Faculty of Arts and Philosophy

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A Corpus-Based Study on the Rise and Grammaticalisation of Intensifiers in British and American English

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Supervisor: prof. dr. Miriam Taverniers
Co-supervisor: dr. Tine Defour

Master dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree
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Many thanks are also due to my family and friends for their kindness and moral support during the last couple of months. I would like to express a special word of thanks to Anne-Sophie, Emma, Ilse, Justin and Margaux for their greatly appreciated advice and encouragement. Thank you very much.
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INTRODUCTION

From the 20th century onwards, several studies have been conducted on the use of intensifiers, i.e. degree words that scale a quality up or down to a certain degree, such as very, really, bloody, rather, fairly and somewhat (Stoffel 1901; Fries 1940; Bolinger 1972; Quirk et al. 1985). These studies have greatly contributed to the structural description and semantic categorisation of intensifiers. Different characteristics have been attributed to intensifiers based on their positive and negative scaling and degree of “boundedness,” which indicates to which extent they collocate with a particular type of adjectives (see chapters 1.1.2 and 1.1.3) (Paradis 2008). Some of these early studies already referred to the processes of grammaticalisation and delexicalisation. More recent studies (Murphy 2010; Ito and Tagliamonte 2003; Tagliamonte and Roberts 2005; Méndez-Naya 2008; Peters 1994; Lorenz 2002), however, predominantly focus on grammaticalisation and the constant change of intensifiers during the last decades. The continuous evolution of degree words can be explained by the speaker’s urge to “achieve expressivity” (Lorenz 2002: 143), as well as by “the fluid patterns of language use” (Hopper and Traugott 1993: 2). Therefore, the more unexpected and unusual an intensifier in a given context, the more it will add expressivity to what is being said (Lorenz 2002: 143). It is suggested that “the most rapid and the most interesting semantic developments in linguistic change are said to occur with amplifiers” (Murphy 2010: 111) because these linguistic elements “afford a picture of fevered invention and competition that would be hard to come by elsewhere, for in their nature they are unsettled” (Bolinger 1972: 18). Intensifiers are thus continuously changing due to the diachronic and synchronic process of grammaticalisation and the speaker’s need to add emphasis to what is being said. Therefore, they are utterly interesting language phenomena when one wants to gain insight into language change processes in general and grammaticalisation more specifically.

During the last decades, computerized corpora have enabled elaborate research into intensifiers and linguistic patterns of grammaticalisation in large numbers of texts. Traditionally, social variables, such as age, gender and social class, have been taken into account to analyse intensifier use within one and the same variant of English. In this way, it was found that the use of so is on the rise, and thus becomes more widespread, in American
English (Tagliamonte 2005; Kuha 2005), while this intensifier was still considered “vulgar” and a typical “feminine expression” by Stoffel at the turn of the previous century (1901: 113). Murphy, in addition, notes that in British English very is becoming less and less popular in the conversations of younger generations and that after this intensifier, “the form “fucking, fecking”, is the second most frequent amplifier” (2010: 116). Furthermore, Stenström et al. (2002) examined the use of intensifiers by teenagers and discovered the rise of taboo intensifiers at the expense of very, which is now becoming more and more typical of speech of the older generations. As yet, little research is available about the different stages of grammaticalisation of intensifiers in different varieties of English. This thesis therefore focuses on the use of three different intensifiers in corpora of American English (COCA) and British English (BNC) in order to discover how they have changed in these two varieties of English. A comparative corpus-based methodology allows us to explore these intensifiers in detail. As Stoffel explains, “of certain classes of adverbs the sense is constantly becoming weaker and less emphatic, so that others have to take their place where completeness of a quality has to be expressed” (1901: 2). This study will compare the use of the prototypical intensifier, very, of which the lexical meaning has completely faded away due to the complete process of grammaticalisation. In addition, the development of the moderator pretty is equally interesting as this intensifier is not yet used as frequently as very, but nonetheless has been grammaticalised to a certain degree. Thirdly, the use of the taboo intensifier damn will be investigated in order to examine how its lexical meaning has become implicit over time and to explore to which extent this taboo intensifier has acquired a more pragmatic meaning in American and British English. By examining the distribution and adjectival collocations of very, pretty and damn, we will be able to determine whether these intensifiers have evolved differently in British and American English.

Two research questions are at the centre of this research. The first question to be answered is whether the three intensifiers under study have undergone a different process of grammaticalisation in American and British English. We will consequently compare the occurrences of the three different intensifiers in two corpora, COCA and BNC, with earlier studies that have discussed the use of intensifiers. In contrast to many other studies on intensifiers, the focus of this dissertation will not be on detecting the most popular intensifiers, but rather on comparing different categories of intensifiers. As Labov claims
(1994: 76), we should ideally compare two sets of texts of two and the same groups of the same region, but a certain period of time later. As extensive corpora have only been developed during the last decades, such comparative research, which requires data from about half a century ago of a specific target group, is at present not possible. However, we can and will compare these observations with the general conclusions and perceptions about intensifiers in both language varieties in order to describe the process of grammaticalisation. The second question which this thesis focuses on is which intensifiers can be said to be ‘on the rise’, and thus emerge to the surface in American and British English. In this way, we will be able to analyse which variety of English is marked by the biggest “renewal”, since Hopper and Traugott note that intensifiers are good indicators of this process (1993: 121). A quantitative and qualitative approach will be combined since we will compare both the frequency of intensifiers, as well as the type of adjectives they collocate with.

This dissertation is subdivided into four chapters. The first chapter is devoted to the different theoretical insights and observations about the characteristics and categorisation of intensifiers. In the second chapter, we will focus on the functions, rapid change, grammaticalisation and delexicalisation of different intensifiers. The third chapter discusses which intensifiers are on the rise, and thus become more frequently used in wider contexts, and how this process evolves in American and British English. This literature study, divided into three chapters, precedes the actual corpus study. In this fourth chapter, we will first of all introduce the methodology and justify the choice for the three intensifiers under study. Subsequently, the use and rise of very, pretty and damn will be discussed in greater detail before interpreting the corpus results. We end with a discussion of the results and a final conclusion.
CHAPTER 1 DEFINING INTENSIFIERS

This first chapter elucidates the grammatical meaning and semantic categorisation of intensifiers, since such a framework is important to understand their evolution and current use. In the following four subchapters the different characteristics of intensifiers regarding scale, boundedness and semantic extension will be explained.

1.1 TERMINOLOGY

First of all, three important terms that are used frequently throughout this thesis are explained in brief. In the subsequent chapters they will be dealt with in further detail.

Intensifiers

I give preference to the term ‘intensifier’ as a cover term to refer to those adverbs that influence, and thus strengthen or weaken the meaning of the adjective that is modified. Intensifiers bring the quality that is expressed by the adjective to a degree somewhere between the two far ends of a degree scale (Quirk et al. 1985: 589). Moreover, the intensifiers under scrutiny in this thesis only modify adjectives, and are consequently not collocated with nouns, adverbs or verbs. In this way, they fulfil “the prototypical function of adverbs, namely that of grading adjectives” (Athanasiadou 2007: 555; Lorenz 2002: 144). This approach makes it less complex to compare the results of this thesis with existing studies that also discuss intensifiers that premodify adjectives.

Grammaticalisation

Grammaticalisation is defined as “the development from lexical to grammatical forms and from grammatical to even more grammatical forms” (Kuteva and Heine 2008: 217; 2002: 2). This process becomes clear by a loss in meaning content, use in new contexts, a change in syntactic properties and phonetic reduction (Kuteva and Heine 2008: 217). We follow the notion of Heine and Kuteva in that grammaticalisation is a process influenced by different mechanisms of linguistic change that can be examined by looking at different criteria (see also 4.1.2) (Heine and Kuteva 2002: 2). In this dissertation, however, grammaticalisation is
mainly conceived as a process of semantic change and is therefore closely linked to delexicalisation, or the loss in lexical meaning. We will therefore examine how items with a lexical meaning, such as adjectives and taboo words, can gradually develop into adverbial items expressing a more grammatical and pragmatic function of intensification. The intensifier *purely*, for instance, is derived from the adjective *pure* referring to a state of ‘purity’, but due to its use as an adjective modifier, it has acquired a grammatical meaning of intensification that is similar to the adverbs *only*, *merely* and *simply*. This evolution is illustrated by the two adjectives that collocate most frequently with *purely* in the COCA, i.e. *economic* and *political*.

(1a) COCA: Since post-divorce money is often tight, such fights may be **purely economic**.

(1b) COCA: Running mates are often chosen with only short-term, **purely political** considerations in mind, so that even the presidential contender making the selection rarely realizes just how much he might be shaping long-term history.

In these sentences no reference is made to *purity*, but rather to the notion that something is *only* “economic” or “political”, without interference of emotions or friendship. *Purely* has thus acquired a more grammatical meaning. These processes of delexicalisation and grammaticalisation will be explored in further detail in 2.1.3.

**Rise of intensifiers**

The rise of intensifiers is linked with their distribution and frequency in use. The more they occur in different contexts and are marked by a higher frequency, the more they will become widely accepted. Intensifiers seem to *rise* to the surface when they are no longer only linked to a very specific semantic context, but become integrated in different written texts and spoken conversations. This thesis links the process of grammaticalisation and delexicalisation of the three intensifiers under study with their rise in two varieties of English and thus compares their development in meaning with their increase in use.
Different terms have been used to denominate grammatical elements that modify and have a heightening or lowering effect on adjectives, adverbs and nouns (Quirk et al. 1985: 446). Especially because of the different possible angles of looking at intensifying adverbs, there is some overlap regarding this terminology. A more general denomination for intensifiers is “degree adverbs”, as frequently used by Bolinger (1972). However, he also uses “the term intensifier for any device that scales a quality, whether up or down or somewhere between the two” (Bolinger 1972: 17). Biber et al., on the other hand, use “intensives, amplifiers or intensifiers” for all adverbs that “increase intensity” (2007: 209). Along with these general denominations, linguists make different subdivisions within the category of degree adverbs or intensifiers (Stoffel 1901; Quirk et al. 1985; Biber et al. 2000). Stoffel (1901) was the first one to make a semantic distinction between “intensives and down-toners”, which respectively express a high or a low degree of the adjective that is being premodified, e.g. extremely good and rather good. This subdivision was later adopted by many others (Fries 1940; Tagliamonte 2005; Quirk et al. 1985). Huebler, on the other hand, refers to downtoners as “detensifiers”, as opposed to intensifiers (1983: 68). Downtoners are not only employed to downscale a quality, but also to soften the meaning of the word that is modified. The following sentences illustrate how the downtoner rather can have different meanings depending on the context in which it occurs.

(2a) COCA: We're taking a rather narrow view of composites, having decided to focus on liquid-molding techniques with glass-fiber reinforcement because press-molding processes.” such as sheet molding compound (SMC) and thermoplastic sheet processes were already being developed elsewhere.

(2b) COCA: A year from now, will there be nobody starving in that country? Mr. McDermott: No, I think that would be rather naive to think so.

In (2a) “rather narrow” indicates that the view is limited and that they focus on merely one type of “molding techniques,” while (2b) illustrates how downtoners can take up the function of hedging to convey a more subtle message instead of being too explicit (Stoffel 1901: 129). In (2b), McDermott does not say that the speaker is obviously wrong, but nuances the proposition by saying that it is “rather naive to think so”. In this way, rather is
“employed to take off the edge of what might otherwise produce an unpleasant impression on the hearer, or to tone down the harshness of a statement” (Stoffel 1901: 129). Nevertheless, in general, intensives enhance the meaning of the modified word, while downtoners “express a moderate, slight, or just perceptible degree of a quality” (Stoffel 1901: 129). Quirk et al. agree with this subdivision made by Stoffel, but use the term “amplifier” instead of intensives (Quirk et al. 1985: 445).

Next to this general subdivision based on a positive scaling or negative scaling, Bolinger looks at intensifiers from a different angle. He divides degree words that modify adjectives into four subclasses “according to the region of the scale that they occupy” (Bolinger 1972: 17). Firstly, “boosters” refer to the “upper part of scale” and are used for “looking up” (Bolinger 1972: 17). This category of intensifiers brings the quality expressed by the modified adjective to the highest possible degree. In the following example, the intensifier completely indicates that the shed was totally destroyed, and not partially. There is thus a complete state of damage.

(3) BNC: The shed was **completely destroyed** and the aviary badly damaged.

Secondly, “compromisers” often try “to look both ways at once”, and express the intensity of “the middle of the scale” (Bolinger 1972: 17). For instance, the intensifiers rather and quite do not boost a quality upwards, but indicate a place on a degree scale ‘somewhere in between’ the two end points.

(4) BNC: The Queen could concede that with inflation being **rather different** from what was anticipated in 1990, there need to be certain adjustments.

The inflation referred to in (4) is probably somewhat higher or lower than in 1990, but not completely the opposite as there “need to be certain adjustments” and not a complete change. If we put “inflation” at the time of the utterance on a scale of difference with the inflation of 1990, it is somewhere in the middle: the inflation is not the same, but not completely different either.

Thirdly, “diminishers” express a meaning of “looking down” and belong to the “lower part of the scale” (Bolinger 1972: 17). This term is also used by Biber et al. to specify “[d]egree adverbs which decrease the effect of the modified item” (2007: 210). Finally,
“minimizers” occupy “the lower end of the scale” and downscale and minimize the quality of the adjective as much as possible (Bolinger 1972: 17).

(5a) BNC: The very fact that he held the parliamentarians partially responsible for the RPF’s demise suggests that he had not assumed in June 1951 that the Rassemblement was dead.

(5b) BNC: She pointed up the beach to a man and a woman barely visible under a big beach umbrella.

These two sentences illustrate the difference between “diminishers” and “minimizers”. In (5a) “the parliamentarians” are not completely responsible, but still to a considerable degree, whereas in (5b) the two persons walking on the beach are almost not visible because of the “big beach umbrella”.

Quirk et al. (1985) partially agree with the semantic categorisation based on these four groupings on a scale made by Bolinger, but nonetheless start from three different main categories, which partially overlap with Bolinger’s subclasses. Quirk et al. first make a distinction between “amplifiers” and “downtoners” (1985: 445). “Amplifiers” can take up the function of “maximizers” when they indicate “an endpoint on a scale,” as pointed out by Biber et al. (2007: 210). This category of intensifiers includes “totally, absolutely, completely, and quite (in the sense of ‘completely’)” (Biber et al. 2007: 210). The second subtype of “amplifiers” is called “boosters” and does not express an absolute degree, but simply enhances the quality of the modified adjective (Quirk et al. 1985: 143). The second subtype of “amplifiers” is called “boosters” (Quirk et al. 1985: 590). Here we clearly see how the categories overlap, as “boosters” in the sense used by Quirk et al. (1985: 590) are more generally defined as intensifiers which scale a degree upwards, but not to the highest possible degree, as defined by Bolinger (1972: 17). The third category distinguished by Quirk et al. is that of “downtoners,” which can take up the role of “approximators (almost), compromisers (more or less), diminishers (partly) and minimizers (hardly)” (1985: 590). The final three subcategories are entirely in line with Bolinger’s subclasses.
We can now link the subcategorisation of Quirk et al. (1985) with the concept of “boundedness” introduced by Paradis (2008). She makes a distinction between nondegree and degree structures (2008: 322-323). Since the first category cannot be modified by intensifiers, we focus in particular on degree structures, which can be further subdivided into nonscale structures and scale structures (Paradis 2008: 323). Paradis explains that the nonscale structures are “always BOUNDED and such meanings combine with BOUNDED DEGREE modifiers such as completely and almost” (2008: 232). For example, in relation with the collocation completely dead, it is supposed that one is dead or alive, and not something in between (Paradis 2008: 323). Secondly, scale modifiers, can be “unbounded” or “bounded”, or in other words “totality modifiers” or “scalar modifiers” (Paradis 2008). In these categories, we observe a similar subdivision as that of Bolinger (1972). Totality modifiers are “associated with a definite BOUNDARY”, while “scalar modifiers are UNBOUNDED, indicating a range of a SCALE” (Paradis 2008: 321). In addition, totality modifiers can be conceived as “maximizers that highlight the perfect match with a maximum or a boundary” e.g.
completely, or as “approximators that indicate that a gradable property falls short of that maximum or that boundary, as in almost full” (Paradis 2008: 321). These totality modifiers have a “definite boundary” (Paradis 2008: 321) and belong “to the upper part of scale”, as Bolinger would call it (1972: 17). “Scalar modifiers”, however, are “unbounded” and comprise three types: boosters, e.g. extremely, moderators, e.g. fairly and diminishers, e.g. a bit (Paradis 2008: 231). Paradis’ category of totality modifiers appears to coincide with the “middle and lower part of the scale”, as defined by Bolinger (1972: 17). Scalar modifiers do not scale the quality of the modified adjective to a particular degree, but rather emphasize it or lower its intensity.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories depending on the degree of boundedness (Paradis 2008)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Degree Structures</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Nonscale Structures</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>e.g.</em> completely dead, almost dead</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Scale Structures</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Totality Modifiers</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bounded: Definite Boundary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Maximizers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>e.g.</em> completely full</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Approximators</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>e.g.</em> almost full</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Scalar Modifiers</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unbounded: Range on a Scale</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Boosters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>e.g.</em> extremely nice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Moderators</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>e.g.</em> fairly nice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Diminishers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>e.g.</em> a bit odd</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Subdivision of intensifiers by Paradis (2008)

The intensifiers *very*, *pretty* and *damn* usually indicate a degree on a scale, as illustrated in the following sentences.

(6a) BNC: ... it would be **very interesting** if er you had a positive er proposal or something constructive to make which we might be able to examine

(6b) BNC: Just hope there's not one on today, but I'm **pretty sure** there isn't.

(6c) BNC: She was **damn lucky** to have pulled him as a husband.

These sentences illustrate that the three intensifiers under study all are scalar modifiers that indicate a degree on a scale rather than a definite boundary (Paradis 2008). In (6a) and (6c)
the intensifiers function as boosters, while in (6b) *pretty* takes up the function of a moderator.

1.4 SEMANTIC EXTENSION

When categorising intensifiers, we should not consider these words as isolated linguistic items, but also, and above all, investigate the context in which they occur. Consequently, next to the degree of scaling and boundedness, we have to take into account the “semantic extension” of the intensifiers (Athanasiadou 2007: 561; Heine and Kuteva 2008: 219), which Athanasiadou links with the “degree of subjectivity” (2007: 561). She points out that an intensifier can take up different meanings and consequently belong to different categories, depending on the adjective it premodifies and the degree to which it is semantically bleached or delexicalised (see also 2.3) (2007: 557). She thus agrees with Paradis who claims that “[m]ost degree modifiers are used mainly as either scalar or totality modifiers, e.g. *pretty* and *absolutely* respectively”, however, “[o]nce they are used in combination with the element they modify, they determine the reading of the whole” (Paradis 2008: 325). Yet, even though Paradis rightly refers to the intensifier *pretty* as a degree modifier that is nearly always used as a scalar modifier, we can find some occurrences of *pretty* in which this intensifier belongs to different subcategories. *Pretty* happens to adopt a meaning that is similar to that of the intensifier *quite*, but can also express a degree of intensification that is similar to the meaning of *very*, as is demonstrated by the following sentences:

(7a) BNC: They huddled together in twos and threes, with the *pretty little* church standing back about halfway down the village.

(7b) BNC: I’m afraid I got very annoyed and left; it was *pretty obvious* to me that there wasn’t going to be a proper discussion.

In (7a) “pretty little” describes the church as rather small, as opposed to very big, while in (7b) “pretty obvious” appears to have a stronger undertone. As the speaker “left” and was “very annoyed”, it was probably *really* clear that “there wasn’t going to be a proper discussion”. As a consequence, a synonym for *pretty* in (7a) could have been *rather* or *quite*, whereas this intensifier would not express the proper degree of modification in (7b).
However, Paradis adds that the variable semantic extension, due to the meaning of the modified adjective, may lead to confusion since “the exact DEGREE reading may be unclear in cases where there is no DEGREE modifier or when the DEGREE modifier is capable of modifying both SCALES and BOUNDARIES” (2008: 325). By means of the following example, she elucidates the different use of the intensifier quite: “in quite right and dead right a BOUNDARY is involved and quite and dead are both totality modifiers, while the configuration of easy in quite easy and dead easy is UNBOUNDED and the modifiers indicate a range on a SCALE” (Paradis 2008: 325-326). Therefore, this thesis mainly focuses on the meaning of pretty as ‘moderator’ (Paradis 2008) meaning quite or rather.

Taking these remarks in mind, we should be cautious when describing degree words and dividing them into clear-cut categories. However, it is interesting to take these different types of categorisation in mind, as they provide insight into how intensifiers are used in different contexts and how they can evolve over time.

1.5 Conclusion

We now have considered different viewpoints towards the categorisation of intensifiers. To summarize, intensifiers are also called “degree words”, “amplifiers”, or “intensives” (Bolinger 1972; Quirk et al. 1985; Stoffel 1901). All authors agree upon two main subclasses: intensifiers and downtoners (Stoffel 1901: 2), referring respectively to their capacity to boost the quality expressed by an adjective positively, or to bring it to a lower degree. Within these two categories, intensifiers can be “boosters”, “compromisers”, “diminishers” or “minimizers,” according to Bolinger (1972). Quirk et al. (1985) further subdivide the category of “boosters”, which they call “amplifiers,” into “maximizers” and “boosters” (with a more specific definition). Moreover, they subdivide the category of “downtoners” even further into the following categories: “approximators”, “compromisers”, “diminishers” and “minimizers”, which partially overlap with Bolinger’s classification (Quirk et al. 1985).
CHAPTER 2 LANGUAGE CHANGE

There is broad consensus on the notion that intensifiers are good indicators of language change (Peters 1994: 269; Murphy 2010: 111; Quirk et al. 1985: 590). As will be explained in 2.3, intensifiers go through different stages of grammaticalisation, which can be linked to their ‘rise’. The more intensifiers are used in wider contexts, the more they lose their original meaning and start to become function words. This fading away of the original lexical meaning in favour of a more general meaning of intensification can lead to an increase in frequency. The different characteristics of this process of change, such as expressivity, versatility and renewal will be explained in detail in the following subchapters.

2.1 EXPRESSIVITY

Intensifiers are often used to add an expressive force to the quality expressed by the adjective that is being modified. Many linguists agree with Bolinger who claims that

[d]egree words afford a picture of fevered invention and competition that would be hard to come by elsewhere, for in their nature they are unsettled. They are the chief means of emphasis for speakers for whom all means of emphasis quickly grow stale and need to be replaced. (Bolinger 1972: 18)

In other words, if a speaker wants to emphasise a proposition and ascertain that the hearer believes and listens to what is said, s/he will often underscore that his utterance is true or interesting by using expressive intensifiers. Expressivity and emotion are thus important aspects of intensifiers, especially when intensifiers are not yet fully delexicalised (see 2.1.3) and still are ‘on the rise’, such as in the case of so, bloody and damn (Stenström et al. 2002; Tagliamonte 2003). Such expressive intensifiers attract the attention of the hearer and emphasise the quality of the word that is modified. Hopper and Traugott confirm that intensifiers are often characterised by “their markedly emotional function” and that they are consequently “subject to renewal” (1993: 121), as will be further explained in 2.4. González-Díaz (2008) agrees with Hopper and Traugott (1993) in her analysis of the sentence modifier very much. She claims that “degree words are key elements in conveying
interpersonal meanings: they are used to highlight specific parts of the speaker’s message in an original, different way” (Góngalez-Díaz 2008: 221). However, she also acknowledges that intensifiers lose their originality over time and are pushed aside by more expressive newcomers (Góngalez-Díaz 2008: 221). Therefore, it is not surprising that the speaker will often give preference to explicit and colourful intensifiers, such as damn or bloody, if the context allows it. Using a more neutral form, such as really, would not convey the same “interpersonal meanings” (González-Díaz 2008: 221) and degree of intensity (Labov 1984: 43). Labov observes that

some elements of the grammatical system are specifically devoted to emotional expression, and the most common of these are adverbs that signal intensity. ‘Intensity’ is defined here as the emotional expression or social orientation toward the linguistic proposition: the commitment of the self to the proposition. The speaker relates future estimates of his or her honesty, intelligence, and dependability to the truth of the proposition. (1984: 43-44)

Speakers consequently use intensifiers to indicate that the proposition is noteworthy and do so by expressing their attitude towards it. Lorenz explains that “[i]n speech as well as in writing, we are constantly having to justify that X actually needs to be said” (2002: 146). In this way, speakers often try to convince the interlocutor of their opinion and show their involvement (Athanasiadou 2007: 555, 560). To achieve this goal, speakers can give preference to intensifiers with a strong lexical meaning. However, in using such intensifiers with a strong lexical undertone, they often incline towards overemphasis and exaggeration. It is a tendency inherent of conversation, and especially of informal talk, that “speakers exaggerate narrative, descriptive and argumentative features and make assertions that are overstated, literally impossible, inconceivable or counterfactual in many different types of discourse context” (McCarthy and Carter 2004: 150). To attract the hearer’s attention the speaker adds expressivity to what is said and renders the message more credible and worth mentioning than it might actually be in reality. Intensifiers are consequently important linguistic elements to express overstatement or hyperbole, especially when they are employed as boosters (Peters 1994: 271). In order to ascertain that speakers will obtain the effect they aim for, the proposition is sometimes overstated. We should however be careful when using the term ‘hyperbole’. McCarthy and Carter rightly note that a distinction should be made between real hyperbole and simple overstatement (2004: 152). They refer to Gibbs
who “advocates a distinction between hyperbole and simple overstatement, labeling the latter as unconscious or unintentional, while hyperbole is intentional” (1994 qtd. in McCarthy and Carter 2004: 152). Accordingly, we should not simply link all intensifiers in informal talk with hyperbole. They can express exaggeration, but it is too simplistic to assume that the use of intensifiers automatically leads to hyperbole in the majority of the occurrences. Intensifiers primarily scale “a quality, whether up or down or somewhere between the two” (Bolinger 1972: 17), but can also be used in exaggerations.

As McCarthy and Carter point out, exaggerations and overstatements are common in informal conversations (2004: 150). However, until recently it was generally said that especially women had a tendency towards exaggeration and over-colouring their experiences in conversations (Stoffel 1901: 101; Jespersen 1954: 250). Stoffel, for instance, claimed one century ago that the rise of the intensifier so was a typically feminine feature (1901: 101), while at present this intensifier is becoming more and more a frequently used intensifier by both male and female speakers of American English, and especially among younger generations (Tagliamonte and Roberts: 2005). This observation is especially interesting in the light of the on-going grammaticalisation and delexicalisation (see also 2.3). The more the speaker wants to achieve expressivity, the more s/he will make use of intensifiers that convey best the originality of the message. In this way, “[t]here is a pertinent link between the stylistic qualities of hyperbole and expressivity on the one hand, and novelty in language on the other” (Lorenz 2002: 143). We will argue in the third chapter that the three intensifiers under study in this dissertation have different functions and are applied in different contexts, depending on the originality they are supposed to express. At present, the intensifier very conveys a more neutral meaning than other intensifiers, such as bloody, fucking or damn and will therefore be perceived as less expressive and new, and thus less adequate for exaggeration and hyperbole (Lorenz 2002: 143).

It is also interesting to discuss this expressivity from a cognitive point of view, as Peters points out (1994: 270). He agrees with Lorenz in that “the newer, the more unusual and the more “original” a degree adverb, the more inventiveness or cognitive effort the speaker invests into his utterance” (1994: 270). Yet, he adds that this search for an expressive utterance by the speaker also “necessitates a complementary process of inference on the hearer’s side” (Peters 1994: 270). In other words, the hearer is confronted
with an adverb that is not often used in that context and is therefore forced to make an effort to interpret it correctly. As a consequence, the hearer “has to find out the basis for the speaker’s metaphorical use” (Peters 1994: 270) and link it to the utterance. The use of unusual intensifiers in new contexts thus requires the commitment of the hearer to interpret these words in a broader sense. At this point, intensifiers contain two coexisting meanings, i.e. a more general intensifying meaning with an expressive connotation, as well as the original lexical meaning.

2.2 Versatility and Constant Change

Ito and Tagliamonte, as well as Murphy, claim that there are two main features of intensifiers, namely “versatility and colour” and “constant change” (Ito and Tagliamonte 2003: 258; Murphy 2010: 112). This “versatility and color” (Ito and Tagliamonte 2003: 258) implies that intensifiers and downtoners often lack a well-defined meaning and that they can adopt nuances in meaning depending on the context in which they occur. Since intensifiers are used to emphasise propositions and express the speaker’s stance, the individual connotation of intensifiers depends on the quality and type of the adjective that is being modified. In particular more recent intensifiers have such an ambiguous meaning. For instance, intensifiers such as terribly and awfully, still retain their meaning of ‘terror’, although they have gradually acquired a more grammatical meaning of intensification, as pointed out by Paradis (2008: 338). According to Stoffel, awfully was not yet considered part of normal conversations, but a manifestation of “slang” at the beginning of the twentieth century (1901: 121). Partington, however, claims that terribly and awfully used to “excite terror or dread” (1993: 183), while now they have almost completely disposed of these lexical meanings in favour of a more neutral intensifying function. Yet, if we observe the adjectival collocations of terribly in the BNC and COCA, the most frequently modified adjectives still express a negative quality. The five most popular adjectives in collocation with terribly are wrong, important, sorry, difficult and sad in COCA and sorry, important, difficult, wrong and hard in the BNC.

(8a) COCA: Looking from the outside, he knew the situation was terribly wrong.
(8b) BNC: It’s terribly difficult. I keep having to read it again to try and work it out.
However, we also come across some positive collocations with the intensifier *terribly*:

(8c) COCA: “You should always leave soon after lunch-unless you're a *terribly good* friend”.
(8d) BNC: “And we had the fantastic help in from South Wales, most thos *terribly good* er people were terribly *good* to us in organizing er different things”.

The adjective *good* is the sixth most frequently occurring adjective premodified by the intensifier *terribly* in the BNC. However, out of the 19 collocations of *terribly good*, 10 are part of a negation, which in fact does not express a positive degree. So, there are a great deal fewer occurrences with positive adjectives, and often in combination with a negation, as in the following examples:

(9a) COCA: However, she also noted that she was “not a *terribly good* follower” because she often resented people in authority who seemed controlling”.

(9b) BNC: Shouldn't we have the courage to say “This is not a *terribly good* idea?” Justin: Be fair, this ad was your brainchild”.

The above collocations of *terribly* indicate that this intensifier indeed has acquired a more grammatical meaning of intensification, as it does no longer only refer to something “terrible”. Yet, this intensifier is marked by versatility and the negative connotation of “terror or dread” is still the most important one. This variable meaning is a factor indicating that these intensifiers have not yet reached full delexicalisation, but should be situated somewhere in between. The case of the intensifier *terribly* is a good example to illustrate that intensifiers regularly lack a single fixed meaning, and are characterized by flexibility. The meanings of intensifiers are always changing, “because the old ones are felt to be inadequate to the expression of the idea of completeness of a quality, or of a quality to the very highest degree of which it is capable under the circumstances” (Stoffel 1901: 2). The connotation of *terribly*, as in (8a), is stronger than *very*. The use of *very* may have been perceived as “inadequate” to explain how wrong exactly the situation was in (8a).

The second feature of intensifiers next to versatility and colour, is the tendency towards constant change and recycling of different forms in new contexts (Ito and Tagliamonte 2003: 258; Murphy 2010: 112, Tagliamonte 2008: 362). This rapid change is caused by the weakening of the meaning of intensifiers over time. The result of intensifiers
acquiring a weaker meaning is that other intensifiers “have to take their place where completeness of a quality has to be expressed” (Stoffel 1901: 2). Stoffel points out that very or “verrai” originally meant true, genuine or real (1901: 29), while at the turn of the previous century it had already adopted a more colourless intensifying meaning (Stoffel 1901: 33).

The speaker may start to attribute a new meaning to a certain intensifier since

> [f]requent use is apt to weaken the sense of a word: the general run of speakers are so much given to using hyperbolical language, to “laying it on thick”, that the very words they use for this purpose will come to be discounted in the public estimation, and taken for what they are worth, which is usually a good deal less than what they imply etymologically (Stoffel 1901: 1-2).

When speakers are getting used to hyperbole and exaggeration, they will even more need to emphasise a proposition or premise in order to evoke the same impression. This variability in meaning leads to the co-occurrence of different meanings of one and the same intensifier (Ito and Tagliamonte 2003: 261).

On the basis of these observations, we can conclude that intensifiers are in constant change. This change depends on the variable meaning of the intensifiers, as they are used in different contexts and to express different meanings, but is also the consequence of the velocity with which speakers pick up new meanings and recycle words. Speakers are constantly trying to express themselves in the best way possible and therefore look for the word that best suits this purpose.

2.3 Grammaticalisation and Delexicalisation

2.3.1 Meaning

In the discussion of the rise of intensifiers, it is indispensable to refer to the concepts of grammaticalisation and delexicalisation, or “‘blunting’, as it has been referred to in the context of intensification” (Lorenz 2002: 144). Partington acknowledges that delexicalisation is an important characteristic of the development of intensifiers. He describes it as “the reduction of the independent lexical content of a word, or group of words, so that it comes to fulfil a particular function but has no meaning apart from this to contribute to the phrase
in which it occurs” (Partington 1993: 183). Delexicalisation differs from grammaticalisation in that it is the process that describes how the lexical meaning fades away, while “[g]rammaticalization is defined as the development from lexical to grammatical forms, and from grammatical to even more grammatical forms” (Heine and Kuteva 2008: 217). Grammaticalisation thus takes it even further than delexicalisation; first the lexical meaning of the word fades into the background, and later it becomes even more grammaticalised. As Heine and Kuteva point out, grammaticalisation can also involve phonetic reduction, decategorialization and context generalization (see also 4.1.2) (2008: 217). A lexical word is grammaticized when it “assumes the grammatical characteristics of a function word” (Hopper and Traugott 1993: 4). For instance, when the adverb bloody is used in the collocation bloody fantastic, it no longer refers to real blood or the other possible original meaning ‘by our lady’ (Mencken 1922: 155), but it now has acquired the meaning of a function word that expresses intensification. Partington recognizes that his abovementioned description of delexicalisation has a rather limited scope and that it defines delexicalisation in “its extreme form” (1993: 183). Yet, it conveys the true essence of what delexicalisation implies. The ‘fading away’ of the original meaning is in fact a reduction of the lexical meaning, while gradually a second more grammatical and pragmatic meaning is acquired. This process whereby “items become more grammatical through time” (Hopper and Traugott 1993: 2) causes other words to rise to the surface and replace older forms that now have become “inadequate” (Stoffel 1901: 2). If we make a downward scale with different words that express to a lesser or bigger extent the same meaning, we observe that the main lexical quality of the meaning expressed becomes gradually less explicit. For instance, to express the feeling of anxiety, we can use different words, such as frightened, terrified, scared, afraid, and timid. Such a scale visualizes how one and the same word also can express its own lexical meaning to a lesser or bigger extent, similar to a cline of delexicalisation (Hopper and Traugott 1993: 4; Partington 1993: 184). The more the intensifier is delexicalised, the more its meaning will become ambiguous and the more it can collocate with a greater variety of adjectives. The word seems to have undergone a “scale transfer”, i.e. it moved along a scale divided into different gradations of modification (Peters 1994: 269). Peters argues that
[s]cale transfer is a special case of metaphorical meaning change: a concrete meaning develops into a more abstract one on the basis of a semantic component in the concrete meaning which facilitates at first the occasional use and later the transition of an adverb with full lexical meaning into the class of degree adverbs. (Peters 1994: 269)

Tagliamonte and Roberts visually represent this gradual process by means of the following figure (2005: 285). This scheme shows the different stages a lexical item goes through during the process of delexicalisation. The more frequently the lexical word is used as an intensifier to emphasise a proposition or adjective, the less concrete its meaning will become and the wider the context in which it can occur.

```
Lexical Word
↓
Used for occasional Emphasis
↓
Used More Frequently
↓
Used with Wider and Wider Range of Words

[Concomitantly original lexical meaning lost]

(Tagliamonte and Roberts 2005: 285)
```

For instance, the taboo word *fucking*, at first only occurred in non-standard situations and referred to its root ‘fuck’ (Napoli and Hoeksema 2009: 614). Subsequently, this taboo intensifier was occasionally used to convey emphasis and to add expressive force to what is said, while now it is already used more frequently on different occasions, as illustrated in the following sentence.

(10) COCA: You’re a **fucking great** policeman, but give yourself a break.

This observation is consistent with Napoli and Hoeksema’s findings since they acknowledge that *fucking* gradually acquired the meaning of a more neutral intensifier and that it now “can be placed at the bottom of the relevance scale of worth or value, along with other non-taboo terms (not change an iota, not worth {a plugged nickel/red cent, not drink a drop, not say a word, not sleep a wink})” (2009: 633). Even though *fucking* originally conveyed a “literal sense of ‘fornicate’”, it now collocates with a wider range of words (Napoli and Hoeksema 2009: 614), such as **crazy, brilliant, great, little, hot, good, tired, huge and awful**, which all
occur in the top ten collocations in COCA. However, *fucking* often preserves its negative connotation as it occurs in many sentences where there is a notion of negativity and frustration involved, such as in the following sentences:

(11a) COCA: It involves lying, and I'm pretty *fucking good* at that, right?

(11b) COCA: What I've learned from women is they're all *fucking crazy*. You find one that deals with your craziness and make the best.

(11c) COCA: Let's face it, no matter how nice I was and how *fucking brilliant* my advice was, Jackson'd sneer at you for taking it just because I'm a woman!

These sentences indicate that we should not assume that delexicalisation is purely systematic and fully predictable. It is however a long gradual process in which intensifiers evolve from a lexical root towards a modifier word and therefore gradually shed their original lexical meaning. During this development, they nonetheless retain some of the original sense before gradually developing into a neutral degree word.

Peters distinguishes five different categories of boosters that change by means of a “scale transfer from adverbs performing other types of modification” (1994: 269). The first category consists of degree adverbs that used to be local or dimensional adverbs, such as *highly*, or *extremely* (Peters 1994: 269). If we now search for occurrences of *highly* in the BNC and COCA, we no longer encounter many collocations in which *highly* denotes height, in the meaning of ‘opposite of depth or lowness’. In exploring the BNC, it is moreover quite striking that there are various adjectives that are premodified by *highly* which can be linked to the world of sciences or technics, such as *radioactive, contagious, flammable, toxic, technical, mobile and liquid*. COCA also demonstrates this tendency, and includes even more technical adjectives in collocation with *highly*, such as *acidic and industrialized*.

(12a) BNC: The drugs used are *highly toxic* and those in charge have to learn the dangers both to themselves and to patients.

(12b) COCA: ...the "Bloomobile" which, in essence, was a rugged, *highly mobile*, miniature satellite truck.

The meaning of *highly* in these sentences seems to coincide with the expression ‘to a considerable degree’ or ‘a high level’. On the basis of this observation, we can tentatively suggest that *highly* has not yet completed the process of grammaticalisation and disposed of
its original lexical content. The intensifier *highly* has indeed come “to fulfil a particular function”, as grammaticalisation is defined by Peters (1994: 183), but it has still retained part of its original lexical meaning. This intensifier is consequently an example of “partial stage of delexicalization” (Lorenz 2002: 145), as will be discussed in further detail in 2.1.3.2. The stage of delexicalisation is partial because the original meaning of “high” as referring to height coexists with a more general meaning of intensification. The intensifier *highly* obviously still has “collocational restrictions,” which will probably disappear over time (Peters 1994: 270). A second category that illustrates even better how the process of scale transfer can take place, is “the case of the quantitative adverbs *maximally, much, little* and *minimally*” (Peters 1994: 269). As these intensifiers indicate a certain quantity, it is easier to compare their lexical meaning and to visualize their transfer on an imaginary scale than with the previous category of local and dimensional adverbs, which often have a less clear-cut meaning. Thirdly, Peters indicates that qualitative adverbs, such as *terribly* and *violently*, also develop by means of scale transfer (1994: 269-270), which would suggest that *violently* evolves from first being a lexical item that signifies ‘violence’, towards an intensifier with a connotation of ‘violence’ and ‘dreadfulness’, towards finally a neutral intensifier. The BNC provides ample evidence for this scale transfer. The ten most frequently used adjectives premodified by *violently* are respectively sick, opposed, ill, explosive, unpleasant, nationalist, hostile, well-picked, anti-system and anti-modernist. Clearly, all these adjectives denote a strong connotation of negative feelings. Peter’s fourth type of degree adverbs, in which “a concrete meaning develops into a more abstract one” is called “emphaisers”, e.g. *really* (1994: 269). The meaning of *really* originally referred to ‘reality’ and ‘truth’, while now this intensifier is commonly used to express a certain degree of modification rather than veracity (Tagliamonte and Roberts 2005: 283). In addition, the fifth type of degree adverbs that starts to perform other types of modification through scale transfer is the class of taboo words (Peters 1994: 269). This category differs from the other types of boosters in that the original meaning of a taboo intensifier does not only fade away, but also needs to become socially accepted. We will further elaborate upon this category with regard to the rise and use of *damn* in 3.2.2.3.
2.3.2 Different Perspectives

Hopper and Traugott observe that grammaticalisation can be approached from two different perspectives (1993: 2). Firstly, studies from a historical perspective compare the use of a grammatical item in the past with its current occurrences. The idea hereof is that the main factor of grammaticalisation is time and that diachronic studies are necessary to lay bare this development (Hopper and Traugott 1993: 2). Grammaticalisation is thus considered as inherent in language change across time, which implies that in order to find the different stages of partial and complete grammaticalisation, we need to look at data from the past, and compare these results with the current meanings of the words or sentences under study. The other perspective to which Hopper and Traugott refer is “synchronic grammaticalization” (1993: 2). According to this perspective on grammaticalisation, the fading away of the original lexical meaning in favour of a more general intensifying connotation, is chiefly considered as “a syntactic, discourse pragmatic phenomenon” (Hopper and Traugott 1993: 2). In other words, the speaker can choose between coexisting terms that convey more or less the same meaning. For instance, to intensify the meaning of the adjective welcome in the following sentences, we can use different intensifiers that modify the quality of this adjective, but to a different extent.

(13a) BNC: Although some financial assistance is given to team members, which is very welcome, most of the cost is carried by the individual athletes...

(13b) BNC: I think they're an extremely welcome addition to the stable of measures of regulation and they will improve materially depositor protection.

It is the interaction and competition between those different forms, such as extremely and very, that lead to the process of delexicalisation. As very starts to lose its expressive force, another form, i.e. extremely, starts to be used instead to express more explicitly how welcome the new measures or financial assistance are exactly. In this way, extremely competes with very because this newer form is “felt to be more expressive than what was available before” (Hopper and Traugott 1993: 123). This competition between older and newer words that express more or less the same meaning encourages the loss of the less expressive ones and the rise of more innovative forms (Hopper Traugott 1993: 123). Partington agrees with Hopper and Traugott in that he also considers grammaticalisation as
the result of two related phenomena, one being diachronic, and the other being part of contemporary speech (1993: 180). In his opinion, “linguistic fossilization”, which he describes as “the restriction of lexical items to a small number of combinations, for example stone dead, stone cold and stone deaf” and “linguistic competition”, or the “jostling of lexical items to win the favour of speakers,” go hand in hand (Partington 1993: 180). He focuses on the importance of combining synchronic with diachronic studies as the latter “can help us to understand why”, while “[t]he synchronic approach tells linguists how the bits and pieces of a language fit together” (Partington 1993: 178). An illustration of how language change and variation can be approached synchronically is Athanasiadou’s (2007) discussion of the current use of four different intensifiers: perfectly, absolutely, completely, and totally. She demonstrates how these intensifiers all have the connotation of “completeness”, but are used in different contexts on the basis of their individual idiosyncrasies (Athanasiadou 2007: 559).

2.3.3 Stages of Grammaticalisation

Since grammaticalisation is a long and gradual development (Tagliamonte and Roberts 2005: 284; Heine and Kuteva 2008: 219), we usually can distinguish different stages of grammaticalisation of one linguistic item. Lorenz claims that a “partial state of delexicalization is by no means exceptional”, as in the case of the intensifier terribly (2002: 145). As we pointed out in 2.2, terribly as an intensifier has partially lost its “conceptual meaning” of fear and terror, but especially has gained a “boosting function” instead (Lorenz 2002: 145). In (8a) we observed that terribly still retains its connotation of fear and dread, but is nonetheless also used in more general contexts, such as in (8b) (repeated from section 2.2 above).

(8a) COCA: “Looking from the outside, he knew the situation was terribly wrong.”
(8b) BNC: “It’s terribly difficult, I keep having to read it again to try and work it out.”

Lorenz even claims that “intensifiers seem to be losing in force and denotational meaning from the very moment of their inception” (Lorenz 2002: 145). This idea may seem a little extreme, but indicates how quickly intensifiers can shed their original meaning in favour of a more grammatical one.
As intensifiers go through this continuum of different stages, from a purely lexical meaning towards a stage of partial delexicalisation until they reach a level of complete delexicalisation, they evolve from “modal” to “intensifier” (Partington 1993: 181; Ito and Tagliamonte 2003: 261). This “modal-to-intensifier shift”, as called by Partington (1993: 181), describes how the lexical meaning of a word gradually becomes less explicit. The first stage, or “modal” use, is the first phase in which a “number of lexical items which today have an intensifying function began life with some modal semantic content, through which speakers comment on their assessment of the truth of the matter under discussion or vouch for the sincerity of their words” (Partington 1993: 181). In this early stage the future intensifier has not yet acquired a boosting function. As the word is used more often and in a larger variety of contexts, it will gradually be employed more frequently in a context in which it conveys emphasis and thus enter the next stage of delexicalisation. This is a natural process, since “all intensifying items over time tend to shed their conceptual meaning” (Lorenz 2002: 147).

2.4 Conclusion

In sum, intensifiers change quickly and can express different meanings over time. They are unusual in that they can change so frequently, due to their function to express emotions (Hopper Traugott 1993: 121). The more unexpected the intensifier in a certain context, the more expressive it is perceived to be. In this way, a certain degree of intensification can be expressed by different intensifiers. For instance, the meaning of “to a high degree” can be expressed by older forms that are completely grammaticalised, such as very, or newer and more expressive forms, such as bloody and tremendously. Hopper and Traugott refer to this “process whereby existing meanings may take on new forms” as “renewal” (1993: 121). The development of intensifiers is a good example of this renewal since this process demonstrates how older and newer layers can coexist and display different meanings over time (Hopper and Traugott 1993: 121).
CHAPTER 3  RISE OF INTENSIFIERS IN ENGLISH

Now that we have discussed the functions and semantic characteristics of intensifiers, this chapter will focus on their development and use in British and American English. Firstly, we will briefly discuss the historical development of intensifiers. Even though this thesis is above all a synchronic investigation, it is interesting to look at the origins of intensifiers in order to comprehend their entire process of grammaticalisation. As Heine and Kuteva claim, “[g]rammaticalization is a gradual step-by-step process which can be observed both in time (in the historical development of a language) and in space (in the synchronic, geographical-linguistic variation within a language)” (2008: 219). Consequently, without an understanding of how the three intensifiers under study have been used in the past, it would be difficult to interpret their current evolution and use. Labov confirms this notion and explains that “[o]ne should automatically make use of the past to interpret the present… [t]he results of such a search will show both the advantages and disadvantages of historical investigations in general” (1994: 74). After this brief diachronic exposition, we will point out which intensifiers are on the rise in English in general, as well as which intensifiers are particularly used in American and British English. This framework contributes to the contextualization of the three intensifiers under scrutiny – i.e. study very, pretty, and damn – since their development is not a purely isolated process, but an evolution that is also influenced by the rise of other intensifiers.

3.1 HISTORICAL EVOLUTION OF INTENSIFIERS

Peters observes that the “growth of the booster class during Early Modern English, and also the rate of change in the repertoire, are paralleled neither in earlier nor in later period of English” (1994: 271). Especially intensifiers based on qualitative adverbs started to be used more frequently at that time, and did mainly occur in dramatic dialogue, political and religious polemics, handbooks, instructive prose and travel magazines (Peters 1994: 271-272). These genres are consistent with our observations in 2.1.1 in that intensifiers are above all used in situations when the hearer needs to be convinced and involved, e.g. in political and religious polemics, or in expressive texts, e.g. dramatic dialogue, instructive
prose and travel magazines. Based on the examination of letters written in the fifteenth century, Peters claims that the most popular intensifiers at that time were right, wel, sore, hertily and interly (1994: 275). Interestingly, at this early stage the intensifier very was not yet commonly used in letters by adults, but did already occur in letters of the younger generations. Very, which was then still spelled as “verray”, “verrai” of verri,” was mostly used to convey the meaning of “true, “genuine” or “real” (Stoffel 1901: 29). Very was thus still at the very beginning of its process of delexicalisation, since especially right and well were commonly used as neutral modifiers of intensification (Peters 1994: 275). By the seventeenth century, however, very started to be used by older generations and in broader contexts as well (Peters 1994: 278). In this way, very gradually became more popular than right and well. The latter items did not disappear completely, but coexisted at first with very, until being pushed into the background (Ito and Tagliamonte 2003: 257). It is consequently no surprise that after a trajectory of more than 500 years, very has now finished an entire process of delexicalisation and has currently acquired a neutral meaning of intensification. After the rise of very, really was the “newcomer in the eighteenth century and thereafter very and really coexist[ed] as popular intensifiers for a long time” (Tagliamonte and Roberts 2005: 283). In 2.2.2, we will discuss how this development of really is visible in today’s intensifier use.

Further, it is not until the eighteenth century that the second intensifier under study, pretty, comes to the fore in the letters of “The Wentworth Papers”, as explained by Peters (1994: 280-281). This timing is not surprising since moderators in general started to be used more frequently from the second half of the eighteenth century onwards (Rissanen 2008: 345). Stoffel claims that pretty started to be used in the seventeenth century (1901: 148), while Ito and Tagliamonte note that pretty in its earliest form was already attested in 1565 (2003: 266), although it definitely was not very common yet at that time. In the sixteenth century, pretty was used to express “cunning” or “crafty”, then it referred to “clever” or “skillful,” and later it started to denote the property of “pleasing” or “comely” when it was placed before another adjective (Fries 1940: 201; Rissanen 2008: 354). From the sixteenth century onwards, pretty thus “tended to lose its full word meaning and become a function word of degree” (Fries 1940: 201).
The third intensifier under investigation, the taboo intensifier *damn*, did not yet occur on a regular basis in the seventeenth and eighteenth century. This tendency is not surprising since, in general, very few taboo words in general were used in written texts at that time. Peters nevertheless found a rare instance of “damn’d” in an early letter marked by a colloquial style written by Peter Wentworth in the first half of the eighteenth century (1994: 281). Still, we have to wait another two centuries before we can speak of a real development and process of grammaticalisation of this intensifier.

3.2 Compeition between English intensifiers

### 3.2.1 General remarks

Intensifiers that are very common in one variant of English, such as *very* and *pretty*, usually play an important role in other variants of English as well. The uses of intensifiers in American and British English are consequently marked by many similarities. Yet, it is interesting to examine if and which intensifiers are used differently in order to discover whether one variant of English is marked by a bigger renewal than the other. Different studies about the use of intensifiers in American or British English provide us with accounts that often may seem somewhat conflicting or contradicting. For instance, Ito and Tagliamonte claim that *really* is the second most frequently used intensifier in British English on the basis of data in York English (2003: 266). Stenström et al., in addition, observe that *really* is the most popular intensifier in British teenage talk (2002: 142), but also acknowledge that “teenagers and adults do not use exactly the same set of intensifiers; nor do they use the ones they have in common to the same extent” (2002: 141). They came to these findings on the basis of data in COLT, which is a subcorpus of the BNC that mainly contains teenage talk. Biber et al., however, argue that *really* is not one of the most popular intensifiers in British English and that this intensifier is far more frequent in American English (2000: 565). Furthermore, Murphy examined the use of intensifiers in conversations of Irish women, and observed that the intensifiers *fucking* and *fecking* are in the top four most commonly used intensifiers of the corpus under study (2010: 116), while *fucking* does not even occur in the top ten distributional analysis of the most frequently used intensifiers in the discussion of Ito and Tagliamonte on the basis of a corpus in York English (2003: 266).
Even though these observations may seem to contradict each other, they do not imply that one study is right and the other wrong. These different findings, however, illustrate that the observations with reference to intensifiers highly depend on different factors, such as the sizes of the corpora under study, the type of speech, whether spoken or written, and other sociolinguistic variables, such as gender, age and educational background. Ito and Tagliamonte, for instance, acknowledge that the “York English corpus provides an excellent site for examining language variation and locally based change in a geographical context” (2003: 267), and do not pretend to have taken the entire British English language community under scrutiny. Moreover, Biber et al. point out that

[c]onversation and academic prose have very different preferences in their choice of degree modifiers. Conversational speakers use many informal amplifiers that are avoided in academic prose; these include bloody (BrE), damn, totally, absolutely, real, and really […] which can be offensive in some contexts (2007: 211).

Yet, they also acknowledge that there are similarities since “the two most common amplifiers for both conversation and academic prose are the same: very and so (although both tend to be more common in conversation)” (Biber et al. 2007: 211). As a consequence, we need to be careful when drawing conclusions on the basis of British and American English data, since the tendencies in intensifier use appear to depend highly on the corpora that provide the data. As this thesis aims to explore general tendencies regarding intensifier use in American and British English as a whole, the corpus study is based on two large corpora that both contain approximately 100,000,000 words and cover spoken and written data of an entire language community and not one particular group. In 4.1.1, the composition of the BNC and COCA will be explained in detail.

3.2.2 TENDENCIES IN INTENSIFIER USE

After this brief discussion of the different factors influencing the use of intensifiers, the following three subchapters present the current tendencies in intensifier use. On the basis of three groupings, i.e. amplifiers\(^1\), moderators\(^2\) and taboo intensifiers, we will explain

\(^1\) The term ‘amplifiers’ refers to those intensifiers that express a high degree of a quality, as opposed to downtoners, which express a low degree, as explained in 1.1.2 (Quirk et al. 1985).

\(^2\) The term ‘moderators’ refers to the subdivision of Paradis (2008), and is similar to ‘compromisers’, as defined by Quirk et al. (1985) and Bolinger (1972) (see also 1.1.2 and 1.1.3).
which intensifiers coexist and compete with each other. The subdivision into these categories is especially interesting in view of the three intensifiers that will be discussed in the corpus study, i.e. very, pretty and damn. The distinction between the first two categories, i.e. amplifiers and moderators, is based upon a difference in scale gradation. As very and pretty are respectively good examples of these two categories, it is relevant to discuss the rise of their most important ‘competitors’ in these categories. Regarding damn, it is less interesting to simply include this intensifier in the category of amplifiers, as the peculiarity of damn lies in its original taboo meaning. The third subchapter therefore outlines the development of taboo intensifiers in general and presents a semantic categorisation of this specific type of intensifiers.

3.2.2.1 Amplifiers

Stoffel notes that very is the prototypical intensifier in Modern English” (1901: 34), while nowadays really and so are also common intensifiers (Labov 1984: 43-44). Most recent studies confirm these observations (Ito and Tagliamonte 2003; Lorenz 2002; Méndez-Naya 2008) and focus above all on the rise of really and so since very often appears to decrease in frequency, especially in the conversations of younger generations (Stenström et al. 2002; Ito and Tagliamonte 2003). In the comparison of amplifiers in British and American English, Biber et al. claim that they have “a similar profile of frequency” (2000: 564). However, they also note that “so, totally, really, and real are more common in AmE” while “bloody and absolutely are more common in BrE” (Biber et al. 2000: 564). Such observations about the rise of amplifiers other than very are interesting in view of the following corpus study, as the rise of a particular intensifier, such as so or really in American English and bloody in British English, can influence the frequency of another intensifier, such as very. In American English conversations really occurs about 600 times per million words, while in British English conversations really only occurs 350 times per million words (Biber et al. 2000: 565). This difference in frequency can function as an indication of their stage of grammaticalisation. Once really no longer refers to its modal meaning of ‘truth’ and merely functions as a grammatical item for intensification, this intensifier will start to occur more frequently and in wider contexts (Lorenz 2002: 154). Accordingly, if really becomes as widespread as very is at present, this intensifier can also become a prototypical intensifier that is used in a greater
If we now compare the number of occurrences presented by Biber et al. (2000), we could presume that the considerable difference in frequency of really in American and British English indicates a further stage of grammaticalisation of really in American English than in British English. Yet, we also need to take into account other criteria of grammaticalisation, such as the semantic type and variety of adjectives really collocates with. Notwithstanding the above-mentioned observations of Biber et al. (2000), Ito and Tagliamonte (2003) observe that really is also commonly used in British English. In their investigation of the use of intensifiers in York English, really even appears to be the second most frequently used intensifier. 38.3 per cent of all the intensifiers examined is very, while 30.2 per cent is really (Ito and Tagliamonte 2003: 266). Of course, we have to bear in mind that Ito and Tagliamonte’s research did not examine the British language community as a whole. Still, their observations indicate that really probably will start to occur more frequently in British English over time. We can thus expect that in both the BNC and COCA very will occur with a great variety of adjectives, but that it now has to compete with the rising intensifier really as well.

With regard to the use of so, Tagliamonte and Roberts observe that “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” (2005: 280). It is said that this intensifier now “has a well-established use as an intensifying adverb that modifies adjectives” (Kuha 2008: 217), and that it occurs above all in American English (Murphy 2010: 215; Tagliamonte and Roberts 2005). Stoffel already mentioned the rise of this intensifier in British English a century ago, but still referred to it as a function word “meaning ‘to a degree that is indicated by a clause introduced by as or that, or that is implied in the general meaning of the sentence’” (1901: 76). Yet, he also acknowledged the newer use of so as “an intensive demonstrative adverb” (Stoffel 1901: 76). At the beginning of the twentieth century this intensifier was thus clearly not as widespread as it is now in everyday American English, and to a lesser extent in British English (Ito and Tagliamonte 2003: 266). Ito and Tagliamonte observe that so ranks third after very and really, with a percentage of 10.1% in York English (2003: 266). If we compare these findings with the observations of Tagliamonte and Roberts (2005) on the basis of the American TV series Friends –of which it is said that it reflects the current tendencies in language change well—we see a big discrepancy in frequency of so between American and British English (Tagliamonte and Roberts 2005: 280). The intensifier
use in these series indicates that so is even about to become the most popular intensifier in spoken American English. Once the intensifier so truly “begins to collocate more and more widely, it automatically loses the independent lexical content it once had” (Partington 1993: 183), and will become very common in everyday speech.

Furthermore, other amplifiers, such as fucking and bloody, also coexist with very. As mentioned in 3.2.1, Murphy claims on the basis of spoken data that “after ‘very’, the form ‘fucking/fecking’ is the second most frequent amplifier in the corpus” (Murphy 2010: 116) and Biber also underlines the clear rise of bloody in British English conversations (2000: 564). These two intensifiers are mainly used in conversations, while more formal items, such as entirely, extremely, fully, highly, and strongly, are also quite frequent in both British and American English, but especially in academic texts (Biber et al 2000: 565).

3.2.2.2 Moderators

Similar to the category of amplifiers, there is also a range of frequently used moderators in British and American English. Paradis found, on the basis of data of the London-Lund Corpus of Spoken British English, that the most popular moderators in British English are quite, rather, pretty and fairly (1997: 37). Biber et al. (2000) came to the same conclusion as Paradis, but add nearly to this list of popular moderators. It is said that pretty is the most frequently used moderator (Tagliamonte and Roberts 2005; Méndez-Naya 2008: 217). Biber et al. note that the use of moderators in British and American English conversations is similar, except for quite and pretty (2000: 566). Pretty appears to occur four times more frequently in American English than in British English conversation, whereas quite occurs seven times more frequently in British English than in American English (Biber et al. 2000: 567). In 4.3.2 we will discuss the concrete influence of this development on pretty. Further, in the comparison of the different nuances in meaning of these four intensifiers, Paradis observes that rather, quite and pretty are all versatile and flexible towards the adjective they modify and can thus take up different meanings (Paradis 1997: 87-88). In general, rather is used with “scalar adjectives, e.g. nasty, small, careful, sad disappointed, interesting, tired, worried”, although it also combines with “potential limit adjectives, e.g. artificial, reluctant, illogical and some extreme adjectives, e.g. lovely, extraordinary, marvellous” (Paradis 1997: 87). Stoffel describes rather as a relatively neutral moderator.
meaning “to the slightest perceptible degree” (Stoffel 1901: 148). Quite, on the other hand “collocates frequently with good (15%), and it has a relatively strong link to nice, big, funny, important and long” (Paradis 1997: 87). Both quite and rather consequently have a preference for scalar adjectives. Pretty also collocates with this type of adjectives, e.g. low, heavy and interesting, and similar to rather, combines with a variety of limit adjectives, e.g. certain and unanimous, and potential extreme adjectives, e.g. horrible and desperate (Paradis 1997: 89). Yet, pretty differs from rather and quite in that it is perceived as a more informal intensifier (Paradis 1997: 89). In the corpus analysis we will examine whether these findings are consistent with our results. Finally, the fourth moderator fairly appears to differ from the three abovementioned moderators because it is a more neutral item meaning comparatively and reasonably, and it has a less strong connection with the adjectives it modifies than the other moderators (Paradis 1997: 89). Next to these four frequently used modifiers, Biber et al. also mention the use moderators that are less frequent, e.g. relatively and slightly, which are more characteristic of academic English texts than of conversations (Biber et al. 2000: 567-568).

3.2.2.3 Taboo intensifiers

While intensifiers such as really, very, pretty, and fairly are all intensifiers conveying a relatively neutral meaning of intensification, damn, bloody and fucking still have to go through different stages of delexicalisation before they can become truly neutral. It is therefore interesting to pay particular attention to the origin and evolution of this type of intensifiers. Taboo intensifiers differ from other intensifiers in that they do not only gradually acquire a meaning of intensification, but also develop a strong pragmatic function through their process of grammaticalisation. Other intensifiers also develop a pragmatic meaning and serve as a means to project one’s perspective on what is said (Athanasiadou 2008: 555), but taboo intensifiers have the capacity to express the attitude of the speaker and add emotion even more explicitly (Murphy 2010: 128). In the following sentence preference is given to fucking instead of a more neutral item, e.g. very or completely.

(14) COCA: We used to take our products to the border. We'd get there, let's say, in the evening, and we'd stay there for a day or two. Until the importers came to collect them. We saw a lot of trains pass. And you know what, they all came fucking empty, and left jam-packed! For all the times I've been there, I never seen a full train come through.
In this example *fucking* does not merely indicate that the train was *completely* empty, but also expresses the speaker’s frustration and anger. The intensifier *fucking* in this sentence no longer refers to the lexical meaning of its root *fuck*, but functions as an intensifier that is used to express the speaker’s dismay (Murphy 2010: 128-129).

Furthermore, Andersson and Trudgill (2007) attribute three main characteristics to swearing and taboo words in general. Firstly, a taboo word “[r]efers to something that is taboo/and or stigmatized in the culture”, e.g. *shit* (Andersson and Trudgill 2007: 195). Secondly, they claim that taboo terms “[s]hould not be interpreted literally”, i.e. *shit* as taboo expression does no longer literally refer to excretion, but rather expresses a general negative emotion (Andersson and Trudgill 2007: 195). This second aspect is linked to the third aspect, as this characteristic refers to the ability of taboo words “to express strong emotions and attitudes” (Andersson and Trudgill 2007: 195). If we apply this description to the word *shit*, we observe that it is indeed often used to express an emotive sense (Andersson and Trudgill 2007: 195). Napoli and Hoeksema agree with this third feature and even state that taboo terms intrinsically carry a sense of degree due to their pejorative meaning that conveys reinforcement (2009: 626). They argue that it is therefore “no surprise that some taboo terms have developed into straightforward degree adverbials with the force of intensifiers but without any pejorative sense” (2009: 626). In this respect, they consider the intensifier *damn* as a good example of such a loss of pejorative sense (2009: 626). However, it seems a little exaggerated to mark *damn* as an intensifier “without any pejorative sense” since this intensifier still carries a negative connotation and is still very uncommon in rather formal texts (Biber et al. 2000: 564).

In addition, we have to bear in mind some important remarks concerning the investigation of taboo words. First of all, it is essential to note that not all people of one language community make use of taboo intensifiers or a type of ‘bad language’ to add emotion to what is said. In 3.2.1 we already mentioned that the use of intensifiers is highly dependent on different social variables, and this comment also applies to taboo terms. Therefore, Andersson and Trudgill point out that

[i]t is an extremely hard task to compare the frequency of swearing in different cultures. No one can really be expected to have a complete knowledge of swearing even in the various layers of their own society. Even within one culture there seem to be differences in the
frequency of swearing between different groups and within one and the same group. (2007: 199)

Still, they acknowledge that this variability in use of taboo terms does not imply that it is completely impossible to give explanations for the differences in use of intensifiers as long as this complexity is taken into account (2007: 199). Secondly, Napoli and Hoeksema (2009) focus on the differences in use of taboo terms in written and spoken materials. They explain that

fixed typical corpora (such as books, magazines, newspapers) are often lacking in taboo terms and even when they do contain them, the range of both lexical items and syntactic constructions those lexical items occur in is more limited than the range we easily thought of ourselves. (Napoli and Hoeksema 2009: 613)

Biber et al. (2000) also underline the importance of such differences in use of taboo terms dependent on the type of data under study. In the comparison of damn in written and non-written sources, they observed that this intensifier is on the rise in spoken communication, while it hardly ever occurs in academic texts (Biber et al. 2000: 565). Since the corpora under investigation in the subsequent corpus study mainly consist of written data, the number of occurrences of taboo words will probably be lower than if we had analysed only spoken data. Yet, since both corpora contain more or less the same percentage of written and spoken materials, the dominance of written data will not wrongly influence our comparison of British and American English. A third element that needs to be taken into account in the investigation of taboo terms, next to the variability of language communities and the differences between spoken and written data, is that not all taboo terms are as shocking or intrusive. In general, taboo words are subdivided into three categories on the basis of their origin (Andersson and Trudgill 1992: 15). The first subgroup contains “‘dirty’ words having to do with sex and excretion, such as bugger and shit” (Andersson and Trudgill 1992: 15). The second semantic category consists of “words that have to do with the Christian religion such as Christ and Jesus,” while the third category comprises words “which are used in ‘animal abuse’ (calling a person by the name of an animal, such as bitch and cow” (Andersson and Trudgill 1992: 15). Napoli and Hoeksema agree with the first two types of Andersson and Trudgill (1992), and add another semantic group that consists of taboo words related to health (2009: 615).
In the light of the comparative aim of this thesis, it is interesting to examine how taboo intensifiers are used differently in American and British English, since different uses of this type of intensifiers can reveal interesting aspects about societal norms in general. For instance, a given taboo term can occur frequently and combine with a variety of adjectives in one variety of English, while it appears to be rather uncommon and inappropriate in another variety. Such findings can indicate that this particular intensifier is probably more intrusive in one variety than the other. As aforesaid, we should not pretend to know how all speakers of British and American English people use taboo terms. Yet, it is relevant to present general tendencies in order to contextualize the use of the taboo intensifier damn. Mencken observed in the 1920s that “[w]hen we come to words that, either intrinsically or by usage, are improper, a great many curious differences between English and American reveal themselves” (1922: 148). On the basis of his personal observations, Mencken argues that “[t]he average American [...] has a larger profane vocabulary than the average Englishman, and swears rather more, but he attempts an amelioration of many of his oaths by softening them to forms with no apparent meaning” (1921: 153). He thus highlights two important aspects in the use of taboo words in American English. On the one hand, Americans dare to use swear words more often, but on the other, they also have the tendency to render them less explicit by slightly changing them. A good example is the predilection for darn instead of damn in American English (Mencken 1922: 153). It is said that this surrogate form is used “ten thousand times in America to once in England” (Mencken 1922: 153). Mencken also examined the use of the taboo intensifier bloody. In this respect, he claims that bloody “is entirely without improper significance in America, but in England it is regarded as the vilest of indecencies” (Mencken 1922: 155). Surprisingly, Biber et al. (2000) came to an opposite conclusion at the turn of the current century. They state that bloody is more frequent in British English than in American English, i.e. about 50 times per million words in American English as opposed to 100 times in British English. This observation is based on corpus studies, while Mencken’s observations (1922) were probably based upon a much more limited set of data since no extensive corpora were available at that time. In the subsequent corpus study we will examine which one of these opposite observations is consistent with our results on the basis of the BNC and COCA.
3.3 CONCLUSION

To summarize, there are many similarities in the use of intensifiers in American and British English, but we also found some striking differences. The following table presents which intensifiers are currently on the rise these in these two varieties of English.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Intensifiers</th>
<th>British English</th>
<th>American English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Amplifiers</td>
<td>Predilection for very</td>
<td>So</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderators</td>
<td>Quite</td>
<td>Really</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taboo intensifiers</td>
<td>Bloody</td>
<td>Pretty</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

American English is marked by a rise of really and so, while this tendency is said to be less clear in British English (Biber et al. 2000; Ito and Tagliamonte 2003; Tagliamonte and Roberts 2005). In the category of moderators, Biber et al. observe a clear preference for quite in British English and pretty in American English (2000: 567). Regarding the use of taboo intensifiers, however, there is no real consensus, since the use of bloody and damn is disputed. Mencken (1922) claims that American English is marked by a higher frequency of taboo words, while Biber et al. (2000) observe a higher frequency of bloody in British English. We will consequently take into account these different viewpoints and compare them with the corpus results in the corpus analysis.
CHAPTER 4 CORPUS STUDY

4.1 METHODOLOGY

4.1.1 DATA RETRIEVAL
4.1.1.1 Corpora

This thesis discusses the use of three intensifiers on the basis of extensive corpora, namely the British National Corpus (BNC) and the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA). As we already mentioned in 3.2, intensifier use is highly dependent on different social variables, such as social and educational background, age and gender. In order to avoid that only a limited group of speakers would be taken under scrutiny instead of an entire language community, we have selected two large corpora that cover a great variety of text types and speakers. These two corpora both consist of written and spoken materials. The BNC contains about 100,000,000 words, of which one tenth is spoken and ninety per cent is text taken from written sources. These written materials can be divided into different subgenres: fictional texts, such as drama, poetry and prose, periodicals, newspapers, academic and non-academic books, essays and e-mails\(^3\). The spoken part of the BNC consists of transcriptions of both formal and informal conversations, such as classroom conversations, interviews, business meetings, demonstrations, tutorials, television programmes, radio shows, and news bulletins\(^4\). COCA also contains spoken and written materials, but is subdivided differently. In total, COCA consists of more than 425,000,000 words and is split up into five subgenres, each of which represents twenty per cent of all data. These genres include spoken materials, fictional texts, magazines, newspapers and academic materials. About one fifth of this corpus is a collection of spoken data, and eighty per cent is written. It is very important that the relation between written and spoken data in COCA does not differ too much from the subdivision in the BNC, since the use of intensifiers in speech and writing is different, with regard to both the number of intensifiers as their semantic categorisation (see also 3.2.1) (Xiao and Tao 2007: 246-247; Biber et al. 2000: 564). Xiao and Tao consequently found that “speech appears to select informal amplifiers such as really, bloody, real, terribly, dead and damn as well as general amplifiers very and quite

\(^3\) Information provided by BNC Mark Davies interface: http://www.natcorp.ox.ac.uk/corpus/index.xml?ID=intro

\(^4\) Information provided by BNC Mark Davies interface: http://www.natcorp.ox.ac.uk/corpus/index.xml?ID=intro
whereas more formal amplifiers are selected in writing” (Xiao and Tao 2007: 247). Moreover, in conversation, a smaller set of intensifiers is used more frequently, while in written data a preference is given to a wider range of less common intensifiers (Xiao and Tao 2007: 247). Accordingly, the share of spoken data in one corpus should not be considerably higher than in the other since this imbalance could give a wrong indication of the differences in intensifier use between the two varieties of English. This problem is avoided here, since in both the BNC and COCA the majority of the data are spoken materials, respectively 10 and 20 per cent.

4.1.1.2 Time frame and size

The data in the BNC were recorded between 1980 and 1993, whereas the COCA contains written and spoken materials that date from 1990 until 2011. As this thesis focuses on the process of grammaticalisation and language change, we cannot neglect the importance of such a wide time span. If we compared the two entire corpora, this corpus study would cover a time span of 21 years, containing BNC data from 1980 as well as the most recent COCA data from March 2011. Since we want to avoid that this leap in time would wrongly influence the observations and lead to an apparent bigger “renewal” in one variety of English than the other (Hopper and Traugott 1993: 121), we have chosen to delimit the time span and analyse the data in the COCA that date only from 1990 until 1994. We have thus excluded the most recent data from 1995 until 2011, since these materials could illustrate more recent tendencies in intensifier use that are mainly due to a leap in time rather than being evidence of clear geographical differences. Besides, the two corpora now have approximately the same number of data. The data taken from the COCA between 1990 and 1994 encompass 103,999,100 words, and the entire BNC contains exactly 96,985,707 words. What is more, the comparison of a similar number of words has the advantage that in the investigation of a non-frequent word or construction, a smaller corpus could give the impression that this infrequent item hardly ever or never occurs, while a much larger collection of data would probably illustrate a greater variety in use of such a word or construction. In relation to the subsequent corpus study, this aspect could be important in the examination of the taboo intensifier damn. This intensifier is not yet used.

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5 COCA corpus information amounts of spoken and written data : http://corpus.byu.edu/coca/help/texts_e.asp
6 BNC Mark Davies information http://www.natcorp.ox.ac.uk/corpus/index.xml.ID=numbers
very frequently, and it is consequently important that we compare two corpora of similar sizes.

4.1.2 Criteria

We already described the concept and stages of grammaticalisation in 2.3, but what remains to be clarified is how we can detect these stages on the basis of our corpus data. By means of different criteria we can determine to which extent the intensifiers under study are grammarized and whether this process has evolved differently in British and American English. Heine and Kuteva (2008; 2002) describe four general criteria that can be used to examine the process of grammaticalisation. These criteria encompass context generalization, desemanticization, or loss in lexical meaning (as described in 2.3.1), decategorialisation, or loss in morphosyntactic properties, and erosion, or phonetic reduction (Heine and Kuteva 2008: 219). In this thesis we focus in particular on the first two criteria since we do not examine how the intensifiers are pronounced, which is necessary to apply the criterion of phonetic reduction. Neither do we examine how the syntactic properties of the intensifiers under study have changed since we focus on degree words that premodify adjectives. Next to the two criteria of desemanticization and context generalization, which will be explained in the following subchapters, we will also compare the differences in frequency of very, pretty and damn in the two corpora.

4.1.2.1 Frequency

The more a linguistic item is grammaticalised, the more it collocates with a variety of adjectives and increases in frequency (Tagliamonte and Roberts 2005: 285). A comparison between the numbers of occurrences in different varieties of one and the same intensifier can thus provide insight into its stage of grammaticalisation. A great discrepancy in incidence between British and American English can indicate that an intensifier is more grammaticalised in one variety than the other (Lorenz 2002: 144). This quantitative criterion must however be combined with qualitative criteria since minor differences in frequency are more difficult to interpret in relation to the stage of grammaticalisation. In order to analyse the differences in frequency of the three intensifiers under study, we will make use of a list of twenty common intensifiers in British and American English, of which most intensifiers
have also been studied in other studies, and compare their relative percentages (Ito and Tagliamonte 2003; Xiao and Tao 2007; Bäcklund 1970; Paradis 1997).

4.1.2.2 Collocation with adjectives

Probably even more interesting than the frequency of intensifiers are the contexts in which they appear. In the corpus study we will take a closer look at two aspects of intensifier contexts. The first aspect is the semantic extension or context generalization of the intensifier. This use in new contexts indicates that the intensifier can be combined with a greater variety of adjectives and has thus lost its original lexical meaning and contextual restrictions (Heine and Kuteva 2008: 219; Lorenz 2002; Partington 1993). The second aspect is the degree of desemanticization or semantic bleaching, which does not only indicate whether the intensifier has adopted new meanings, but also whether it has lost its original meaning content (Heine and Kuteva 2008: 219; 2002: 2). These two aspects can be linked to each other. Partington underlines that there is “a correlation between the delexicalisation of an intensifier and its collocational behaviour” (1993: 183). He explains that “the more delexicalised an intensifier, the more widely it collocates: the greater the range and number of modifiers it combines with” (1993: 183). As a consequence, if we observe that an intensifier now modifies a type of adjective it did not collocate with before, the intensifier has spread out to new contexts and we can therefore assume that this is a strong indication of an overall increase in use and a more advanced stage of grammaticalisation (Ito and Tagliamonte 2003: 271; Méndez-Naya 2008: 217). More specifically, the “diffusion and collocation with emotional/non-emotional adjectives is a good indication of the status of an intensifier along the delexicalization path” (Méndez-Naya 2008: 217). Both Partington (1993) and Méndez-Naya (2008) refer in this context to the intensifier very to illustrate that a completely delexicalised intensifier indeed collocates widely with a great number of adjectives. Very has shed its collocational restrictions and can now be combined with a great variety of adjectives, both emotional and non-emotional (Partington 1993: 183; Méndez-Naya 2008: 217). Intensifiers ‘on the rise’, e.g. bloody, so, fucking/fecking, on the other hand, are “intimately associated with emotional contexts” (Méndez-Naya 2008: 217). The distinction between emotionally and non-emotionally charged adjectives is of crucial importance in the subsequent corpus study. This aspect of delexicalisation enables linguists to look at the context of intensifiers in order to determine whether these degree adverbs
have already entirely lost their original lexical meaning or whether they are still closely linked with a specific type of emotional adjectives. When intensifiers mostly combine with adjectives that express emotions, they have not yet reached the stage of full delexicalisation. If, however, they collocate with all types of emotional and non-emotional adjectives, such as in the example of very, they have probably reached a more advanced level of grammaticalisation.

In sum, in the corpus study, we will compare the frequency of the intensifiers in general, the type of adjectives they combine with, with regard to their “emotional” or “non-emotional” character, as well to their diversity, in order to determine the degree of grammaticalisation of the three intensifiers in British and American English. We will therefore look at the twenty most frequent collocations of very, pretty and damn. Naturally, we will take into account our previously described observations about the use of the three intensifiers in American and British English and examine whether our data are consistent with these findings.

4.2 Selection of Intensifiers: Justification

In this case study I have opted for three intensifiers from different semantic categories. As pointed out in 1.1.2, the main distinction can be made between intensives and downtoners, which respectively refer to the upper or lower part of a scale (Stoffel 1901; Fries 1940; Bolinger 1972: 17). Most scholarly attention has been attracted to intensifiers, and more specifically boosters, as “both the most rapid rate of change and the most interesting semantic developments occur in those categories” (Peters 1994: 269). The intensifier very and the taboo intensifier damn belong to this category of intensifiers. Yet, as I want to create a complete picture of the rise and grammaticalisation of intensifiers in American and British English, I have also included the investigation of the moderator pretty. Rissanen points out in his study about quickly and fairly that “[a]lthough moderators have not attracted as much attention as other intensifiers, they nevertheless offer excellent material for the study of grammaticalization” (2008: 345). Therefore, I have included pretty, since this intensifier is widely accepted in both American and British English and is now becoming more and more frequently used. Next to covering the two main subcategories, i.e.
downtoners and intensifiers, I also chose the three intensifiers in function of their different stages of grammaticalisation, as this is the departing point of this thesis. Since the degree of grammaticalisation of intensifiers is a good indicator of their change and development, it is interesting to investigate whether one and the same intensifier has gone through similar stages of grammaticalisation in different varieties of English. In the case of very, we obviously expect this intensifier to be very frequent in both the BNC and COCA. This intensifier is no longer on the rise, as opposed to pretty and damn. It is however interesting to examine the use of very since it now appears that, after its long and completed process of grammaticalisation, it is no longer always necessarily the only “intensive par excellence” (Stoffel 1901: 34) due to the rise of other intensifiers, such as really, real and so. This coexistence between different, older, and more innovative intensifiers is like a “jostling of lexical items to win the favour of speakers” (Partington 1993: 180) and leads to variation in intensifier use in different varieties of English. In addition, I opted for the intensifier pretty since it is quite common in both British and American English, although I expect to find interesting differences regarding the processes of grammaticalisation, as already elucidated in 3.2.2.2. Finally, the intensifier damn attracted my interest since there is still no real consensus about the use and rise of this intensifier. I therefore want to examine its process of grammaticalisation and taboo status in order to find out whether it is more widely accepted in American or British English.

4.3 INTENSIFIERS UNDER STUDY

The discussion of amplifiers, moderators and taboo intensifiers in 3.2.2 has revealed a number of interesting aspects concerning the competition and coexistence of different intensifiers. The subsequent subchapters, however, examine the individual developments and uses of very, pretty and damn more specifically and focus on specific characteristics, such as their frequency and collocational behaviour. These observations will serve as the guidelines in the corpus study.
4.3.1 Very

Origin and influence on the type of collocations

As we already mentioned before, very is a prototypical intensifier that has completely shed its original lexical meaning and is now used as a function word (Bolinger 1972: 18). Very can thus be considered as an “empty word” or “colourless intensive” (Stoffel 1901: 33) and combine with many different adjectives. Originally, very was “derived from Latin verus through Old French verrai and Middle English verra, all with a modal meaning of ‘tru(ly), truthfull(ly)” (Lorenz 145-146). Fries adds the lexical meanings of ‘real and ‘genuine’ (1940: 200-201). Very still occasionally expressed this meaning at the turn of the previous century (Stoffel 1901: 31), while, at present, this connotation has faded away and its “historical meaning is now completely opaque” (Lorenz 2002: 145-146). The process of delexicalisation is thus completed and very has gradually turned into a “monosemic lexeme with only degree-modifying function, which is (nearly) free from collocational restrictions, and does not depend on situational context for disambiguation” (Peters 1994: 270). As a consequence, we expect to find a wide variety of adjectival collocations with very in both British and American English, containing both emotional and non-emotional adjectives from categories scalar and non-scalar categories. However, Murphy argues that very “seems to have a negative semantic prosody” (2010: 120). In other words, she observes that notwithstanding its delexicalisation, very collocates more often with negative adjectives than adjectives denoting a positive quality. Interestingly, she found that especially younger speakers in their 20s tend to use very in negative contexts, while older people also use very in collocation with positive adjectives (2010: 121). Biber et al. (2000), however, claim that very in conversations generally collocates with positive adjectives, such as good and nice (Biber et al. 2000: 565-566).

Frequency

Regarding the frequency of very, it goes without saying that this intensifier will occur prominently in our corpus results due to its wide acceptability. A lower frequency of very in one variety consequently does not imply that very is still on the rise, but indicates that it coexists with other intensifiers that express more or less the same degree of intensification. These newer items can replace very in certain contexts and lead to a decrease in frequency
of this intensifier. As we mentioned in 3.1.2.1, so and really are also in an advanced stage of grammaticalisation, but are not yet completely grammaticalised and still add more expressivity to what is being said (see also 2.1). According to the observations of Biber et al. on the basis of spoken data, it is said that so occurs about 600 times per million in British English conversations, while American English is marked by a higher frequency of approximately 900 occurrences per million words (Biber et al. 2000: 565). Concerning really, Biber et al. found that this intensifier occurs approximately 350 times per million words in British English conversation, while in American English this intensifier is almost twice as frequent with a frequency of 600 occurrences per million words (2000: 565). Very, on the other hand, is said to be less frequent in American English conversations than in British English conversations with 750 as opposed to 900 occurrences per million words (Biber et al. 2000: 565). On the basis of their observations, we see that so even occurs more frequently than very in American English conversations (900 times as opposed to 600 times). In British English, however, this proportion is reversed, as very occurs about 800 times per million words and so 600 times. In the long term, it thus appears that very will start to decrease in favour of the rising so, in the same way as very at first coexisted with right, full, and well in Early Modern English in the fifteenth and sixteenth century (Stoffel 1901: 34; Bolinger 1972: 18) before replacing these ‘older’ items. In a recent study of intensifier use in New Zealand English in primary schools, very already “appears to be a relatively infrequent booster” (Bauer and Bauer 2002: 250). The following question therefore arises: will this development spread towards American and British English as well? We however need to pay specific attention to the type of data under scrutiny. Biber et al. found that very is less popular than so in American English on the basis of spoken conversations, which generally display a different pattern of intensifier use than written data, as explained in 3.1.1. The study of Bauer and Bauer (2002) on the basis of New Zealand English, in addition, was also mainly based on spoken data. As a consequence, their observations are not necessarily entirely similar to our corpus results, but are nevertheless interesting observations and good indications of how very can evolve in the long term.

Relevant questions

In view of these observations, the following questions are especially interesting for our corpus study.
- What is the relative frequency of very, so and really and do we see a clear link between these different numbers of occurrences and the use of very?
- Are the observations of the aforementioned studies in line with our corpus results and will we consequently also find a decrease in use of very in American English?

4.3.2 PRETTY

Origin and influence on the type of collocations

As described in 3.1, pretty originally meant ‘cunning’ or ‘crafty’, and in a later stage it evolved towards a more positive meaning of ‘clever’ and ‘skillful’ (Rissanen 2008: 345; Fries 1904: 201). Fries claims that after this stage, its meaning changed into ‘pleasing’ and ‘comely’ (1940: 201), whereas Rissanen notes that pretty started to express ‘handsome’, ‘shapely’ and later ‘fair-sized, considerable, great’ (2008: 345). In spite of these nuances in meaning, we can say that pretty as an adjective gradually acquired a more positive connotation before it started to take up the function of a degree modifier. Yet, Bäcklund observes that the current meaning of pretty not necessarily originated in the meaning of the adjective pretty meaning ‘moderately’ (1970: 147). He explains that “in the function of a modifier pretty has probably originated in collocation with another adjective, for example: a pretty young girl” (1970: 147). He thus attributes the delexicalisation of pretty to the word pattern and explains that

[a]t first it was juxtaposed exclusively with adjectives with related semantic notions, but as it was increasingly felt to be merely a function word, losing its own semantic force, it came to be used as a modifier of heads with a content different from that of the original adjective pretty.” (Bäcklund 1970: 147)

Notwithstanding the loss of its collocational limitations, Stoffel states that pretty is generally combined with positive adjectives (Stoffel 1901: 152). According to his observations, pretty “is very rarely employed before adjectives and adverbs expressing unfavourable or negative ideas” (1901: 152). Quirk et al., however, also examined the collocations of pretty, and claim that this intensifier “can be used with both favourable and unfavourable import: pretty clean/dirty” (1985: 446). In addition, Paradis found that pretty not only combines with positive adjectives, but also with bad, expensive, slow, tough and hard (1997: 86). Both Paradis and Quirk et al. made these observations at the turn of the current century, while
Stoffel discussed the use of *pretty* almost one century ago. As a consequence, it is possible that due to this leap in time *pretty* has now lost even more of its original meaning and therefore combines with a greater variety of adjectives.

**Frequency**

As described in 3.2.2.2, Biber et al. note that the use of moderators is similar in British and American English conversation, except for *quite* and *pretty* (2000: 566). The latter is a lot more frequent in American English conversations, in which it generally occurs 400 times per million words, as opposed to 100 times per million words in British English (2000: 567). In British English preference is given to *quite*, which occurs 350 times per million, while this intensifier only occurs 50 times in American English conversation (Biber et al. 2000: 567). Moreover, it is said that “[c]onsidering the dialect difference with respect to *quite* and *pretty*, many of the same collocates that occur with *quite* in BrE conversation occur with *pretty* in AmE conversation: bad, big, cheap, easy, expensive, funny, high, interesting” (Biber et al. 2000: 567). This collocational development is particularly interesting in the light of the on-going grammaticalisation, since similar collocational patterns could indicate that *pretty* in American English is as grammaticalised as *quite* in British English. Regarding the stage of grammaticalisation of *pretty*, it is said that it occurs in wider contexts than for instance *fairly*, but still has not reached a complete stage of grammaticalisation (Nevalainen and Rissanen 2002: 377). In the 1970s, Bolinger argued that *pretty* was “more or less grammaticized” (1972: 22), while Méndez-Naya currently considers *pretty* one of the “emerging new favourites among the youngest generations of males and females, respectively” (2008: 217). As the semantic extension (see also 1.4) and collocational behaviour are good indicators of the stage of grammaticalisation, we can presume that *quite* in British English conversations is as grammaticalised as *pretty* in American English conversations.

**Relevant questions**

- Which types of collocations are most frequent?
- What are the new emerging favourite moderators in British and American English, and how do they influence the frequency of *pretty*?
4.3.3. DAMN

Origin and influence on the type of collocations

Damn is a taboo intensifier originally meaning “accursed” or “condemned” (Fries 1940: 203). According to Andersson and Trudgill’s categorisation of taboo words, it thus belongs to the second semantic category linked to religion, as described in 3.2.2.3 (1992: 15). However, they point out that it can also be derived from dam, meaning animal mother, although this origin is less widely accepted (Andersson and Trudgill 1992: 15). Damn does no longer literally refer to one of the above meanings, but is now used as a pragmatic marker expressing a certain attitude towards what is being said (Murphy 2010: 128). Biber et al. explain that damn is often perceived as intrusive (2007: 211), although it is generally considered as a less strong expression than other taboo intensifiers such as fucking due to its more advanced stage of delexicalisation (Napoli and Hoeksema 2009: 614). Nevertheless, damn clearly has not yet shed all of its negative implications. As a consequence, this intensifier will probably collocate more frequently with negative than with positive adjectives. Unlike very, damn still displays different stages of grammaticalisation in different varieties of English. It is therefore interesting to compare the type of adjectives it collocates with in British and American English. Biber et al. state that damn occurs as frequently in British as American conversation (2000: 565). In the next subchapter, we will compare whether this observation is consistent with our corpus results or whether our data are rather in line with the notion that Americans tend to use taboo terms more often than British English speakers (Mencken 1922: 153, 155).

Frequency

Mencken points out that Americans often use darn instead of damn in order to disguise the original lexical root of this taboo word, and that this form even occurs ten thousand times more frequently in American English than in British English (1922: 153). Therefore, I have also included this term in the frequency list in order to compare its use in British and American English and to find out whether this form has an influence on the use of damn. Moreover, it is interesting to observe the use of such a substitute form, as it displays a remarkable tendency. On the one hand, one dares to use taboo terms and thereby
gives the impression that such words are widely accepted, while on the other, the real form is left out as if this word is still very offensive and tabooed.

Relevant questions

- Is there any difference with regard to the adjectival collocations of *damn* between British and American English?
- Can we draw general conclusions on the use of taboo intensifiers, or are the different taboo terms, i.e. *fucking, bloody* and *damn*, marked by different patterns of use in British and American English?
4.4 CORPUS RESULTS

4.4.1 QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Intensifier</th>
<th>BNC</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>COCA</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very</td>
<td>79717</td>
<td>42.43</td>
<td>72371</td>
<td>42.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totally</td>
<td>3318</td>
<td>1.77</td>
<td>2667</td>
<td>1.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Really</td>
<td>8175</td>
<td>4.35</td>
<td>8145</td>
<td>4.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Real</td>
<td>1687</td>
<td>0.90</td>
<td>4761</td>
<td>2.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>So</td>
<td>32144</td>
<td>17.11</td>
<td>37740</td>
<td>22.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Absolutely</td>
<td>2994</td>
<td>1.59</td>
<td>2587</td>
<td>1.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highly</td>
<td>6545</td>
<td>3.48</td>
<td>5658</td>
<td>3.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entirely</td>
<td>2851</td>
<td>1.52</td>
<td>2019</td>
<td>1.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Completely</td>
<td>3303</td>
<td>1.76</td>
<td>2647</td>
<td>1.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extremely</td>
<td>5948</td>
<td>3.17</td>
<td>4742</td>
<td>2.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rather</td>
<td>8676</td>
<td>4.62</td>
<td>3903</td>
<td>2.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pretty</td>
<td>3925</td>
<td>2.09</td>
<td>7230</td>
<td>4.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quite</td>
<td>18700</td>
<td>9.95</td>
<td>8146</td>
<td>4.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fairly</td>
<td>4661</td>
<td>2.48</td>
<td>2836</td>
<td>1.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nearly</td>
<td>730</td>
<td>0.39</td>
<td>1983</td>
<td>1.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat</td>
<td>2569</td>
<td>1.37</td>
<td>2952</td>
<td>1.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bloody</td>
<td>1225</td>
<td>0.65</td>
<td>196</td>
<td>0.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Damn</td>
<td>277</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>466</td>
<td>0.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Darn</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>0.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fucking</td>
<td>434</td>
<td>0.23</td>
<td>165</td>
<td>0.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>187,897</td>
<td></td>
<td>171,829</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: Frequency of different intensifiers in the BNC and COCA.

1. Very

In line with the observations described in 3.1.2.1, *very* is indeed the most frequent intensifier and coexists with *so* and *really*. However, the difference in frequency of *very* between the BNC and COCA is less outspoken as claimed by Biber et al. (2000) on the basis of spoken data. According to their observations, *very* in a premodifying adjective function is more typical of British English than American English. In the BNC *very* occurs 79,717 times, while the COCA contains 72,371 occurrences of this intensifier in a premodifying adjective position. These numbers indicate that *very* is more frequent in British English, although the difference is not remarkable. Moreover, in terms of their relative percentage compared to other intensifiers, *very* represents approximately 42% of all intensifiers in both the BNC and the COCA. In this respect, the difference between the British and American corpus is not really significant. This discrepancy between our findings and the observations of Quirk et al.
Wittouck (2000) may be due to the majority of written texts under study in this corpus investigation, since very tends to be more commonly used in written texts than in conversations. Regarding the other amplifiers that coexist with very (see also 3.2.2.1), we observe that the COCA counts 37,740 occurrences of so, or 22.03% of all intensifiers that figure in the above list, whereas this number is lower in the BNC, namely 32,144 or 17.11%. This higher frequency of so in American English confirms our hypothesis based on the observations of Tagliamonte and Roberts (2005) and Ito and Tagliamonte (2003), since they claimed that so is now on the rise in American English, while this tendency is less clear in British English. Regarding the intensifier really, we observe that its percentage is rather low and very similar in the two varieties, i.e. 8175 occurrences, or 4.35%, in the BNC and 8145, or 4.75%, in the COCA. The use of real, however, displays a difference between the BNC and COCA, which is consistent with the observations of Biber et al. (2000). In COCA, the intensifier real occurs almost three times more frequently than in the BNC, namely 4,761 compared to 1,687 occurrences. As a consequence, since both real and so occur more frequently in the COCA, we expect other intensifiers to be more frequent in the BNC. From the above list we can deduce that highly, extremely, absolutely, entirely and completely all occur more frequently in British than in American English. Overall, we can thus say that the BNC is marked by a lower frequency of intensifiers that are on the rise, such as real and so. Nonetheless, this corpus displays a slightly higher frequency of intensifiers that tend to be less colloquial and more formal, such as entirely, absolutely and highly.

2. Pretty

In regards to pretty and its coexistence with other moderators, we observe more outspoken differences between the BNC and COCA than in the comparison of very. Pretty is almost twice as frequent in COCA as in the BNC, and occurs respectively 7,230 compared to 3,925 times. Quite shows an opposite tendency, and is far more frequent in the BNC, in which it occurs 18,700 times, while in the COCA only 8146 occurrences of this moderator are documented. These observations are consistent with Quirk et al.’s conclusions to which we referred in 4.3.2. As a consequence, quite is the most popular moderator in BNC, while in COCA both quite (8146) and pretty are common (7230). In addition, fairly is more frequent in the British English corpus with 4,661 occurrences or 2.48% of all intensifiers, while this
intensifier occurs less frequently in American English, namely 2836 times or 1.65%. The third moderator that coexists and competes with pretty is rather. This intensifier appears to be twice as frequent in the BNC as in the COCA, i.e. 8976 as opposed to 3903 times. Nearly, on the other hand, occurs almost three times as frequently in COCA as in the BNC, i.e. 1983 as opposed to 730 times. Considering the different moderators, we observe that the difference in use between the BNC and COCA is more striking than in the comparison of the amplifiers that co-occur with very. Of the different moderators that we discussed, pretty is the most informal one (see also 3.2.2.2) and occurs more frequently in the COCA than in the BNC. Both fairly and quite, on the other hand, occur twice as frequently in the BNC as in the COCA.

3. DAMN

The comparison of fucking, bloody and damn illustrates a clear difference in use between different taboo intensifiers in British and American English. Clearly, damn is much more frequent in the COCA than in the BNC, respectively 466 compared to 277 times. In terms of percentage, damn even occurs twice as frequently in the American corpus (0.27%) as in the British corpus (0.15%). With regard to the substitute form darn, the difference is even more striking, since the BNC contains only 18 occurrences of this form, while in the COCA darn occurs no less than 94 times. This finding clearly confirms Mencken’s assumption that darn is far more frequent in America compared to England (1922: 153). In contrast, the intensifier bloody, which is also derived from a taboo word, occurs six times more frequently in the BNC than in COCA, i.e. 1225 times compared to only 196 occurrences in the COCA. It is remarkable that these results are completely consistent with the observations of Biber et al. (2000) based on spoken data, since such data usually display a higher frequency of taboo words than written materials. Moreover, regarding the frequency of fucking, it is again the British corpus that is marked by a higher number of occurrences, namely 434, while fucking as an adjective premodifier only occurs 165 times in the COCA.

4.4.2 Qualitative Analysis

As we already mentioned in 4.1, in order to really interpret the frequency of the different intensifiers in view of their stage of grammaticalisation, it is necessary to also
examine the semantic collocations and the contexts in which the intensifiers occur. By means of the following three tables, which display the twenty most frequently modified adjectives by *very*, *damn* and *pretty* in the BNC and COCA, we aim to gain a better insight into their collocational patterns and different stages of grammaticalisation in British and American English.

1. **Very**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>BNC</th>
<th>Premodified adjective</th>
<th>Total number of occurrences out of 79,717</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>COCA</th>
<th>Premodified adjective</th>
<th>Total number of occurrences out of 72,371</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Good</td>
<td>4777</td>
<td>6.60</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Good</td>
<td>3942</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Different</td>
<td>2346</td>
<td>3.24</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Important</td>
<td>3010</td>
<td>4.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Important</td>
<td>2155</td>
<td>2.98</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Difficult</td>
<td>2429</td>
<td>3.36</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Difficult</td>
<td>2052</td>
<td>2.84</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Different</td>
<td>1856</td>
<td>2.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Small</td>
<td>1550</td>
<td>2.14</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Hard</td>
<td>1230</td>
<td>1.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Nice</td>
<td>1419</td>
<td>1.96</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Strong</td>
<td>1156</td>
<td>1.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>1358</td>
<td>1.88</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>1113</td>
<td>1.54</td>
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<td>8</td>
<td>Large</td>
<td>1352</td>
<td>1.87</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Close</td>
<td>1077</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Similar</td>
<td>915</td>
<td>1.26</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Small</td>
<td>1002</td>
<td>1.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Long</td>
<td>857</td>
<td>1.18</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Serious</td>
<td>857</td>
<td>0.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>842</td>
<td>1.16</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Large</td>
<td>854</td>
<td>0.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Hard</td>
<td>824</td>
<td>1.14</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Nice</td>
<td>773</td>
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<td>14</td>
<td>Strong</td>
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<td>1.17</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>Interesting</td>
<td>757</td>
<td>1.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Happy</td>
<td>730</td>
<td>1.01</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>696</td>
<td>0.96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Useful</td>
<td>711</td>
<td>0.98</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Happy</td>
<td>691</td>
<td>0.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Interesting</td>
<td>628</td>
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<td>20</td>
<td>Tough</td>
<td>527</td>
<td>0.72</td>
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Table 4: Adjectival collocations with *very* in the BNC and COCA

From the above list of adjectival collocations with *very*, we can deduce that this prototypical intensifier indeed combines with a wide range of different adjectives, i.e. 3626 in the BNC and 3824 in COCA. This great diversity clearly indicates that *very* has lost its collocational restrictions in both varieties. All premodified adjectives have a relatively small low frequency in terms of percentage, which demonstrates that *very* is not combined with one adjective in particular, but that this intensifier is widely accepted and used. Such a wide semantic extension is typical of an intensifier that purely has a degree-modifying function and no
longer expresses its original meaning, as explained in 1.4. The adjectives that collocate with *very* consequently belong to different semantic categories. Regarding the distinction between emotional and non-emotional adjectives, we observe that among the twenty most popular adjectival collocations listed above, there are mostly non-emotional adjectives due to the neutral meaning of intensification of *very*. Popular categories of adjectives in collocation with *very* are scalar adjectives that indicate a certain quantity, size and age, such as *small, high, large, close, long, short* and *young*. What is more, regarding the positive or negative semantic prosody (see 4.3.1), as it was called by Murphy (2010: 120), it appears that *very* in both varieties has no outspoken preference for negative adjectives. The corpus results tend to be more consistent with the observations of Quirk et al. who claimed that *very* typically combines with positive adjectives in conversation (2000: 565-566). In both the BNC and the COCA, we find several positive adjectives in the twenty most frequent collocations, e.g. *good, important, nice, interesting*, and *happy*. In the BNC we observe fewer collocations with negative adjectives than in the COCA. For instance, in the COCA we find 1230 occurrences of *hard*, the most frequently modified negative adjective in both corpora, while only 824 occurrences are attested in collocation with *very* in the BNC. Moreover, in the COCA, two clearly negative adjectives, i.e. *bad* and *tough*, occur in the top twenty modified adjectives, while these adjectives do not figure in the BNC list. On the basis of these observations, we could thus tentatively say that in the COCA *very* has a slightly bigger negative semantic prosody, although most adjectives are positive or neutral, e.g. *close, similar* and *different*.

### 2. Pretty

<table>
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<th>%</th>
<th>COCA</th>
<th>Premodified adjective</th>
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Table 5: Adjectival collocations with *pretty* in the BNC and COCA

With regard to the number of different adjectives collocating with *pretty*, COCA displays a greater variety than the BNC, i.e. 1180 different adjectives compared to 1072. In collocation with *pretty*, the adjective *good* again appears to be the most frequently modified adjective in both the BNC and COCA, as it was also the case with *very*. However, in collocation with *pretty*, *good* appears to be much more frequent than in collocation with *very* in terms of percentage, i.e. *pretty good* represents 12.35% of the collocations with *pretty* in the BNC and 21.85% in the COCA, while *very* collocates with *good* in 6.60% of all collocations in the BNC and 5.45% in the COCA. This discrepancy indicates that *very* collocates with a very wide range of other adjectives, while *pretty* is not yet that widespread. Moreover, a comparison of the collocations with *pretty* illustrates that fewer adjectives denote a negative connotation in the BNC than in COCA. As we noted in 4.3.2, Stoffel claimed at the turn of the century that *pretty* was mostly associated with adjectives denoting a positive quality (1901: 147), while Quirk et al. associate *pretty* with both negative and positive adjectives (1985: 446). We have already discussed that the more *pretty* combines with both positive and negative adjectives, the more this intensifier tends to be grammaticalised due to the gradual loss of its original positive connotation. In the comparison of our results, we observe that in the top twenty of the adjectival collocations with *pretty* in the BNC seven adjectives are positively connotated, e.g. *good, well* and *impressive*, six adjectives have a clear negative connotation, such as *bad, poor, awful, tough, and boring*, and seven are rather neutral, e.g. *certain, obvious, close, busy, clear* and *sure*. In the COCA, on the other hand, eight adjectives are positive, e.g. *good, nice, easy, cool, simple* and *smart*, four adjectives have a negative connotation, e.g. *bad, hard, tough* and rough, and eight others are neutral, e.g. close, sure and obvious. We thus see a similar variation in the two corpora, although some negative...
adjectives, such as bad (2.66%), hard (1.60%) and tough (1.56%), have a higher relative percentage in the COCA than in the BNC, in which these adjectives respectively occur in 1.38%, 0.87% and 0.71% of all adjectival collocations with pretty. The comparison of the twenty most frequent collocations with pretty in the BNC and COCA illustrates that 14.76% of the collocations in the BNC and 14.60% of the collocations in COCA are clearly negative, while 40.38% in the BNC and 59.37% are the COCA are positive. Therefore, we can conclude that, surprisingly, in the COCA there is a greater preference for collocations with positive adjectives than in the BNC, although the higher frequency and greater variation in adjectives in the COCA would suggest that pretty is more grammaticalised in the COCA than in the BNC.

3. **Damn**

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<th>COCA</th>
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</table>

Table 6: Adjectival collocations with damn in the BNC and COCA

As we already observed in the discussion of the quantitative results, it is striking that damn occurs more than twice as frequently in the COCA as in the BNC, i.e. 466 compared to 277 times. Moreover, damn collocates in the COCA with 179 different adjectives, and is
therefore a lot more widespread than in the BNC, in which only 88 different adjectives are premodified by *damn*. In the top twenty collocations of the COCA, *damn* combines with ten positive adjectives, such as *good, fine, lucky, glad, smart*, and *proud*, three negative adjectives, e.g. *bad, dumb* and *hard* and seven more neutral adjectives, e.g. *long* and *close*. In the BNC, on the other hand, we encounter seven positive adjectives in collocation with *damn*, e.g. *good, great, fine, lucky* and *nice*, but a lot more obviously negative ones, e.g. *silly, stupid, patronising/patronizing, boring, poor, rude* and *awkward*. These different types of collocations, as well as the lower frequency and the fewer adjectives that combine with *damn* in the BNC, indicate that this intensifier is clearly less grammaticalised in the BNC than in the COCA.

4.5 DISCUSSION

1) Research Question 1

*Do very, pretty and damn have a similar degree of grammaticalisation in American and British English?*

Fully in line with our expectations, we found *very* to be a prototypical intensifier that has lost its lexical meaning in favour of a purely grammatical one. The question that arose was not in which variety of English *very* had reached a more advanced stage of grammaticalisation, but rather whether this intensifier was receding more obviously in one variety than the other due to the rise of other intensifiers. Our results demonstrated that *very* in both the BNC and the COCA combines widely with a great range of different adjectives. What is more, *very* appears to occur in 42% of all the intensifiers that were examined in the above lists in both the BNC and COCA. This similar pattern in the two corpora is striking in view of the observations made by different authors (Biber et al. 2000, Tagliamonte and Roberts 2005; Stenström et al. 2002; Murphy 2010), who all discussed the rise of other intensifiers at the expense of *very* in American English. Of course, we have to bear in mind that our data are not only based on TV series or conversations of youngsters, as it is the case in the research of Tagliamonte and Roberts (2005) and Stenström et al. (2000). Our data, however, encompass texts and conversations that are produced by a bigger group
of speakers, and indicate that, in general, the use of the intensifier very is quite similar in British and American English. Therefore, we should be tentative when overgeneralizing the findings in these abovementioned studies. They are interesting studies to indicate tendencies that might become apparent in the foreseeable future, but the data we examined do not really provide evidence for this development. Of course, our most recent data were recorded in 1994, and it is possible that in the meantime a gradual shift between intensifiers has taken place, but probably not to such extent that the use of intensifiers is now completely different from how they were used fifteen years ago.

With regard to the intensifier pretty, we did find evidence for a different process of grammaticalisation in British and American English. According to Biber et al., pretty is far more frequent in American English than in British English conversations, i.e. about 400 times as opposed to 100 times (2000: 567). This hypothesis is confirmed by our findings. At first, we observed that the frequency of pretty in the COCA is almost twice as high (7230) as in the BNC (3925), which is a first indication of the more prominent role of pretty in American English than in British English. Secondly, the number of different adjectives that are premodified by pretty in American English was also higher in the COCA (1180) than in the BNC (1072), which again illustrates a greater loss in semantic context of pretty in American English. The third point that attracted our attention was the type of collocations pretty collocates with and the distinction between positive and negative adjectives. As we noted in 4.3.2, Stoffel claimed at the turn of the previous century that pretty was mostly associated with adjectives denoting a positive quality (1901: 147), while Quirk et al. associate pretty with “both favourable and unfavourable import” (1985: 446). Due to the original meaning of pretty, we have discussed that the more pretty combines with negative adjectives, the more this intensifier tends to be grammaticalised. In the comparison of our results, we found more negative adjectives in collocation with pretty in the BNC than in the COCA, although we would expect to find fewer negative adjectival collocations with pretty in the BNC due to its lower frequency and smaller variety of different collocations. What is more, in the comparison of the overall percentage of negative and positive adjectives in the top twenty of collocations with pretty, we observed a higher percentage of positive collocations in the COCA (59.37%) than in the BNC (40.38%), which indicates that we should not consider the observations about the frequency and number of different adjectives as solid evidence for the stage of grammaticalisation of a particular intensifier. Even so, we can say that pretty is
obviously more frequently used in premodifying adjective position in the COCA than in the BNC. Yet, it preferably combines with positive adjectives, which indicates that pretty is clearly not yet a ‘neutral’ moderator and has not yet completed the process of grammaticalisation, but still retains some of its original positive connotation. Regarding the use of pretty in the BNC, we can say that although it is less widespread in this variety than in American English, it collocates widely and does not purely occur in combination with positive adjectives, but also with a considerable number of negative adjectives. This collocational behaviour indicates that pretty is also on its way to become more and more grammaticalised, but is not yet in the same stage of grammaticalisation as pretty in American English.

In the comparison of the taboo intensifier damn, we see a clear distinction in use and grammaticalisation between American and British English, compared to the two other intensifiers under scrutiny. Firstly, damn appears to be a lot more frequent in the COCA and to combine with more than twice as many different adjectives in the COCA than in the BNC. This observation is consistent with Mencken’s observation in that he claims that Americans, in general, tend to use taboo terms more often than British English speakers (1922: 153). What is more, we clearly observe that the COCA is marked by fewer negative connotations with damn than in the BNC. As we mentioned in 4.4.2, there are more explicitly negative adjectives, such as stupid, silly, patronising/patronizing and rude that collocate with damn in the BNC, while we do not find such adjectives in the top twenty of collocations with damn in the COCA. On the basis of these observations, we can conclude that damn is clearly more grammaticalised in American English than in British English. This observation is in line with Mencken’s viewpoint, but is also somewhat surprising since Biber et al. (2000) did not observe a clear difference in frequency with regard to the use of damn in British and American English conversations. In addition, they pointed out that another taboo intensifier, i.e. bloody, is more frequent in British English than in American English conversation, which is confirmed by our observations on the basis of the BNC and COCA. Therefore, these differences in frequency of the intensifiers bloody and damn between the BNC and the COCA suggest that we should not consider all taboo intensifiers as one homogenous group with a similar type of grammaticalisation and degree of acceptability in different varieties of English. In order to fully understand the development of different taboo intensifiers we
should thus examine a much wider range of taboo words and investigate in which variety of English they are most frequently used.

2) RESEARCH QUESTION 2

With regard to the stages of grammaticalisation of the intensifiers under study, which intensifiers are on the rise, and in which language variety do we observe the biggest renewal?

As we already pointed out in 2.4, Hopper and Traugott describe renewal as the “process whereby existing meanings may take on new forms” (1993: 121). In the context of intensifiers, we explained that this process implies that newer intensifiers compete with older forms that express approximately the same degree of intensification. Over time, these older intensifiers can become inadequate to express the right emotion or intensification and fade into the background or become replaced by newer and more expressive intensifiers (Stoffel 1901: 2).

The difference between the stages of grammaticalisation of very in British and American English appears to be less outspoken than we expected on the basis of the literature study. Tagliamonte and Roberts claim that so is about to become the most popular intensifier in American English and that it even usurps other intensifiers, such as really and very (2005: 280). On the basis of our findings in the COCA we observe that very is not necessarily replaced by real and so, but that it rather coexists with these newer forms. This finding is consistent with the notion of Hopper and Traugott who claim that “[r]ather than replace a lost or almost lost distinction, newly innovated forms compete with older ones because they are felt to be more expressive than what was available before” (1993: 123). In this way, the rise of real and so in American English does not necessarily lead to the immediate loss of very, but illustrates how new forms coexist and compete with an existing form. In the comparison of the number of occurrences of the newer intensifiers that compete with very, i.e. real, really and so, in 4.4.1, we observed that really and so have a higher frequency in the COCA than in the BNC. With regard to the intensifier really, however, the difference is not really striking since this intensifier has a similar percentage in the two
corpora, i.e. 4.35% in the BNC and 4.75% in the COCA. On the basis of this comparison, we can argue that, even though *very* is not yet fully replaced by *real* and *so*, we see a more obvious tendency towards renewal in American English than British English due to the more apparent rise of these newer forms that coexist with *very*.

In the comparison of the rise of different moderators, i.e. *pretty*, *quite*, *rather* and *fairly*, it is more complex to examine whether American or British English is marked by a bigger renewal, since the ‘novelty’ of one particular moderator is less outspoken than in the comparison of *very* and *so*. Nevertheless, Stoffel points out that “*pretty* as an adverb of degree before adjectives and adverbs [...] is somewhat older than *rather*” (1901: 147-148). Rissanen and Nevalainen, in addition, note that “[*fairly* is very recent as a downtoning moderator while this use of *pretty* goes back to earlier times” (2002: 377). On the basis of these two observations we could thus argue that *pretty* as a moderator is less ‘novel’ than *fairly* and *rather*. If we apply these insights to our corpus results, we observe that the BNC is marked by a higher frequency of *fairly* than the COCA (4661 occurrences compared to 2836) and this observation also applies to *rather*, which is more than twice as frequent in the BNC (8676) than in the COCA (3903). *Pretty*, however, appears to occur almost twice more frequently in the COCA (7230) than in the BNC (3925). Therefore, speakers of British English appear to use ‘newer’ moderators more often than American English speakers, who prefer the older form *pretty* to express the meaning ‘to a moderate degree’. This finding is remarkable since we found an opposite tendency with regard to the use of amplifiers, where American English proved to be marked by a more frequent use of newer forms, such as *so* and *real*.

Finally, the intensifier *damn* appears to be a good indicator of how one and the same word can be grammaticalised differently in different varieties of English as this intensifier is quite commonly used in the COCA, while it is less frequent in the BNC, i.e. 466 compared to 277 occurrences. As we mentioned in 4.4.2, *damn* collocates with more positive adjectives in the COCA than in the BNC despite its negative original meaning, which indicates that it more clearly ‘on the rise’ in American English than in British English. Since *damn* is obviously an intensifier that is used to add expression when other intensifiers appear to have become “inadequate” to do so (Stoffel 1901: 2), we can conclude that it contributes to the novelty and renewal of American English.
To summarize, we have observed that American English is marked by a bigger renewal on the basis of the comparison of the intensifiers *damn* and *very* in American and British English. With regard to the category of amplifiers, we noticed that in American English preference is given to the newer forms *real* and *so* at the expense of the older form *very*, while this tendency is less clear in British English. Moreover, in the comparison of the use of *damn*, we observed that this new form of intensification is further grammaticalised and more frequently used in American English and therefore contributes to the renewal in this variety of English. However, the use of moderators illustrated a reversed tendency since speakers of American English appear to prefer an older form, e.g. *pretty*, to express 'to a moderate degree' while in British English newer forms, e.g. *fairly* and *rather*, are more frequent. This finding highlights that the general conclusion drawn here, i.e. that American English is marked by greater renewal, has to be treated cautiously. After all, the case of *pretty* demonstrates how not all intensifiers behave in the same way. Further research, including more intensifiers, has to point out whether the general conclusion holds for the majority of other intensifiers.
CONCLUSION

At the outset of this research, two research questions were formulated. First of all, we wanted to know whether very, pretty and damn have a similar degree of grammaticalisation in American and British English. Secondly, we wanted to investigate which of these intensifiers can be said to be on the rise, and in which language variety the biggest renewal can be observed. In order to really comprehend the meaning and development of intensifiers, the concept of intensification and the various viewpoints towards the different types of intensifiers were elucidated in the first chapter. The second chapter discussed the function and variability of intensifiers and why new intensifiers compete with older forms. In order to explain this evolution, we elaborated on the process of grammaticalisation and how we would approach this concept from a semantic perspective. Chapter 3 discussed the rise and coexistence of different types of intensifiers with reference to very, pretty and damn. In this way, we created a general framework before examining our corpus results on the basis of the BNC and COCA in chapter 4.

With regard to the first research question, the conducted corpus research yielded the conclusion that there is indeed a different pattern of grammaticalisation in British and in American English, although this observation does not apply to all intensifiers. We found that very is still the most frequently used intensifier in both American and British English, although other intensifiers, such as really and so, are on the rise, and above all in American English. Further, it appeared that pretty was especially frequent in American English, although its pattern of collocations was not consistent with its high frequency, while in British English pretty appeared to be less frequent, but further grammaticalised with regard to its collocational behaviour. Finally, damn was the most obvious illustration of how an intensifier can be grammaticalised differently in two varieties of English, as this intensifier displayed a clear difference in frequency and collocational behaviour in British and American English. Surprisingly, other taboo intensifiers, such as fucking and bloody, illustrated an opposite tendency. Therefore, we argued that we should not consider all taboo intensifiers as one homogenous group, but as different expressive intensifiers with individual histories of grammaticalisation.
For the second research question, it was found that American English is marked by a bigger renewal than British English on the basis of the use of the intensifiers *very* and *damn*, although this tendency was not confirmed by the category of moderators. As a consequence, our findings highlight the importance of looking critically at the data and types of intensifiers under study.

The topic of grammaticalisation and use of intensifiers offers many possibilities for further research. For instance, it would be of great interest to compare other intensifiers from different categories in order to examine whether they confirm our findings or display different tendencies. Another development that has called my attention is the mutual influence between speakers of British and American English. I have often wondered how different media and encounters between British and American people can influence the use of intensifiers in different varieties of English. Mencken observed that the presence of British immigrants in the United States probably influenced American English, but that, of course, the native speakers of American English exerted an even bigger influence on the British immigrants (1922: 204). In addition, Murphy (2010) observed that the female speakers that provided the data for her corpus study started to use *very* less frequently. She noted that a “possible reason may be due to the influence of contact with American English through soap operas, other media and travel, where ‘really’ is more common than ‘very’”, as also observed by Tagliamonte and Roberts (2005) (Murphy 2010: 120). Therefore, it seems very interesting to repeat a similar corpus study within a certain period of time in order to compare if the differences in intensifier use between British and American English have become less apparent over time.
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