

A corpus-based study of adjectival intensification in West Germanic

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Adjectival intensification is the phenomenon of increasing or decreasing –compared with some presumed standard– the quality expressed by an adjective. *Very* in (1a) is an example of an ‘increaser’/amplifier, *fairly* one of a ‘decreaser’/downtoner. In West Germanic, the phenomenon can be achieved through such adverbs but also through more periphrastic constructions, compounds and affixes –as in Afrikaans, Dutch and German in (1b) to (1d) respectively (e.g. Van der Wouden & Foolen 2017).

- (1) a. *very/fairly large*
- b. *so nuuskierig soos 'n aap* ‘as curious as a monkey’
- c. *ijskoud* ‘ice-cold’
- d. *urgemütlich* ‘really cozy’ (lit. ‘primal-cozy’)

Much research has been undertaken on adjectival intensification in individual West Germanic languages. Attention has been paid to, inter alia, the source domains of intensifiers and factors like gender and age in their use (e.g. Claudi 2006, Fuchs 2017). Stratton (2020) also shows that German resembles English in the frequency with which it intensifies adjectives and in its preference for amplifiers to downtoners. Our study aims to check whether the same is true of Afrikaans and Dutch but will not be limited to intensification by adverbs. We seek to test too Van der Wouden & Foolen’s (2017:84) hypothesis that, consistent with Van Haeringen’s (1956) general observations, “German tends to more ‘synthetic’ forms [of adjectival intensification], whereas Dutch, and even more so English, tends to ‘analytic’ forms”. The position of Afrikaans will be considered as well.

We will extract a random sample of 1500 intensifiable adjectives per language from similar POS-tagged online language data (e.g. NWU/Kommentaarkorpus, similar SoNaR-components). Sampling will skip adjectives not (usually) able to be intensified (e.g. *pregnant*) or occurring in non-intensifiable contexts (e.g. superlatives). Every adjective will then be coded for language, presence/absence of intensification, functional intensifier type (cf. 1a’s distinction) and formal intensifier type (cf. 1a to 1d). Importantly, our classification will consider context (e.g. amplifying or downtoning *quite*) and allow for potential ambiguity (e.g. *kei-* ‘rock’ as a compound or prefix in *keihard* ‘really hard’).

Our initial analysis –of 200 adjectives per language– shows all four languages to exhibit comparable rates of adjectival intensification *and* similarly higher rates of amplifiers than of downtoners. This finding might be indicative of a cross-linguistic preference for amplification. Our preliminary results also suggest that, in actual usage and somewhat pace Van der Wouden & Foolen (2017), adjectival intensification is predominantly done through adverbs in all four languages. Dutch and German do seem to fall back on affixes slightly more than Afrikaans and English and, though the frequency of affixes is similar in Dutch and German, the latter appears to employ a wider variety of such forms than the former.

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Van der Wouden, T. & A. Foolen. 2017. A most serious and extraordinary problem: Intensification of adjectives in Dutch, German and English. *Leuvense Bijdragen* 101, 82-101.

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