, once semantic differences are considered, a more nuanced picture emerge with respect to how intensifiers participate in sociolinguistic variation.

What remains to be seen, at this point, is *why* a speaker-oriented scale makes *totally* more suitable than a lexical scale for certain settings. Needless to say, further and more extensive evidence is required to provide an exhaustive answer to the question. Yet, at least two observations are worth making at this point. First, the strengthened connection between speaker-oriented intensifiers and informality/expressivity has already been observed, although not in a systematic manner, for a variety of morphemes. Non lexical uses of *so*, also dubbed “Generation *so*” (Zwicky 2011) have been claimed to be strongly associated with young white women (in the U.S.), “no doubt because of its prominence in the movies *Heathers* (1988) and *Clueless* (1994)” (Zwicky 2011: 4). Crucially, Zwicky also observes that the linguistic environment plays a crucial role in creating the stylistic effect, as he makes the point that “*So* has been around as a modifier of scalar adjectives and adverbs for a very long time; the innovation is its spread to other

contexts”. A similar pattern applies to *totally*. Multiple authors noted that speaker-oriented uses of the intensifier are markedly informal, common among younger speakers and more imbued with emotive content than lexical ones (McCready and Kauffman 2013, Irwin 2014). Anecdotal evidence supporting this observation comes from widely circulating media commentaries and stereotypes on the use of the intensifier, such as those found on the notorious website *Urban Dictionary*. Here, *totally* records nine entries<sup>4</sup>, each of which provides a slightly different one on the stereotypical users of the intensifiers. These include “Valley Girl”, “young girls”, “surfer”, “little brats”, as well as many others. Interestingly, in all these cases the examples reported in the entries are almost always of the speaker-oriented type, showing that the semantic flavor of *totally* is indeed relevant for its sociolinguistic properties.

Second, a natural connection emerges between the speaker-oriented nature of *totally* and the specific affect-oriented function of intensification. By modifying speaker’s commitment and not having any effect on the truth conditions of the proposition, this usage of *totally* has the right semantics to make salient scales that are grounded in the speaker’s attitude, and as such can fit particularly well in contexts where the interactional work between speaker and hearer is more important than the mere exchange of informational content. On the contrary, by merely describing a state of the world, lexical *totally* does not seem to be more resourceful in this respect than any other truth-conditional modifier. Hence, the lack of a prominent association with the genre of Fiction and the function of narration. Once again, the connection between the semantics and the sociolinguistics of attitude marking needs to be explored in a more systematic fashion. Yet, framing speaker-oriented intensifiers as semantically equipped devices for the encoding and sharing of attitude and stance appears to be a promising starting point in this direction.

## 7 Conclusion

The study outlined here presents a novel, though still preliminary, result, suggesting that the fine-grained semantic properties of an intensifier do have an effect on its sociolinguistic patterns. Not only does this finding invite further research to understand why semantic variation interacts with sociolinguistic patterns in the realm of intensification. It also aligns with several recent work at the socio-semantics interface (Acton and Potts 2014, Glass 2014) in calling for further exploration of how the semantic and pragmatic properties of a variable affect its use in the social landscape.

## 8 References

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=totally>

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