

dead cool / proper cool / really cool / very cool?



dead cool frog!

That's a cool frog in the picture, but if you want to boost the force of *cool* are you and your friends more likely to say

*that's a **very** cool frog*
*that's a **really** cool frog*
*that's a **dead** cool frog*
*that's a **well** cool frog*

or something else entirely?

We all like to boost (or intensify) the force of our adjectives (and other words), so words like *very* and *really* (intensifiers) get used a lot, and then lose their force as people get used to hearing them. This means that the words people choose as intensifiers tend to change quite quickly. You could investigate variation and change in intensifiers in several ways.

How to investigate:

Gather some material

Choose any two books, one written recently and one



written a hundred or more years ago. Or choose one of Shakespeare's plays and a play written more recently.

Start at the beginning of each book or play, and each time you come across an adjective whose force is boosted with an intensifier, note down the adjective and its intensifier.

TIP:



An adjective is a word that describes something, like green (a

green frog), cool (a cool frog), or big (a big frog). People use intensifiers with adverbs too (I ran really fast, she sings really well) or even, sometimes, with verbs (I really hate the rain). But it's easier to keep things simple and just investigate adjectives and their intensifiers. If you're not sure if the word you've picked out is an adjective, look it up in a good dictionary, like the Oxford English Dictionary.

Carry on until you've found at least 20 adjectives and intensifiers in each book or play.

Questions to think about:

1. How many pages did you have to look at in each of the books or plays before you found your 20 adjectives and intensifiers? It is sometimes thought that people use more intensifiers today than they used to; so if this is right, we would expect you to have to look at more pages in the older book or play before you gathered as many as 20 examples.

2. For each book or play, draw up a list of intensifiers with the most frequent one at the top and the least frequent one at the bottom. What are the differences between the older book or play and the more recent one? Is there any overlap at all, or are all the intensifier

forms different? This will give an idea of the changes in intensifier forms in the English language over the period you have covered.

3. If you want to take your investigation further, look at the types of adjectives that occur with an intensifier in your data. In each book or play, group the adjectives into:

those that describe human characteristics (like *kind* or *posh*);

and those describe a value (like *good* or *bad*);

those referring to age (like *new* or *young*);

those referring to a kind of measurement (like *big* or *thick*);

those describing a speed (like *fast* or *slow*).

Do the intensifiers occur more often with one type of adjective than another?

Sometimes, when an intensifier is new to the language, it is used with only one or two types of adjective to start with. So your analysis could suggest whether the intensifier is a new one, or a well-established one.

TIP:



You can check the age of an intensifier by looking it up in the

Oxford English Dictionary. For example, if you look through the entry for *dead* in this dictionary you will see that it gives 1589 as the first date when it was used as an adverb (an intensifier is a type of adverb) meaning 'utterly' or 'absolutely'. Probably *dead* fell out of use and has since been picked up again.

Another way to find some material

Find three or four pictures that contain an image that is extreme in some way. The strange frog could be one of them; you could also look for pictures of a person who looks very old, or who has something unusual about them, such as a beard reaching down to their chest (so that people are likely to say *he's got a really long beard*, not just *he's got a long beard*). A picture of a sunset or something else with strong colours might also be suitable.

Present these pictures to at least three people aged 60 or more, and then to at least three teenagers. Note down the adjectives they use, and whether or not they use an intensifier. If they do use one, note what the intensifier is.



You can use this material to answer the same kinds of

questions as above:

1. Who uses more intensifiers? The older speakers or the younger speakers? Some researchers have found that younger people tend to use more intensifiers than older people, so it would be interesting to see if you find the same. No-one's been able to explain why this might be, though - perhaps you can!
2. Draw up two separate lists, as suggested above - one list for the older speakers and one for the younger ones. Use the list to answer the same questions: what are the most frequent intensifiers used by the older speakers, and then by the younger speakers? Is there any overlap?

Linguists have found that in many parts of the English-speaking world, older people like to use *very* as an intensifier. Younger people don't use *very* often and instead prefer *really*. Intensifiers can come and go quite quickly, though, so you may find the younger speakers using completely new forms.

And another way to find intensifiers

Ask someone aged 60 or more to tell you a story about something that meant a lot to them, or about something funny that happened to them recently, or the worst thing that ever happened to them. Or ask them what they like best in the world, what they hate most, what they find funny and why. When people talk about these kinds of topics they're likely to use intensifiers. If they do, note them down, with the adjective that was used with them. You could then ask a much younger person the same question and compare the results. Don't despair if your speakers don't use intensifiers after all! Just choose one of the

other ways to investigate intensifiers instead - think up your own way of finding intensifiers.

And a last way....

Prepare 4 sentences like the one about the frog, and prepare different versions of each sentence, each with a different intensifier. You could use *very*, *really*, *dead*, and *well*, or choose some other intensifiers, perhaps some that are used in your region (like *right?* Or *geet?* Or *bare?*). Then present these sentences to three or four different people and ask them what kind of person they think might say this, and why. Ask them whether they think they would like the person, and what sort of job they think they might have. You could also ask which sentences are likely to occur in a formal letter (e.g. a letter from someone applying for a job) and which are more likely to occur between people chatting,

This should give you an idea of people's attitudes to different intensifier forms. You may find, for instance, that older people don't like new intensifiers (like *proper* or *pure*) or that younger speakers think people who use *very* are stuffy or posh (note that these attitudes are likely to be unconscious!)

Suggested Reading:

Barnfield, Kate and Buchstaller, Isabelle 2010 Intensifiers in Tyneside: Longitudinal developments and new trends. *English World-Wide* 31 (3): 252-287. (Click [here](#) for a summary of this paper).