‘That’s proper cool’

JAMES M. STRATTON

The emerging intensifier *proper* in British English

1. Introduction

Intensifying adverbs are devices which scale a quality up, down, or somewhere between the two (Bolinger 1972: 17). To intensify the adjective *cool*, speakers of British English have a variety of functionally equivalent intensifiers at their disposal. They can use *very*, *really*, *so*, *dead*, *bloody*, *right* and *well*, among many others.[1] A seemingly recent arrival to the British intensifier system is *proper*, as in *that was proper cool*.[2] Believed to have entered English from the Latin *proprius* via Norman French (OED, *proper*), *proper* now has a variety of denotations in Present Day English. As an adjective, it can denote suitability (e.g., *wear the proper equipment*), etiquette (e.g., *it wouldn’t be proper to do that*) and worthiness/authenticity (e.g., *it’s proper street food*). As an adverb, *proper* can function as an adverb of manner (e.g., *we like to do things proper in our house*), and a marker of degree (e.g., *he is proper tall*); the degree function applying exclusively to British English. Some examples of *proper* intensifying adjectives from the present dataset are reported in (1).[3]

(1) (a) . . . he’s always been **proper** thin, hasn’t he? [BNC2014S, S0458]
(b) that’s a **proper** romantic story [BNC2014S, S0014]
(c) it’s **proper** cheesy [BNC2014S, S0133]
(d) it’s like a **proper** scary job [BNC2014S, S0084]

While a few studies make reference to the intensifier *proper* (Barnfield & Buchstaller, 2010: 272; Stratton, 2018: 807), to date, only Núñez–Pertejo and Palacios–Martínez (2018) have investigated its current use and frequency. As the authors point out (2018: 122), ‘there are no monographic studies in the literature on [its] use as [an] intensifier[. . .], which may be indicative of the current emergence of new uses and functions in this area of intensification.’ In their study, Núñez–Pertejo and Palacios–Martínez (2018) examined the intensifier *proper*, along with the intensifier *bare*, in Multicultural London English. They found that *proper* was used mostly by younger speakers ages 16–19. Given the lack of exploration of this emerging intensifier, the present study contributes to this empirical discussion by examining its use in the spoken parts of the two British National Corpora (henceforth, BNC). Since the question of age is pertinent to the ongoing discourse regarding its usage, the stratified spoken components of the corpora are used, namely the BNC1994DS (British National Corpus 1994, Demographic Spoken Sample) and the Spoken BNC2014S (British National Corpus 2014, Spoken Sample).

The present study addresses four research questions. Firstly, has there been a significant change



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in the frequency of the adjective intensifier *proper* from 1994 to 2014? Secondly, does any change in frequency correlate with the decrease in frequency of functionally equivalent intensifiers? Thirdly, is there any discernable difference in its collocational distribution from 1994 to 2014? In other words, does *proper* come to intensify a wider variety of adjectives as time goes on? Finally, does the intensifying use of *proper* correlate with social factors such as sex or age?[4]

2. Intensifiers

2.1 What are intensifiers?

While a variety of labels have been used to describe intensifiers such as 'degree words' (Bolinger, 1972), 'degree intensifiers' (Allerton, 1987), 'degree adverbs' (Peters, 1994) and 'degree modifiers' (Paradis, 1997), following previous work (e.g., Ito & Tagliamonte, 2003; Tagliamonte, 2008; Stratton, 2018), intensifiers are defined as adverbs which have an intensifying function. While the overarching label used to describe intensifiers is not of immediate importance, the distinction between different types of intensifiers is pertinent to the present study. Quirk et al. (1985: 590) differentiate between two major types of intensifiers: 'amplifiers' and 'downtoners'. For the purpose of this study, amplifiers are defined as intensifiers which scale up the meaning of an adjective (e.g., *really*, *so*, *very*) and downtoners are intensifiers which scale down the meaning of an adjective (e.g., *a bit*, *kind of*, *a little bit*). Both intensify the degree of an adjective but in opposite directions. Amplifiers are further sub-divided into 'boosters' and 'maximizers' according to the degree of amplification. Boosters are amplifiers which heighten the degree of the adjective (e.g., *very*, *so*, *really*) and maximizers are amplifiers which heighten the degree of the adjective to the end point of the scale (e.g., *completely*, *absolutely*, *utterly*). All intensifiers dealt with in the present study, are amplifiers, more specifically, boosters.

2.2 Why study intensifiers?

The rich literature on intensification in the English language has yielded some important findings about language variation and change (Bolinger, 1972; Paradis, 1997; Ito & Tagliamonte, 2003; Tagliamonte & Roberts, 2005; Tagliamonte, 2008; Barnfield & Buchstaller, 2010; D'Arcy, 2015; Stratton, 2018; Stratton, forthcoming). For instance, many quantitative studies have found that the use of intensifiers or specific types of intensifiers can correlate with the sex of the speaker (Ito & Tagliamonte, 2003; Tagliamonte & Roberts, 2005; Tagliamonte, 2008), the age of the speaker (Tagliamonte, 2008), and the social class of the speaker (Macaulay, 1995). In other words, specific social groups prefer specific intensifiers. Intensifiers are also thought to function as part of a dynamic multi-dimensional system, which means that an increase in frequency of one intensifier, likely correlates with a decrease in frequency of others (Ito & Tagliamonte, 2003; Tagliamonte & Roberts, 2005; Tagliamonte, 2008; Barnfield & Buchstaller, 2010). The established sensitivity of intensifiers to social factors and their known nature to compete longitudinally were the motivating factors for research questions two and four.

3. Methodology

3.1 Corpora

The BNC1994DS and the BNC2014S were used to examine the use of the adjective intensifier *proper* from 1994 to 2014. Both the BNC1994DS and the BNC2014S are reasonably balanced for sex, age and social class and were designed this way with the goal of facilitating sociolinguistic research (Love, Hawtin & Hardie, 2017b). Their balanced design thus provides an opportunity to investigate the social attributes which may be associated with using the adjective intensifier *proper*. The BNC1994DS consists of 153 texts containing 5,014,655 words (from 341 speakers) and the Spoken BNC2014S consists of 567 texts containing 4,789,185 words (from 376 speakers). The BNC1994DS contains 'everyday spontaneous interactions' (Leech, Rayson & Wilson, 2001: 2) and the BNC2014S was designed in a similar way given that it was designed as its counterpart (Love et al., 2017a: 321).

3.2 Coding and Data Processing

Following previous studies on intensifiers (Ito & Tagliamonte, 2003; Tagliamonte & Roberts, 2005, Tagliamonte, 2008; Stratton, 2018), the present study focused on the intensification of adjectives. A corpus search query was run using the appropriate part-of-speech tagging to gather instances where *proper* occurred before an adjective.[5] All examples (i.e., tokens) were subsequently checked manually to determine whether *proper* was functioning as an intensifier. For instance, the search found the examples *proper Indian food*, *proper special effects* and *it's a proper*

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American diner, all of which are contain the adjective *proper*, not the intensifying adverb.[6]

4. Results

4.1 The Frequency of proper

The search queries in the two corpora automatically found 16 tokens in the BNC1994DS and 75 tokens in the BNC2014S. However, after carefully weeding through the data, there were only three unambiguous instances of *proper* intensifying adjectives in the BNC1994DS and only 31 in the BNC2014S. A simple measure which can be used to examine whether there is a statistically significant difference between the frequency of a given variant across two or more corpora is a Log-Likelihood test. In this case, the Log-Likelihood test indicated that the difference in frequency of *proper* in the BNC1994DS and the BNC2014S was statistically significant.[7] However, even though this difference is significant, comparing the absolute frequencies of *proper* is problematic given that there are more words in the BNC1994DS than in the BNC2014S. One way to deal with the unequal number of words per corpus is to normalize the frequency by a common dominator, such as words per 100,000. Doing so estimates that *proper* had a normalized frequency of .06% in 1994 but this increases to .7% by 2014. However, frequency normalization is also problematic since it does not account for the total number of times *proper* could have actually been used, but was not. To account for the number of opportunities each speaker had to employ the intensifier *proper*, both occurrence and absence of each intensifiable context must be accounted for, which means counting the zero contexts (e.g., *that was proper boring* VS *that was* ∅ *boring*). This methodological approach is known as the Principle of Accountability (Labov, 1966: 49, 1972: 72). According to my estimates, when accounting for the total number of instances *proper* could have been used, its frequency was .00004 in 1994 but .0003 in 2014; once again indicating an increase in use over the two decades. While its frequency as an intensifier is significantly lower than many competing intensifiers (such as *so*, *very* and *really*), all statistical estimates indicate a significant increase in frequency over the 20-year period. The rate of increase in 1994 to 2014 is 10.6%.[8]

As has been found in previous studies, the top three mostly frequently used boosters were *so*, *really* and *very* (Ito & Tagliamonte, 2003; Tagliamonte & Roberts, 2005; Tagliamonte, 2008). However, when contextualizing the trajectory of the intensifier *proper* with other competing boosters, its increase correlates with a decrease in frequency of other boosters, as reported in Figure 1. In the BNC1994DS, *proper* was used less frequently than all other boosters listed. However, by 2014, it was used more frequently than *blooming*, *damn*, and *jolly*. Intensifiers like *bloody* and *right* also decrease in frequency by 2014. It has been argued that one of the reasons intensifiers fluctuate in ranking throughout time is that their high frequent use eventually leads to a loss in their intensifying effect (Tagliamonte, 2012: 334). As result, to maintain intensifying power, overused intensifiers are frequently replaced by older or newer intensifiers.

4.2 Collocational Distribution

Having determined that the adjective intensifier *proper* increased in frequency over the two decades, the next question is, has its use changed in any way since 1994? Because there were only three tokens of *proper* in the BNC1994DS, restricting the collocational analysis to the stratified datasets would not be particularly revealing. Therefore, for the collocational analysis the full corpus datasets were used. In the BNC1994, *proper* was used 10 times to intensify adjectives, yielding a normalized frequency of .09%. In the BNC2014, *proper* was used 131 times to intensify adjectives, yielding a normalized frequency of 1.2%.

In the spoken component of the BNC1994, *proper* intensified seven different adjectives (*little*, *old*, *decent*, *pissed off*, *posh*, *silly* and *poorly*).[10] By 2014, the number of unique adjectives intensified by *proper* increases to 95. On this basis, in addition to increasing in frequency, it is clear that *proper* comes to intensify a wider range of different adjectives by 2014. Some examples of its use are reported in (2). Of the seven adjectives in the BNC1994, five denote negative semantic prosody. Of the 131 adjectives in the BNC2014, 115 could be categorized into either positive or negative semantic prosody, of which, 61% denote negative semantic prosody (e.g., *sick*, *grumpy*, *freaky*) and the remaining 39% denote positive semantic prosody (e.g., *good*, *nice*, *beautiful*). The remaining were neutral. These findings corroborate the findings of Núñez–Pertejo and Palacios–Martínez (2018: 136) who found that 'the proportion of adjectives expressing negative semantic prosody is far higher than with a positive orientation'. They also note that 'these adjectives serve to describe a human quality or condition which in most cases is portrayed by the speaker as negative. We can then say that young speakers resort to the

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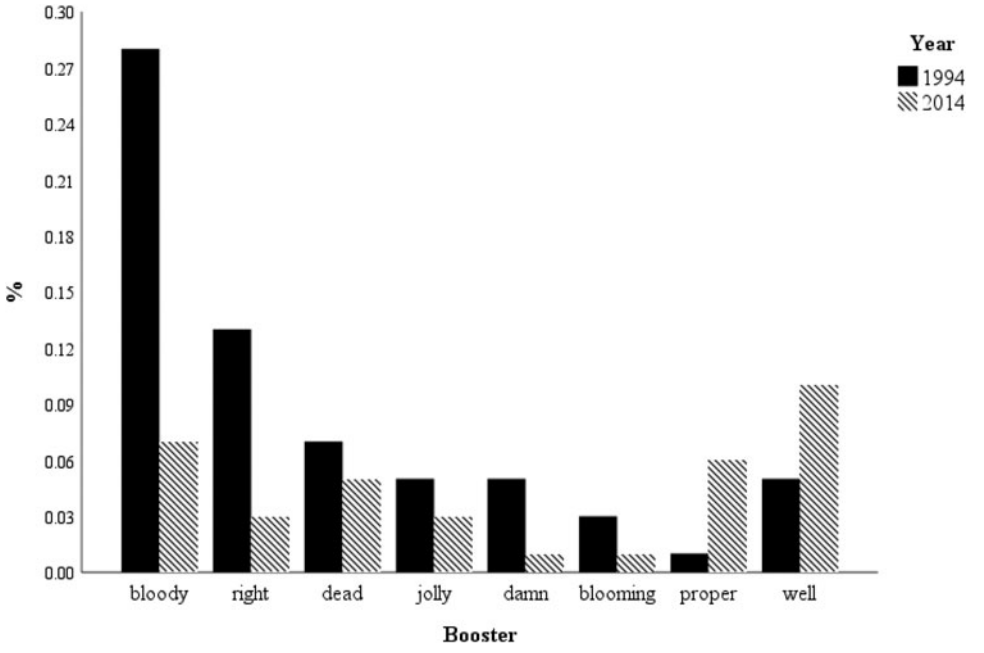


Figure 1. The Intensification Rate of Low Frequency Boosters from 1994 to 2014[9]

use of *proper* to describe and accentuate a person's negative trait'. This observation also holds true in the present dataset.

The fact that *proper* intensifies adjectives denoting negative semantic prosody may be indicative of semantic bleaching (cf. Hopper & Traugott, 1993), a process whereby the original meaning of a word disappears over time, or more moderately, becomes diluted. Since it is no longer the case that the original meaning of 'appropriateness' and 'correctness' is conveyed in the use of *proper* as an intensifier, this dilution of its adjectival meaning can be taken as evidence of semantic bleaching. In other words, *proper* starts out as denoting something positive (i.e., 'correct/appropriate' as opposed to 'inappropriate/incorrect'), but as an intensifier it comes to intensify adjectives which no longer have to denote positivity, as in (2a), (2d) and (2f). An example of *proper* in a dialogue exchange is provided in (3).

(2) (a) he's **proper** silly (BNC1994, KSS)
(b) it seems extremely hard to work in that high-pressure environment in a big you know **proper** posh restaurant (BNC2014, S0115)
(c) is the VIP area like **proper** expensive? (BNC2014, S0080)
(d) they're a **proper** strange group of girls (BNC2014, SAR5702)
(e) he picked up a ball and it was like **proper** shiny (BNC2014, SBXK32))
(f) I've got **proper** hairy toes (BNC2014, S0220)

(3) Spoken BNC2014 – Dialogue [SD3W 362]
S0202: what time are you two setting off?
S0211: erm as soon as I'm ready
S0202: so a few hours then
S0220: what odd shaped feet you have [anonymous name]. Your toenails are rank
S0202: they're not
S0202: they're **proper** rank
S0211: why?
S0220: [they're] they're all like normal toes and then . . .

To take the collocational analysis a step further, it can be useful to explore the semantic properties of the adjectives *proper* intensified. Dixon (1977: 31) laid out a taxonomy which classifies adjectives into eight semantic categories: dimension (e.g. *big*, *little*, *long*, *short*), physical property (e.g. *hard*, *soft*, *hot*, *cold*) color (e.g. *black*, *white*), human propensity (e.g. *happy*, *rude*, *jealous*), age (e.g. *new*, *old*), value (e.g. *good*, *bad*, *perfect*), speed (e.g. *fast*, *quick*), position (e.g. *far*, *near*). The adjectives intensified by *proper* were

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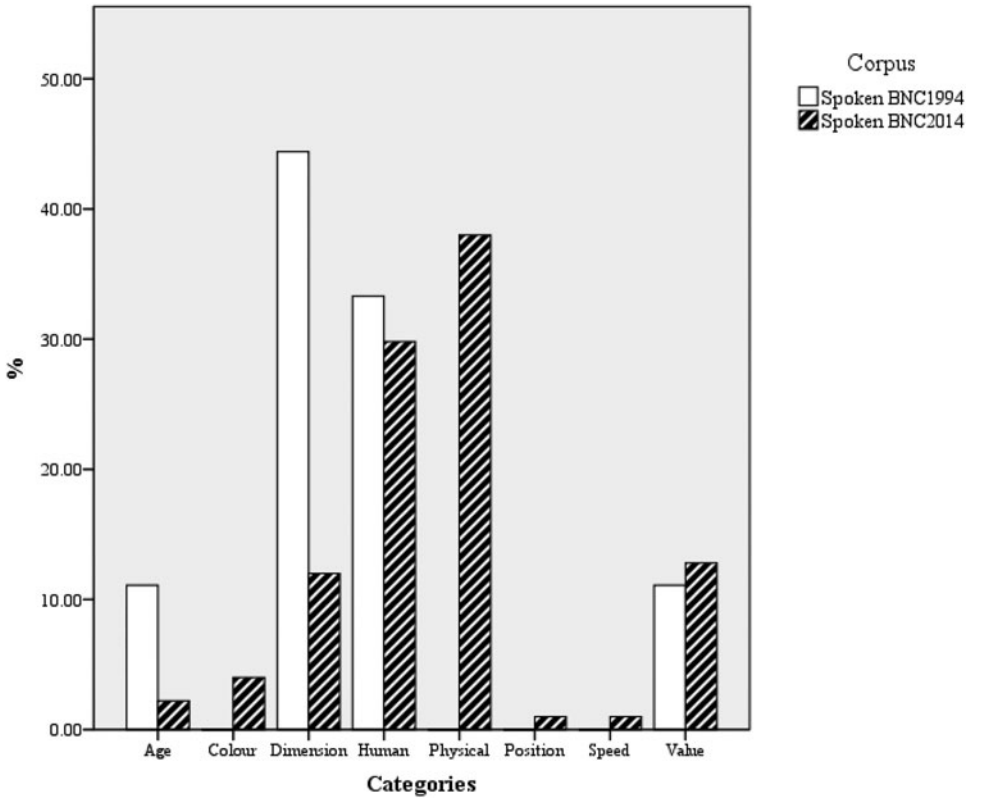


Figure 2. Classification of adjectives Intensified by *proper*

categorized according to Dixon's taxonomy, as reported in Figure 2. The most striking change was the increase in the number of adjectives denoting physical property. In the BNC1994, there were no instances of *proper* modifying adjectival heads denoting physical property, whereas in the BNC2014, adjectives of physical property are the most frequent semantic class modified. Some examples are reported in (4).

(4) (a) well they get **proper** hot weather [BNC2014, S0483]
(b) we've got one for the plates but it's **proper** dirty [BNC2014, S0542]
(c) . . . if you take it when you haven't eaten anything it makes you feel **proper** sick [BNC2014, S0192]
(d) yeah I was like **proper** ill [BNC2014, S0219]

Adjectives which precede a noun are called attributive adjectives (e.g., *the tall man*) whereas adjectives which do not precede a noun are called predicative adjectives (e.g., *he is tall*). In the BNC1994, 66.6% of the adjectives intensified by *proper* were attributive adjectives and 33.3% were predicative adjectives. By 2014, more predicative adjectives become intensified, with 54% of the adjectives being predicative. The shift from intensifying attributive adjectives to predicative adjectives is thought to be evidence of a progressive intensifier (Ito & Tagliamonte, 2003; Tagliamonte, 2008). Some examples of this shift are provided in (5) and (6).

(5) BNC1994

Attributive:

(a) you could get a **proper** posh pencil [JN6]
(b) that little girl of yours is a **proper** little mother [KC2]

Predicative:

(c) I mean he's **proper** silly [KSS]
(d) . . . he's **proper** pissed off [KD2]

(6) BNC2014

Attributive:

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(a) He used to say **proper** Yorkshire stuff [S0206]
(b) Like **proper** old school photos [S0336]
(c) That's a **proper** romantic story [S0014]
(d) I never fart like **proper** loud ones [S0228]

Predicative:

(e) It's **proper** comfy [S0228]
(f) No, one of the girls is **proper** scared of ghosts [S0447]
(g) Are they having a massive orgy or what? They were **proper** loud [S0211]
(h) One of the check men got **proper** grumpy [S0687]

4.3 Who Uses proper?

Núñez–Pertejo and Palacios–Martínez (2018) found that the age group who used the intensifier *proper* most frequently was 16–19-year-olds. To investigate its distribution in the present dataset, we return to the stratified samples of the BNC since they are reasonably stratified for age. Surprisingly, the age group which used this intensifier most frequently was not 16–19-year-olds, but 19–29-year-olds. 61% of the tokens came from speakers ages 19–29 and 25% came from speakers ages 30–39. A possible explanation for the difference in findings between the present study and Núñez–Pertejo and Palacios–Martínez (2018) is the time depth since the data on *proper* in Núñez–Pertejo and Palacios–Martínez came from 2004–2010. In contrast, data in the BNC2014S represent a few years later. Therefore, although the use of the intensifier *proper* may have initially been constrained by age (Núñez–Pertejo & Palacios–Martínez, 2018), by 2014 the adolescent speakers have become adults but continue to use this intensifier in adult life. When speakers refrain from using a given linguistic form or structure that they once used at an earlier stage in life, this process is known as 'age grading' (Tagliamonte, 2012: 46–55). The fact that the use of the intensifier *proper* was not constrained by age suggests that its use is not affected by age grading, and instead can be viewed as an instance of language or generational change given that its use was attested by speakers of all ages. The social class of the speaker also did not constrain its use. In the BNC2014S, it was even used by lecturers, accountants, journalists and teachers. Some examples are reported in (7). There were also no observable differences between its frequency among men and woman.

(7)

(a) that's a **proper** grumpy romantic story (Female, Journalist, BNC2014S, [S0014])
(b) [Place] is a **proper** big city (Female, Literary Editor, BNC2014S, [S0329])
(c) [Name] was **proper** grumpy (Male, Lecturer, BNC2014S, [S0424])

Since the findings from Núñez–Pertejo and Palacios–Martínez (2018) speak to Multicultural London English, prior to their study, one might have assumed that this intensifying use was a feature of that dialectal region only. However, the metadata in the BNC corpora reveal that its use is not restricted to London. It was recorded by speakers throughout England (such as Leeds, Manchester, Birmingham, Liverpool, Cambridge, Milton Keynes, Essex, Kent). The fact that there is little information regarding the use of this intensifier in Wales, Scotland and (Northern) Ireland, does not mean that the adjective intensifier *proper* is not used there, but instead its absence in these regions is simply a reflection of the sampling for geography in the corpus.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The present study set out to explore the current use of the adjective intensifier *proper* in British English by building on the work by Núñez–Pertejo and Palacios–Martínez (2018). The first research question sought to investigate whether the frequency of *proper* had changed over a 20-year time span from 1994 to 2014. To address this question, the stratified samples from the two BNC corpora were used. While *proper* was still used less frequently than many competing intensifiers, there was a significant increase in its frequency by 2014. The second question addressed whether any change in frequency correlated with a rearrangement in the intensifier system. When comparing the trajectory of *proper* with other intensifiers, its increase in frequency descriptively correlated with a decrease in what were previously more frequently used intensifiers such as *jolly* and *right*. The fact that the increase in *proper* goes hand-in-hand with the decrease in frequency of *jolly* and *right*, ties in with the notion that intensifiers are structured as a part of an interwoven system. While the past few decades have seen some fluctuation in the ranking of low frequency variants in British English, such as *dead* and *well* (Barnfield & Buchstaller, 2010; Stratton, forthcoming), *very*, *really* and *so* have remained the three most frequently used intensifiers in British English.

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Broadly speaking, this stability of high frequency intensifier variants might suggest that it takes a great deal of time for highly frequent intensifiers to be replaced by newer ones; even though low frequency variants are found entering the system all the time. For instance, in North American varieties of English which have seen the arrival of variants such as *hella*, as in *that was hella cool*, and *way*, as in *that was way boring* (Bucholtz et al., 2007), *very*, *really*, and *so* still remain as the three most frequently used variants (Tagliamonte & Roberts, 2005; Tagliamonte, 2008).

The third research question sought to examine any changes in the way the intensifier *proper* was used. While *proper* preferred to intensify adjectives denoting negative semantic prosody (e.g., *proper rank*), *proper* already had a predilection for intensifying such adjectives in the 1990s. Nevertheless, these findings were in line with the findings of Núñez–Pertejo and Palacios–Martínez (2018). However, as for an observable difference, there was an increase in the number of different adjectives *proper* intensified over the two decades, which lines up with the fact that it had become a more favored intensifier by 2014.

The most interesting finding was the outcome of the final research question. Núñez–Pertejo and Palacios–Martínez (2018) found that *proper* was used most frequently by 16–19-year-olds. However, according to the present data from 2014, this intensifier was used most frequently by 19–29-year-olds. This suggests that *proper* is not constrained by age grading and the once 16–19-year-olds have continued to use the intensifier into adult life. Had adolescent speakers stopped using the intensifier after adolescence, the intensifier could have actually decreased in frequency if other generations did not use it. However, the speakers continued to use it and it seemingly spread outward to other age groups and social classes. Its use was found by both male and female speakers, speakers of all social classes and all ages groups in the corpora. Therefore, in short, while *proper* is by no means as frequent as the intensifiers *very*, *really* and *so*, it has certainly gained some traction in both function and popularity in recent years.

Notes

1 Functional equivalence is a term used in variationist sociolinguistics to refer to the fact that given variants, in this case, intensifiers, are functionally equivalent in meaning. In other words, there is no functional difference between saying something is *really warm*, *very warm* and *well warm* since they all heighten the degree of the adjective.

2 Based on evidence in the OED, it is possible that the intensifying use of *proper* has been developing for quite some time. For instance, *Ingyons are proper good* was attested in 1825, *its shipping was all in proper good order* was attested in 1867, and *a proper old boozeroo* was attested in 1943. However, it is unclear whether this attested use exemplifies *proper* as a marker of degree (e.g., *proper good* = 'very good') or whether it exemplifies *proper* as a marker of manner (e.g., *proper good* = 'appropriately good').

3 While the present study focuses on the use of *proper* as an intensifier of adjectives, *proper* can also intensify other parts of speech. It can intensify nouns, as in *a proper tantrum* (BNC2014–S0246), prepositions, as in *that is proper from Yorkshire* (BNC2014–S0021), and entire verbal phrases, as in *you'd proper wet yourself though* (BNC2014–S0041) and *he was proper looking at us* (BNC2014–S0556). For a discussion on these other intensifying uses of *proper*, see Núñez–Pertejo and Palacios–Martínez (2018: 130–134).

4 Identifying a correlation between the intensifying use of *proper* and external factors, such as sex and age, provides evidence of 'orderly heterogeneity' (Weinreich, Labov & Herzog, 1968: 100). Put plainly, the choice to use *proper* over other functionally equivalent variants may be explainable by examining the sex and age of the speaker.

5 In the Spoken BNC1994DS, the search used was '*proper*_AJ0'. In the Spoken BNC2014S, the search '*proper*_JJ' was used. The _AJ0 and _JJ were the tags for adjectives in the corpora.

6 One way to circumvent tokens of the adjective *proper* would be to run a search where *proper* is tagged as an adverb. However, the taggers in the corpora erroneously tagged *proper* as an adjective. This likely happened due to the novelty of this intensifier which means that the taggers had no training data of *proper* being used adverbially.

7 The Log-Likelihood test used was Paul Rayson's UCREL log-likelihood wizard. The LL score was 28.15. Any LL above 3.84 is considered statistically significant. The LL score for *proper* was 28.15, indicating a highly significant difference.

8 The rate of increase was 10.6% because in 1994 the intensifier *proper* occurred .06 times every 100,000 words and .7 times per 100,000 words in 2014. Therefore, $\frac{(0.7-.06=.64)}{.06} = 10.6\%$.

9 The frequency in Figure 1 is measured by intensification rate ($\frac{\text{number of occurences}}{\text{possible instances}} \times 100$).

10 Note that in British English, poorly can be both an adverb and an adjective. As an adjective it means 'unwell' or 'sick'. The example in the BNC1994DS was *have you been proper poorly* (KDFPSUNK).

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