Sociolinguistic variation in the use of intensifiers in English as a Lingua Franca

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According to extensive research in sociolinguistics, intensifiers are a rapidly changing, versatile class of words with an emphatic function. The use of intensifiers has also been shown to be socially governed, as it is dependent on speakers’ gender, age and the interactional domain. For example, intensifiers are used more frequently by women, by younger speakers, and in informal speech situations. This type of sociolinguistic variation is the result of socialization processes taking place in a speech community.

Most research on intensifiers has focused on native speaker English. The present study, however, examines patterns of variation in the use of intensifiers in English as a Lingua Franca (ELF), that is, English used as a contact language. For the majority of ELF speakers English is their second (L2) or third (L3) language. Their socialization processes differ from those experienced by native speakers. Combining sociolinguistics and theories on second language acquisition (e.g. Bayley & Preston 1996), this study investigates whether native and non-native speakers of English exhibit similar patterns of variation in their language use, focusing on intensifiers as a feature.

As data, this study uses the Vienna-Oxford International Corpus of English (VOICE), a corpus of ELF. I will examine the overall frequency of intensifiers as well as the role of different social variables (e.g. gender and domain), and compare the results with native English tendencies discovered in previous research. The results suggest that in the case of intensifiers the sociolinguistic behaviour of ELF speakers has little difference with native English. Overall, ELF speakers use more intensifiers than native speakers, but the social variation follows the same patterns. The results imply that the use of intensifiers in English is globally similar, despite of speakers’ diverse language backgrounds.


Keywords: English as a Lingua Franca, Intensifiers, Corpus-based sociolinguistics.