
How intense are intensifiers? Experimental evidence of the degree expressed by intensifiers in French-speaking Switzerland

Suzanne Lesage & Justine Salvadori

Université de Fribourg, Switzerland

[suzanne.lesage,justine.salvadori]@unifr.ch

Intensifiers are frequently renewed due to the emergence of new forms that coexist with older ones (Ito & Tagliamonte 2003). This renewal is often explained by the erosion of existing forms, which lose their expressive strength (Bolinger 1972). In French-speaking Switzerland, regional intensifiers such as *pire* ('worse') and *monstre* ('monster') illustrate this phenomenon while showing microdiatopic variation (Lesage & Salvadori, submitted, in preparation). This study investigates how these forms compare, in terms of perceived intensity, with more standard intensifiers.

To measure intensity, we conducted an experiment in which seventy-five participants from French-speaking Switzerland matched sentences containing different intensifiers to AI-generated images representing three levels of intensity. The independent variable was the intensifier (six levels: none, *très*, *super*, *monstre*, and *pire*), and the dependent variable was the selected image. Thirty experimental items (selected through a prior norming study) and thirteen fillers were used.

Analysis using Cumulative Link Mixed Models (Christensen 2018) revealed significant differences across all intensifiers: no intensifier < *très* < *super* < *pire* < *monstre*. Age and gender had no effect, but an interaction with canton was found: in Valais, *pire* and *monstre* were perceived as equally intense. Overall, the results suggest that older forms like *très* express lower intensity. However, the high intensity rating of *pire* in Valais, despite its regional high acceptability (Lesage & Salvadori, in preparation), challenges the hypothesis that frequent use leads to semantic weakening.

References: • Bolinger, D. (1972). *Degree words*. Walter de Gruyter. • Christensen, R. H. B. (2018). Cumulative link models for ordinal regression with the R package ordinal. *Submitted in J. Stat. Software*, 35, 1–46. • Ito, R. & S. Tagliamonte (2003). Well weird, right dodgy, very strange, really cool: Layering and recycling in English intensifiers. *Language in Society* 32(2), 257–279. • Lesage, S. & J. Salvadori (submitted). Elle était belle mal de le voir fin caisse: Restrictions sémantiques sur les intensifieurs suisses romands. • Lesage, S. & J. Salvadori, (in preparation). *Pire contrainte ou monstre libres? Les préférences syntaxiques de trois intensifieurs du suisse romand.*