Fiction as a source of linguistic data: Evidence from television drama

James M. Stratton
Purdue University

ABSTRACT

Growing evidence suggests that the language used in fictional television can be a fair representation of contemporary language use and changes within the linguistic system. To explore this relationship further, the present study uses variationist quantitative methods to examine the composite system of intensifiers, as well as adjectives of strangeness, in the British fictional TV series *Misfits*. Results indicate that the distribution and constraints of the two variable systems are similar in both scripted and non-scripted language. With respect to intensifiers, amplifiers were more frequent than downtoners, younger speakers used intensifiers more frequently than older speakers, and women had higher intensification rates than men. Predicative adjectives were also intensified more frequently than attributive adjectives, and the top three boosters were *so*, *really*, and *very*. As for adjectives of strangeness, consistent with findings from vernacular speech, the adjective *weird* made up over 70 percent of the semantic field, and was favored predominantly by younger speakers. The present study therefore provides empirical support for the use of naturalistic fictional language as a proxy for studying language variation and change.

Keywords: scripted language, variationist sociolinguistics, British English, intensifiers, adjective variation.

1. Introduction

Linguistic variability is ubiquitous and can be observed across different domains of grammar. To describe a proposition as 'great', speakers of English have a variety of functionally equivalent adjectives at their disposal: *great*, *fantastic*, *cool*, *brilliant*, *class*, *ace*, *topnotch*, *epic*, *sick*, *boss*, *wicked* and *sound*.

DOI: 10.25951/4357.

Recent studies have shown that the decision to use one adjective over a synonymously equivalent counterpart is systematically conditioned and constrained by various linguistic and social factors (Tagliamonte – Pabst 2020; Stratton forthcoming[a]). These same adjectives can also be intensified by a range of functionally equivalent intensifier variants: *very*, *really*, *so*, *dead*, *right*, *proper*, *bloody* and *well*.[1] Like with adjectives, intensifiers are also conditioned by linguistic and social constraints (Peters 1994; Ito – Tagliamonte 2003; Tagliamonte – Roberts 2005; Tagliamonte 2008; Méndez-Naya – Pahta 2010; D'Arcy 2015; Stratton 2018, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c). Weinreich et al. (1968: 100) famously referred to this structured systematicity as "orderly heterogeneity", which forms the major theoretical assumption of variationist sociolinguistics.

After examining the constraints on the intensifier system in York (Ito – Tagliamonte, 2003), Tagliamonte – Roberts (2005) turned to the TV series *Friends* to examine this system in North America. Among several findings, *so* was found to be an incoming variant, a change which, in line with the general principles of language change (Labov 1990: 210-215), was spearheaded by women. However, a broader implication of the study was the emerging view that the analysis of linguistic phenomena through a fictional lens is a viable and fruitful research methodology for tapping into language variation and change. Since then, several authors have followed in their footsteps and have examined different variable domains using datasets from scripted television (Heyd 2010; Reichelt – Durham 2017; Stange 2017; Stratton 2018).

While variationist methods have been used to examine the intensifier system in fictional language (Tagliamonte – Roberts 2005; Reichelt – Durham 2017; Stratton 2018), to the best of my knowledge, no studies have run regression models on fictional data, which have included both fixed and mixed/random effects.[2] Since the failure to include random intercepts can have a significant effect on the outcome of an analysis, it is important to re-evaluate these previous findings with accountable statistical rigor. Moreover, beyond the analysis of intensifiers, to date, no studies have examined whether semantic fields, such as adjectives of strangeness

1 Following variationist terminology, 'variants' refers to two or more ways of saying the same thing (Labov 1972: 188).

2 The term 'mixed effects' refers to the combination of both 'fixed effects' and 'random effects'. In a model in which 'speaker' is run as a random/mixed effect, each individual is treated as a source of random variability. Failure to include 'speaker' as a mixed effect can be problematic when more than one observation (i.e., data point) is collected from each speaker.

(Tagliamonte – Brooke 2014), have similar distributions and constraints in fictional language as unscripted vernacular speech.

Therefore, to test the assumption that "media language actually does reflect what is going on in language" (Tagliamonte – Roberts 2005: 296), the present study uses variationist quantitative methods to examine the intensifier system and adjectives of strangeness in the British fictional TV series *Misfits*. Two research questions were formulated. First, what is the distribution of the intensifier system in the *Misfits Corpus* in terms of frequency and function, and is intensifier use constrained by similar conditioning factors as in real-life vernacular speech? Second, what is the distribution of adjectives of strangeness in the *Misfits Corpus*, and are these constrained by similar conditioning factors as in vernacular speech? By comparing the distribution and constraints on these two linguistic variables in fictional language and real-life vernacular speech, the present study tests the claim that language observable in fictional television is a fair representation of contemporary language use and language change.

2. Previous literature

2.1 Intensifiers

Intensifiers are devices which scale a quality upward or downward from an assumed norm (Bolinger 1972: 17; Quirk et al. 1985: 589-590). Since they are generally thought to be "a vehicle for impressing, praising, persuading, insulting, and generally influencing the listener's reception of the message" (Partington 1993: 178), they are subject to constant renewal, recycling, and replacement (Tagliamonte 2008; Stratton 2020a). Quirk et al. (1985: 590) divide intensifiers into "amplifiers" and "downtoners". Amplifiers scale upward from an assumed norm, as in *that's very good*, whereas downtoners scale downward from an assumed norm, as in *that's kinda good*. Amplifiers can also be further sub-divided into "boosters" and "maximizers" according to the degree of amplification. Boosters "denote a high degree on a scale" whereas maximizers "denote the upper extreme point" on a scale. In terms of distribution, previous studies on English have found that amplifiers are more frequent than downtoners, and more specifically, boosters are more frequent than maximizers (e.g., Peters 1994; D'Arcy 2015). Crosslinguistic evidence also seems to suggest that this type of distribution appears to be consistent across languages (e.g., Stratton 2020d).

A cornerstone of a variationist sociolinguistic analysis is the consideration of both internal and external factors of variation. Previous studies on the intensification of adjectives have found that highly developed and frequently used intensifiers appear predominantly in predicative position, as in, *it was really interesting*, as opposed to attributive position, as in *a really interesting book* (e.g., Ito – Tagliamonte 2003; Tagliamonte – Roberts 2005; Tagliamonte 2008). Moreover, based on Dixon's classification of adjectives (1977: 31), intensifier frequency has also been found to correlate with an increased number of intensified semantic classes (e.g., Partington 1993: 183; Ito – Tagliamonte 2003: 268; Stratton forthcoming[b]). In contrast, outgoing and less frequently used variants collocate with a fewer number of semantic classes and occur with a limited number of unique heads (e.g., Stratton 2020a: 219-221).[3]

As for the external conditioning factors, even outside of the field of variationist sociolinguistics, it is easy to recognize that language use can correlate with the external factor geography. For instance, in England, to intensify an adjective, an adolescent speaker might use *proper*, as in *that film was proper boring* (Stratton 2020b), whereas in parts of Scotland, an adolescent speaker might prefer *pure*, as in *that film was pure boring* (Macaulay 2006). In contrast, using variants such as *hella* and *totes*, as in *that movie was hella/totes boring* indexes North American speech (Bucholtz et al. 2007). However, in addition to geography, other external factors have been found to correlate with intensifier use, such as socioeconomic status (Macaulay 1995), sex (Tagliamonte – Roberts 2005; Tagliamonte 2008; Fuchs 2017; Stratton 2020d), and age (Tagliamonte 2008; Palacios-Martínez – Núñez-Pertejo, 2012; Núñez-Pertejo – Palacios-Martínez 2018).

In general, women have been found to use intensifiers more frequently than men (Tagliamonte 2008; D'Arcy 2015; Fuchs 2017), which also seems true crosslinguistically (Stratton 2020d). While correlation should not be confused with causation, explanations usually fall into one of two schools of thought. On the one hand, it is thought that women might use intensifiers more frequently than men to make up for potential

[3] The original semantic classes, as defined by Dixon (1977: 31) were: value (*good*, *bad*), dimension (e.g., *big*, *small*), physical property (e.g., *hard*, *soft*), speed (e.g., *fast*, *slow*), human propensity (e.g., *happy*, *kind*), age (e.g., *young*, *old*) and color (e.g., *red*, *yellow*). However, Dixon has nuanced his seven-category distinction over time. In Dixon (2005: 484-485), eleven categories are delineated, where similarity (e.g., *similar*, *different*), volition (e.g., *deliberate*, *accidental*), difficulty (e.g., *easy*, *challenging*) and qualification (e.g., *appropriate*, *rational*) are added.

suppression in society (Lakoff 1975; Erikson et al. 1978), but on the other hand, it is also hypothesized that their highly frequent use may be a product of high sociability and expressivity (Carli 1990). Age has also been found to be a strong predictor of intensifier use, with younger speakers having higher intensification rates than older speakers (Ito – Tagliamonte 2003: 265; Barnfield – Buchstaller 2010: 261-262; Stratton 2020d: 207). Recent diachronic evidence also suggests that the propensity to intensify may have increased gradually over time (Stratton forthcoming[b]). Studies have also shown that adolescent speakers use intensifiers differently to adults (Tagliamonte 2008; Núñez-Pertejo – Palacios-Martínez 2018) partly because "teenagers are cliquish to the nth degree" (Tagliamonte 2016a: 3), so depending on the British variety, adolescents have their own in-group language.

2.2 Adjectives of strangeness

To describe a proposition as "strange", speakers of English have several variants to choose from: *strange*, *weird*, *unusual*, *eerie*, *peculiar*, *creepy*, *bizarre*, *odd*. In their analysis of adjectives of strangeness in Toronto English, Tagliamonte – Brooke (2014) found that *weird* made up 70 percent of the system. The distribution of these adjectives in apparent time indicated that *strange* is moving out of favor and is being replaced with *weird*. Similar distributions were also found in British English where *weird* appears to be increasing in use whereas variants such as *peculiar* and *strange* appear to be going out of favor.

In similar research, adjectives of positive evaluation have been found to correlate with social factors, such as sex and age (Tagliamonte – Pabst 2020; Stratton forthcoming[a]). In their study on Canadian English, Tagliamonte – Pabst (2020) found that adjective choices correlated with the age of the speaker, with *cool* favored predominantly by younger speakers, whereas other variants, such as *terrific*, were used predominantly by older speakers. In a recent study on German, similar results were found, with age but also sex correlating with adjective choices (Stratton forthcoming[a]). These studies therefore reveal that the choice to use one adjective over a synonymously equivalent one is subject to the same linguistic and social constraints as other variable phenomena. One of the goals of the present study is to determine whether the distribution of strangeness adjectives is similar to that observed in unscripted language (Tagliamonte – Brooke 2014), but also to examine whether variants such as *weird* are favored mostly by younger speakers.

2.3 Fictional language

While language in fictional television is scripted, "it is the scriptwriters' aim to give a recognisable, and at the same time, fair representation" of the variety being portrayed (Stratton 2018: 795). "Writers use linguistic features that are typical of naturally-occurring conversation to achieve realistic dialogues" (Baños 2013: 526) and if the language does not appear authentic, "viewer identification with the show characters can be negatively impacted, thus, potentially, affecting the success of the show" (Quaglio 2009: 13). In addition to the study by Tagliamonte – Roberts (2005), there is a large body of growing empirical evidence to support the claim that language in fictional television can often reflect the linguistic changes taking place in naturally-occurring speech at least with respect to form, frequency, and distribution (Quaglio 2009; Bednarek 2010; Reichelt – Durham 2017; Stratton 2018). Beyond synchronic studies, fictional dialogue has long been used as a proxy for studying diachronic change (Jucker 1995; Culpepper – Kytö 2010), and given that television has become an integral part of modern culture, its influence on language and society is inevitably profound (Marshall – Werndly 2002: 2). If fictional language is a fair representation of real-life language, based on previous literature, one should expect to find the following in scripted speech:

- Amplifiers are more frequent than downtoners
- Boosters are more frequent than maximizers
- Younger speakers have higher intensification rates than older speakers
- Women use intensifiers more frequently than men
- The three most frequently used intensifiers are *so*, *really*, and *very*
- The intensifier *very* is favored predominantly by older speakers
- Intensifiers collocate more widely with predicative adjectives than attributive adjectives
- Highly frequent and developed intensifiers intensify a higher number of semantic classes
- The adjective *weird* makes up over 2/3 of the system of strangeness adjectives
- Younger speakers prefer *weird* over other functionally equivalent adjectives

To test these hypotheses, the British TV series *Misfits* was used. *Misfits* is a contemporary fictional drama which centers around delinquent

adolescents who, for various reasons, are subject to mandatory community service in London. Over five seasons, a series of unfortunate events leads to the killing of four probation workers. Although the majority of the dialog comes from the young delinquents, there is also supporting dialog from some adult or elderly speakers.[4] The protagonists represent an "ethically and geographically mixed group" which corresponds "to a 'mixed' Great Britain" (Zotevska 2013: 6). For instance, Alisha is from London, Finn is from Liverpool, Kelly, Rudy and Alex are from northern England, Nathan is from Ireland, Simon speaks with an Estuary accent, and Curtis represents MLE 'multicultural London English'. While it is not entirely clear where the speakers Abbey and Jess are from, they also have southern British accents. These ten characters, in addition to the supporting cast ($n = 5$), make up the *Misfits Corpus*, which consists of ca. 110,000 words. The TV series aired in November 2009 and concluded its fifth and final series in December 2013. However, due to the limited time depth, time is not treated as a variable in the present study.

The language in *Misfits* represents layered variability in terms of the intensifiers used. Some examples from the corpus are reported in (1) and (2). In (1a-e), the utterances are the same other than for the chosen intensifier variant. Because the intensifiers are functionally equivalent in meaning, that is, they are all boosters, they are apt for a variationist sociolinguistic analysis. The examples show both inter- and intra-speaker variability. The intensifiers are also used to intensify a variety of adjectives, which can appear predicatively (2a-c), attributively (2d-f), or function as their own discourse unit (2g-h). In the present study, the latter type is referred to as bare adjective intensification.

(1) (a) It's **dead** weird (Kelly, s1-ep1 [12:36])
(b) It's **so** weird (Cancer Patient, s5-ep7 [15:58])
(c) It's **really** weird (Abbey, s5-ep4 [38:57])
(d It's **fucking** weird (Curtis, s3-ep3 [19:18]])
(e) It's **too** weird (Abbey's GF, s5-ep4 [22:20]])
(f) I feel **really** weird (Kelly, s1-ep1 [6:55])
(g) …did any of you feel like **dead** weird? (Kelly, s1-ep1 [20:35])

(2) (a) I'm going to get some chocolate because I'm **very** upset (Rudy, s4-ep-1 [13:38])

[4] In the present study, 'adolescent' refers to people aged 16-24.

(b) If you're **so** happy, then why were you at the support group? (Finn, s5-ep5 [33:22])
(c) I just met this girl who's **really** nice (Rudy, s4-ep7, [26:24])
(d) You're a **very** attractive young man (LPW, s4-ep5 [36:00])
(e) That were a **bloody** brilliant holiday! (Rudy, s5-ep4 [29:31])
(f) I have **very** important probation worker business to attend to (Rudy, s4-ep1 [6:39])
(g) …**so** predictable… (Nathan, s1-ep4 [17:28])
(h) …**very** bossy… (Rudy, s3-ep4 [13:37])

3. Methodology

A personalized *Misfits Corpus* was created by downloading the transcripts from *www.springfieldspringfield.co.uk*, a website which provides a compendium of popular TV and movie scripts. The show was then watched closely with the transcripts to check for missing data, errors, and to code each utterance by speaker. While intensifiers can intensify several parts of speech, following previous research (e.g., Ito – Tagliamonte 2003; Tagliamonte – Roberts 2005), the present study focused specifically on the intensification of adjectives. However, not all adjectives are part of the variable context since not all adjectives can be intensified. Therefore, circumscription of the variable context was necessary, which, following previous literature, meant the exclusion of negative, comparative, and superlative tokens because these are not functionally equivalent in meaning (e.g., Ito – Tagliamonte 2003).

What remained was a list of intensifiable adjectives, some of which were intensified, some of which were not. Looking to the left of each adjective for the presence of an intensifier revealed whether it had been intensified or not. The intensification, or lack thereof, was coded respectively (*yes* [1] – *no* [0]). Adjectives of strangeness were also coded respectively. Each intensifiable adjective was manually coded for the appropriate sociolinguistic metadata (speaker, sex and age) and linguistic factors (such as syntactic position). Each intensifier was also coded according to the taxonomy of Quirk et al. (1985: 590) so that comparisons among functionally equivalent variants could be made. Following previous variationist work (e.g., D'Arcy 2015), a logistic regression was run in *Rbrul* (Johnson 2009), with occurrence versus absence of intensification run as the application value. Since age was not a statistically significant factor in Tagliamonte – Brooke (2014), the model was run on intensification only.

4. Results

4.1 Intensifiers

There were 1596 intensifiable adjectives in the corpus. However, of these, 89 were removed because they came from cameo characters who contributed too few words to be included in any meaningful representative quantitative analysis. What remained were 1506 adjectives produced by 15 speakers, of which 556 were intensified (Table 1). The overall intensification rate of adjectives was therefore 37%, which, while on the high end, is in the range of what has been observed previously in English (Ito – Tagliamonte 2003; Tagliamonte – Roberts 2005; D'Arcy 2015; Tagliamonte 2016b; Stratton 2018). The intensification rate in apparent time is reported in Figure 1, which, like previous research (e.g., Ito – Tagliamonte 2003: 265; Barnfield – Buchstaller 2010: 261-262), shows a higher preference for intensification among younger speakers than older speakers.

Table 1. The overall distribution of intensification in Misfits

Total $N = 1507$			
Intensified		Not Intensified	
%	N	%	N
37	556	63	950

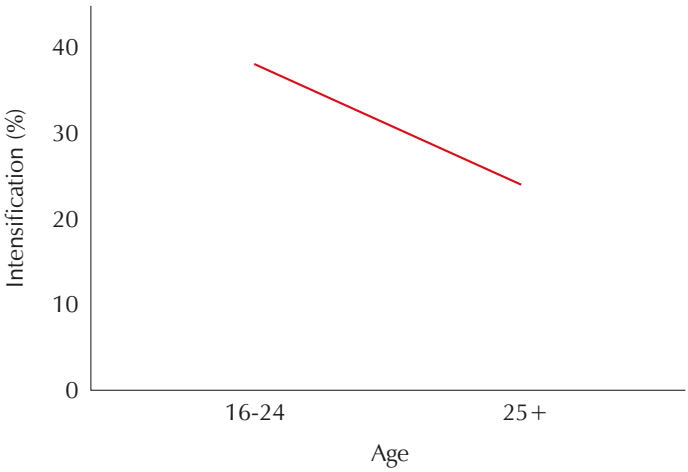

Figure 1. Intensification rate by age

As for differences in intensification among men and women, like in previous research (e.g., Tagliamonte 2008; Fuchs 2017), women intensified more adjectives than men. Women had an intensification rate of 52% ($n = 216/418$) whereas men had an intensification rate of 31% ($n = 340/1088$). The breakdown of the intensification rate by character, proportionally to the number of intensifiable adjectives each speaker produced, is reported in Table 2.

The 556 intensifiers are ranked by frequency in Table 3. When classified according to their scalar function, it becomes clear that, as found in previous studies (Peters 1994: 271; D'Arcy 2015: 460), amplifiers were more frequent than downtoners (Figure 2). Furthermore, within the subset of amplifiers, boosters ($n = 434/459$) were more frequent than maximizers ($n = 25/459$). As for the specific variants, as has been observed in studies on naturally occurring speech (e.g., Ito – Tagliamonte 2003; Tagliamonte 2008), the three most frequently used boosters were *so*, *really*, and *very*. The fourth most frequently used booster was *fucking*, which has also been reported as the most frequent intensifier (after *very*, *really*, and *so*) (Aijmer 2018: 75). Like in Aijmer (2018: 75), *fucking* was used almost more frequently by young women than young men.

Table 2. Intensification rate by character

Name	Sex	Total Adj	Intensified	Rate
Abbey	F	51	23	45%
Alisha	F	94	55	59%
Jess	F	88	43	49%
Kelly	F	83	44	53%
Sally	F	25	10	40%
Girl I	F	67	37	55%
Abbey's GF	F	10	4	40%
Alex	M	38	9	24%
Curtis	M	90	31	35%
Finn	M	146	47	32%
Nathan	M	234	76	33%
Last P-W4	M	29	5	17%
Seth	M	22	4	18%
Rudy	M	485	157	32%
Simon	M	44	11	25%
Total		1506	556	

In terms of the ranking by age, the most frequently used variant among young speakers was *really*, followed by *so*, followed by *very*. While these were also the three most frequently used variants among older speakers, older speakers preferred *very* over *really* and *so*. This ranking order is in line with previous work, where the use of *so* is led predominantly by younger speakers, whereas *very* is used more frequently by older speakers (e.g., Ito – Tagliamonte 2003; Tagliamonte – Roberts 2005; Tagliamonte 2008). The ranking of variants by sex also lined up with previous research. The variant *very* made up 31% of the male booster system but only 10% of the female booster system. In contrast, *so* made up 20% of the male system, and 26% of the female system. Therefore, consistent with previous work on intensifiers (e.g., Tagliamonte – Roberts 2005) the data show that women are leading the change toward using *so*, whereas men use variants which have been around for much longer (e.g., *very*). The distribution of *very* in apparent time also suggests that *very* is an outgoing variant whereas *so* is the favored variant. As for low frequency variants, descriptively speaking, *well* and *bloody* were used more frequently by men, whereas women preferred the booster *dead*.

Table 3. The frequency of adjective intensifiers in Misfits

Intensifier	N	%
so	93	17
really	92	17
very	91	16
fucking	43	8
a bit	33	6
pretty	31	6
too	26	5
all	26	5
bloody	14	3
quite	14	3
dead	11	2
totally	10	2
absolutely	8	1.5
Double intensifiers[1]	19	3
Other	80	5.5
Total	556	100

[1] 'Double intensifiers' are consecutive intensifiers. Examples from the dataset include: *that is so fucking romantic, a really fucking serious falling out,* and *I feel really fucking weird*.

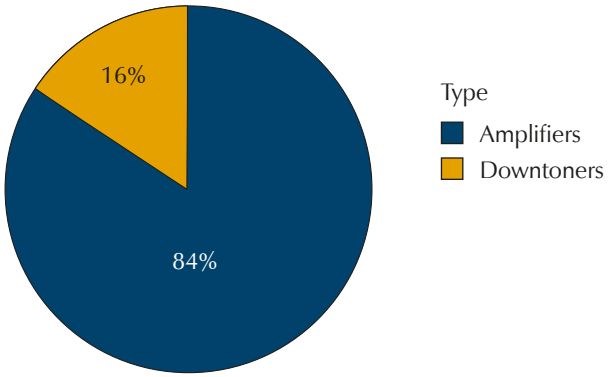

Figure 2. Frequency: Amplification vs. downtoning

(3) (a) Sorry, that was **really** unprofessional (Sally, s1-ep5 [4:12])
(b) Why do you think I was always **so** mean to him? (Nathan, s2-ep3 [18:00])
(c) They're being **all** coy and shy (Finn, season 5, ep. 5 [15:28])
(d) I was **fucking** ecstatic (Last Probation Worker, s4-ep5 [14:40])
(e) Well I can't drink lager, it's **too** gassy (Seth, s3-ep3 [22:04])
(f) Yeah, that's **dead** smart (Kelly, season 1, ep. 3 [26: 28])
(g) My aunt and uncle are **well** religious (Curtis, s1-ep5 [5:48])[5]
(h) I gave her a **right** good seeing to (Nathan, s1-ep2 [36:04])
(i) He's a rat-faced glue sniffer. Yeah, he's **proper** ratty (Kelly, s1-ep3 [6:20])

As for the syntactic distribution, predicative intensification was more common than attributive intensification, a finding consistent with previous work (e.g., Stratton 2020d; Stratton forthcoming[b]). As for the collocational width, of the semantic classes delineated by Dixon (2005: 484-485), human propensity, value, and physical property were intensified most frequently, which is also consistent with findings on naturally occurring speech (e.g., Ito – Tagliamonte 2003: 268-270; Méndez-Naya 2008: 44).

To examine whether the aforementioned linguistic (syntactic position, semantic classification) and social factors (sex, age) had a significant effect

[5] Other interesting examples of the intensifier *well* include: *I was well stressed* (s1-ep3 [38:08]), *I thought you two were well loved up* (s3-ep3 [18:45]) and *you're well butch* (s1-ep3 [31:29]). From the stress, it is clear *well* was functioning as an intensifier given that in its current intensifying use in British English *well* is always stressed (*OED*, *well*, adv. and *n*. IV16c.)

on the use of intensifiers, a mixed effects logistic regression model was run in *Rbrul* (Johnson 2009). Syntactic position had two levels [attributive, predicative] and semantic classification had five levels [human propensity, value, physical property, difficulty, dimension]. Bare intensification was not included as a level in the factor of syntactic position because there were only a few instances in the corpus. For semantic classification, only five semantic classes were included for the same reason. Sex had two levels [male, female] and age had two levels [16-24, 25+]. Intensification was run as the application value. The output of the model is reported in Table 4.

Table 4. Logistic regression of the factors conditioning intensification

Input .136 Total *N* 700	N	%	FW
Linguistic			
SYNTACTIC POSITION			
predicative	397	37.5	.74
attributive	303	.07	.26
Range			48
SEMANTIC CLASS			
human propensity	206	29.6	.63
value	264	25.0	.57
physical property	154	21.4	.52
difficulty	13	15.4	.42
qualification	63	12.7	.37
Range			26
Social			
SEX (.012)			
female	116	39.7	.59
male	584	21.2	.40
Range			19
AGE (.008)			
16-24	651	25.2	.65
25+	49	.12	.36
Range			29
Random Effect *Speaker*	*SD* = .3005 *n* = 15		

A significant effect for all four factors was found. As the factor weights (FW) indicate, women used intensifiers at a significantly higher frequency than men, younger speakers intensified significantly more adjectives than older speakers, predicative adjectives had a significantly higher intensification rate than attributive adjectives, and adjectives of human propensity, value, and physical property were intensified most frequently. The range for the factor syntactic position (48) indicates that syntactic position had the most significant effect, of the linguistic factors, on the use of intensifiers. The range for age (29) indicates that, of the social factors, age had the strongest effect on the use of intensifiers.

4.2 Adjectives of strangeness

Of the 1506 adjectives, 113 were adjectives of strangeness. Like in work on naturally occurring speech (Tagliamonte – Brooke 2014), this system was dominated predominantly by one variant, *weird*, which made up 77% of the system. Moreover, like in Tagliamonte – Brooke (2014), *strange* was the second most frequently used variant, where it made up 10% in *Misfits* and 14% in Toronto English. The distribution of variants from *Misfits* is reported in Table 5.

Table 5. The distribution of strangeness adjectives

Variants	Tokens	%
weird	81	77
strange	10	10
wrong	5	5
funny[1]	3	3
creepy	2	2
unusual	2	2
spooky	1	1
rapey	1	1
Total	105	100%

[1] Tagliamonte – Brooke (2014) removed *funny* from their analysis due its polysemy. However, the three tokens included here were unambiguous. An advantage of using fictional television as a source of linguistic data is that its meaning can often be inferred from the context, paralinguistic information (i.e. the character's facial feature), prosody/intonation, and general information about the storyline.

As for the distribution by age, adults used *strange* 50% of the time, versus a use of only 8% by younger speakers. In addition to using *weird* and *strange*, young speakers also made use of some low frequency variants such as *funny* and *creepy*. Like in Toronto English, men and women used *weird* at almost the same rate. Of the 81 intensifiable tokens of *weird*, 38 (47%) were intensified. Examples of use appear in (4).

(4) (a) I liked you which is really **weird** because you can be such a total dick (Jess)
(b) Wouldn't that be a bit **weird**? (Finn)
(c) I feel well **weird** (Kelly)
(d) You're like, proper **strange** (Girl I)
(e) People are **strange** mate (Rudy)
(f) What's with the **strange** lingering silence? (Nathan)
(e) Have you seen anything **unusual**? (Sally)
(f) The **creepy** coach guy…. (Alisha)
(g) but not in a bloody **creepy** way! (Rudy)

5. Discussion and concluding remarks

The present study set out to examine the validity of using fictional television as a reliable source of linguistic data for examining aspects of language variation and change. In comparing both the intensifier system and the system of strangeness adjectives in the *Misfits Corpus* with naturally occurring speech, few quantitative differences were found. All ten hypotheses outlined in Section 2.3 were supported. Amplifiers were more frequent than downtoners, boosters were more frequent than maximizers, younger speakers had significantly higher intensification rates than older speakers, and women used intensifiers at a significantly higher frequency than men. The three most frequently used boosters in British English are *so*, *really*, and *very*, which was also the case in the *Misfits Corpus*. The variant *fucking* has also reportedly become the fourth most frequently used variant among British adolescents (Aijmer 2018: 75), which was also true in the *Misfits*. Moreover, older speakers used *very* more frequently than *really* and *so*, predicative adjectives were intensified more frequently than attributive adjectives, and the most frequently used intensifiers collocated the highest number of semantic classes. The distribution of strangeness adjectives in the *Misfits*

Corpus also mirrored distributions in naturally occurring speech, with *weird* making up over 70% of the system.

Therefore, at least insofar as the *Misfits* is concerned, there is little reason to believe that the language used in fictional television is significantly different to real-life vernacular speech. Previous claims about the reliability of using fictional language as a proxy for examining language variation and change (e.g., Tagliamonte – Roberts 2005) are therefore supported. Although the present study used data from only one TV show, and different genres may have different reliability rates, the quantitative similarities between the *Misfits* and real-life speech are clear. It is unlikely that scriptwriters are consciously aware of current linguistic research regarding the correlation between intensifier use and, for instance, women, and age, yet these correlations bleed through into the scriptwriting. Thus, on the one hand, there is potentially empirical evidence to suggest that scriptwriting can manifest some intuitively correct and perceptible social assumptions about language use in characterization, even if these core intuitions are tacit and below the level of consciousness. However, on the other hand, one possible reason for the similarity between the language in contemporary fictional drama and naturally occurring language is the actors and scriptwriters are typically native speakers of the language. Therefore, even though the language is scripted, their portrayal of the language often brings about a reasonable representation of the language; unconscious features of the language are still transmitted and thus observable in the data.

There is, however, one obvious caveat. If, by way of contrast, linguistic features present in a contemporary re-enactment of a historical period (i.e., a historical drama like *Downton Abbey*) were compared with authentic data on the historical period, one might expect there to be a much lower reliability rate. The language of a naturalistic contemporary drama reflects, to a large extent, naturally occurring speech because the scriptwriters and actors are contemporary speakers of the language. However, this is clearly not the case for 20th and 21st century historical dramas. Some fictional sources have no reference point (e.g., *Game of Thrones*), while others might be based on a real historical period (e.g., *Downton Abbey*) but are portrayed by actors displaced in time, and often space. These genres aside, the present study provides empirical support for the use of naturalistic contemporary fictional dramas as a proxy for examining language variation and change; sources which can be particularly useful in the absence of corpora on real-life vernacular speech.

REFERENCES

Sources

Springfield! Springfield!
www.springfieldspringfield.co.uk, accessed December 2019

Special studies

Aijmer, K.
2018 "That's well bad: Some new intensifiers in spoken British English". In: V. Brezina – R. Love – K. Aijmer (eds.) *Corpus Approaches to Contemporary British Speech: Sociolinguistics Studies of the Spoken BNC2014*. London: Routledge, 60-95.

Baños, R.
2003 "That is so cool': Investigating the translation of adverbial intensifiers in English Spanish dubbing through a parallel corpus of sitcoms", *Perspectives: Studies in Translation Theory and Practice* 21, 526-542.

Barnfield, K. – I. Buchstaller
2010 "Intensifiers on Tyneside: Longitudinal developments and new trends", *English World Wide* 31 (3), 252-287.

Bednarek, M.
2010 *The Language of Fictional Television: Drama and Identity*. London: Bloomsbury.

Bolinger, D.
1972 *Degree Words*. The Hague, Paris: Mouton.

Bucholtz, M. et al.
2007 "Hella nor call or totally so call? The perceptual dialectology of California", *Journal of English Linguistics* 35 (4), 325-352.

Carli, L.
1990 "Gender, language, and influence", *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 59, 941-951.

Culpeper, J. – M. Kytö
2010 *Early Modern English Dialogues: Spoken Interaction as Writing*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

D'Arcy, A.
2015 "Stability, stasis and change", *Diachronica* 32 (4), 449-493.

Dixon, R.M.W.
1977 "Where have all the adjectives gone?", *Studies in Language* 1, 19-80.
2005 *A Semantic Approach to English Grammar* (2nd edn). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Fuchs, R.
2017 "Do women (still) use more intensifiers than men? Recent changes in the sociolinguistics of intensifiers in British English", *International Journal of Corpus Linguistics* 22 (3), 345-374.

Heyd, T.
2010 "How you guys doin'? Staged orality and emerging plural address in the television series *Friends*", *American Speech* 85 (1), 33-66.
Ito, R. – S.A. Tagliamonte
2003 "Well weird, right dodgy, very strange, really cool: Layering and recycling in English intensifiers", *Language in Society* 32 (2), 257-279.
Johnson, D.E.
2009 "Getting off the GoldVarb standard: Introducing Rbrul for mixed-effects variable rule analysis", *Language and Linguistics Compass* 3 (1), 359-383.
Jucker, A.H. (ed.)
1995 *Historical pragmatics: Pragmatic Developments in the History of English*. Amsterdam, Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
Labov, W.
1972 *Sociolinguistic Patterns*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
1990 "The intersection of sex and social class in the course of linguistic change", *Language Variation and Change* 2 (2), 205-254.
Lakoff, R.
1975 *Language and Women's Place*. New York: Harper and Row.
Macaulay, R.
1995 "The adverbs of authority", *English World-Wide* 16, 37-60.
2006 "Pure grammaticalization: The development of a teenage intensifier", *Language Variation and Change* 18 (3), 267-283.
Marshall, J. – A. Werndly
2002 *The Language of Television*. London: Routledge.
Méndez-Naya, B.
2008 „'The which is most and right harde to answere': Intensifying *right* and *most* in earlier English". In: R. Dury – M. Gotti – M. Dossena (eds.) *English Historical Linguistics 2006. Vol. II: Lexical and semantic change*. Amsterdam, Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 31-51.
Méndez-Naya, B. – P. Pahta
2010 "Intensifiers in competition: The picture from early English medical writing". In: I. Taavitsainen – P. Pahta (eds.) *Early Modern English Medical Texts: Corpus Description and Studies*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 191-214.
Núñez-Pertejo, P. – I. Palacios-Martínez
2018 "Intensifiers in MLE: New trends and developments", *Nordic Journal of English Studies* 17 (2), 116-155.
Palacios-Martínez, I. – P. Núñez-Pertejo
2012 "He's absolutely massive. It's a super day. Madonna, she is a wicked singer. Youth language and intensification: A corpus-based study", *Text and Talk* 32 (6), 773-796.

Partington, A.
1993 "Corpus evidence of language change: The case of intensifiers". In: M. Baker – G. Francis – E. Bonelli (eds.) *Text and Technology. In Honour of John Sinclair*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 177-192.
Peters, H.
1994 "Degree adverbs in early modern English". In: D. Kastovsky (ed.) *Studies in Early Modern English*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 269-288.
Quaglio, P.
2009 *Television Dialogue: The Sitcom Friends vs. Natural Conversation*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
Quirk, R. et al.
1985 *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language*. London and New York: Longman.
Reichelt, S. – M. Durham
2017 "Adjective intensification as a means of characterization: Portraying in-group membership and Britishness in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*", *Journal of English Linguistics* 45 (1), 60-87.
Stange, U.
2017 "'You're so not going to believe this': The use of GenX *so* in constructions with future *going to* in American English", *American Speech: A Quarterly ofLinguistic Usage* 92 (4), 487-524.
Stratton, J.M.
2018 "The use of the adjective intensifier *well* in British English: A case study of *The Inbetweeners*", *English Studies* 99 (8), 793-816.
2020a "A diachronic analysis of the adjective intensifier *well* from Early Modern English to Present Day English", *Canadian Journal of Linguistics* 65 (2), 216-245.
2020b "'That's proper cool': The emerging intensifier 'proper' in British English", *English Today,* 1-8.
2020c "Corpora and diachronic analysis of English". In: E. Friginal – J.A. Hardy (eds.) *The Routledge Handbook of Corpus Approaches to Discourse Analysis.* Abingdon, New York: Routledge, 202-218.
2020d "Adjective intensifiers in German", *Journal of Germanic Linguistics* 32 (2), 183-215.
(forthcoming[a]) "Tapping into German adjective variability: A variationist sociolinguistic approach", *Journal of Germanic Linguistics*.
(forthcoming[b]) "Old English intensifiers: The beginnings of the English intensifier system", *Journal of Historical Linguistics*.
Tagliamonte, S.A.
2008 "So different and pretty cool! Recycling intensifiers in Canadian English", Special issue of *English Language and Linguistics: Intensifiers* 12, 361-394.

2016a *Teen Talk: The Language of Adolescents*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

2016b "So sick or so cool? The language of youth on the internet", *Language in Society* 45 (1), 1-32.

Tagliamonte, S.A. – J. Brooke

2014 "A weird (language) tale: Variation and change in the adjectives of strangeness", *American speech* 89 (1), 4-41.

Tagliamonte, S.A. – C. Roberts

2005 "So weird; so cool; so innovative: The use of intensifiers in the television series *Friends*", *American Speech* 80 (3), 280-300.

Tagliamonte, S.A. – K. Pabst

2020 "A cool comparison: Adjectives of positive evaluation in Toronto, Canada and York, England", *Journal of English Linguistics* 48 (1), 3-30.

Weinreich U. et al.

1968 *Empirical Foundations for a Theory of Language Change*. Austin: University of Texas Press.

Zotevska, E.

2013 *Representation of British Teenage Slang in the TV-series* Misfits*: A Communicative Approach to Teenage Slang*. Unpublished B.A. thesis, Gothenburg: University of Gothenburg.

Address: JAMES M. STRATTON, Department of Linguistics School of Languages and Cultures Purdue University 640 Oval Drive, West Lafayette IN, 47906, USA Purdue, e-mail: jstratt@purdue.edu
ORCID code: orcid.org/0000-0002-7255-5545.