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BACHELOR THESIS

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# On expressivity and ambiguity

Comparing use of adjectival intensifiers *quite*, *bloody*, and *fucking* in spoken British English

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# 1 Introduction

“The people I know, who swear the most, tend to have the widest vocabularies. And the kind of person who says swearing is a sign of a poor vocabulary, usually have a pretty poor vocabulary. The sort of twee person who thinks swearing is in any way a sign of a lack of education, or of a lack of verbal interest, is just... *fucking* lunatic.”

Stephen Fry

## 1.1 General background

The above quote by beloved British comedian and actor Stephen Fry serves as a fitting introduction to the topic of this work, namely expressivity in conversations. The first part of the quote implies that Fry has, in the least, an intuition of swearing not being a distinguishing characteristic between more and less sophisticated individuals. By the second part Fry wittily conveys he does not hold people who spurn swearing in high regard, presumably following a womb-to-tomb experience of being told not to swear. Fry’s opinion may not be shared by a larger audience, but it probably comes as no surprise to any reader that spoken language utterances are filled with semantically vacuous irrelevant words. These words are, however, not ‘unnecessary’. Syntactically embedded swear words, as opposed to exclamations, can generally be assigned to a much larger and productive group of words that are used to convey speaker perspective, but many of these words are also used to express degree. By the latter influence these words induce truth-propositional change, such as in ‘John is tall, but he is not *very/extremely* tall’. Members of this grammatical category of adjectival modifiers that have an expressive character besides their role as degree modifiers are henceforth termed *intensifiers*.

Swear words, let alone intensifiers as a whole, defy clear-cut linguistic classification. At best it can be concluded that these items have an emotional connotation when used (Napoli & Hoeksema, 2009), but even then considerable variability remains. (1a), for example, is more easily used in conversation with a manager about a co-worker than (1b). In fact, the UK Office of Communications published a report (Ofcom, 2016) about the acceptability of all known swear words in public broadcasting. Including a ‘quick reference guide’, the office summarizes how offensive swear words are on a scale from ‘milder’ to ‘strongest’ words, but stresses the importance of context throughout the report. The main take-away is that the choice of swear words is clearly determined by what is a socially accepted time and place, which complicates linguistic inquiry.

- (1) a. The *git* always nicks my pens.  
 b. The *motherfucker* always nicks my pens.

All hope is not lost, however, as a subset of intensifiers are allowed in the same syntactic slot, specifically in intensifier + adjective (+ *syntactic head*) constructions, which accommodates a comparison of these items on a broader scale. Many adjectives, especially those with an expressive character, can and are used to amplify the message a speaker conveys. This is presumably a common way of achieving this, because natural language’s property of recursion (an observation usually attributed to Chomsky, 1957) then facilitates considerable control over such amplification. For instance, the examples in (2) show that the emotional connotation of a message naturally becomes stronger when more adjectives are chained together. It is even possible to chain as many as five adjectives if one is especially keen to express dissatisfaction (see (3), taken from chapter two in O’Brian, 2003). Although

prosody and rhythm influence the exact force of the utterance, no one prefers (2c) sentence over (2a) if a more mellow tone is to be achieved. The prevalence of this syntactic structure in conversations can straightforwardly be approximated by use of the British National Corpus<sup>[1]</sup> (BNC, 2007). Such constructions are indeed abundant in the spoken register, occurring 11536 times per million words (using the query ‘AJ0/AV0 AJ0/AV0 +’<sup>[2]</sup>), which highlights the feasibility of focusing on this particular construction. A consideration of the more intricate workings of such adjectival chaining follows in Section 1.4.

- (2) a. The *bloody* git kissed my sister.  
 b. The *annoying bloody* git kissed my sister.  
 c. The *extremely annoying bloody* git kissed my sister.
- (3) There are some *slack-arsed, bloody-minded* men — *flute-playing, fiddle-scraping, present-seeking, tale-bearing, double-poxed* hounds that would keep you waiting about for a month; but I am not one of them.

Before proceeding to more specific facts, a few general notions about intensifiers should be established. First, these lexical items span several areas of linguistic investigation. They are syntactically constrained, but to a highly variable degree. Intensifiers such as *-ass(ed)*, e.g. (4ab), can only occur as a suffix on adjectives. Even then, grammaticality is reserved for attributive use, as its predicative use in *?That dude is a weird-ass* is presumably rejected by most speakers. Others, such as *rather*, can occur virtually everywhere (4c), and at least modify adjectives (*rather unfair*), adverbs (*rather unfairly*), and verbs (*I’d rather walk*). Besides syntactic variability, there is a substantial difference in semantic sensitivity for most intensifiers. *Utterly*, for example, only occurs in negative contexts (Quirk et al., 1985, footnote p. 470; see example (4d)), as the BNC confirms: *utterly disgraceful, utterly impossible, utterly unforgivable, utterly denied, and utterly deserted* are the top occurrences. Contrastively, *perfectly* is presumably always used in positive contexts (4e), for which the top BNC occurrences are *perfectly honest, perfectly well, perfectly clear, perfectly happy, and perfectly good*.

- (4) a. He is a weird-ass dude.  
 b. \*He is a weird dude-ass.  
 c. John [rather]<sub>1</sub> is being [rather]<sub>2</sub> unfair [rather]<sub>3</sub>.  
 d. John thinks cheating is utterly <sup>?</sup>forgivable/unforgivable.  
 e. John is a fantastically good/<sup>?</sup>bad writer.

Second, any conclusions drawn from analysis of intensifiers are likely influenced by theoretical definitions. A key contrast in this respect is commonly found between semanticists and pragmaticists, which unsurprisingly pertains to how the contribution to utterance meaning should be interpreted. A semanticist may claim that all intensifiers change the truth-conditional status of an utterance, while a pragmaticist prefers to solve the expressivity through (non-)linguistic context. No attempt is made to settle this issue here, but a standpoint is necessary to proceed. As Gutzmann (2013) remarks, expressive intensifiers do not necessarily contribute truth-conditional content. This is most plain for cases such as (5). The denominator denotes the truth-conditional content, while the divisor denotes the expressive content of the utterance when (most) intensifiers are inserted. Such insertion does not change

<sup>[1]</sup> The (balanced) British National Corpus contains 100,000,000 British English sentences in written and spoken register. The sentences were collected in the early 1990s. The BNC is especially useful for comparing between social variables, as it also contains information about the age, sex, and social class of the speakers.

<sup>[2]</sup> In more readable terms: each result belongs to one of these cases followed by a non-optional term: (1) adjective - adjective, (2) adjective - adverb, (3) adverb - adjective, or (4) adverb - adverb.

the fact that the speaker hears the dog barking, so at first it seems the pragmaticist makes the more accurate overall claim. It is, however, possible to analyze intensifying adjectives as a quantification restriction in semantics proper. Section 1.4.3 expands on this notion.

- (5) I hear the  $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{fucking} \\ \text{bloody} \end{array} \right\}$  dog barking =  $\frac{\text{Speaker strongly dislikes the dog/barking}}{\text{Speaker hears that the dog is barking}}$
- (6) a. I have  $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{quite} \\ \text{?rather} \\ \text{??somewhat} \end{array} \right\}$  a problem =  $\frac{\text{Speaker thinks problem is noteworthy}}{\text{Speaker has a problem}}$
- b. They are  $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{quite} \\ \text{rather} \\ \text{??somewhat} \end{array} \right\}$  the hit with the locals.

The case is more complex for the non-expressive intensifier *quite*, as it cannot directly modify nouns, although it can modify a DP (see the examples in (6)). In such cases it becomes clear that *quite* does not behave solely as an adjective or adverb. Similarly to *bloody* and *fucking*, it changes the compositional meaning of the sentence. The sentence type changes from strictly declarative to (partially) subjective, which suggests *quite* is an intensifier. The problem is that it is uncertain whether *quite* can readily be replaced with other intensifiers while retaining syntactic structure. There are cases for which this holds, but also cases in which grammaticality is less clear-cut (compare (6a) and (6b)). Moreover, it can be argued that the truth conditions *do* change when *quite* is inserted. If the truth conditions of, for example, (6b) are assumed to include that the local popularity of the referents of the subject *they* is unequivocally higher than ‘just popular’, it can be argued that the sentence is true if and only if the referents somehow objectively exceeds a normal level of popularity conveyed by *the hit*. This would mean that *quite* fundamentally changes the compositional meaning of the sentence, and requires that *quite* has a singular albeit conditional meaning. The latter consideration is problematic if *quite* is to be considered an intensifier (and not a generic degree modifier).

However, if *quite* does change the truth-conditions of an utterance it is expected that it has some semantic core meaning, but this is clearly not the case. *Quite* only adds any meaning, whether semantic or pragmatic, in context of other elements with a clear semantic contribution. A sentence as *it is quite* is therefore meaningless, even when it serves a response to a tag question, which as an environment typically allows for minimal affirmative responses (see example 7). Responding with singular *Quite* is grammatical, but this can not be a simple case of an ellipsis (as is typically assumed to apply to ‘short’ or ‘fragment’ answers, see e.g. Merchant, 2005). *Quite*’s dependency on meaning-bearing elements is stressed once more by the grammatical contrast between *it is quite* and *it quite is*. This notion is particularly strengthened by the fact that the semantically bleached verb *is* also depends heavily on more meaningful elements in its environment. Furthermore, when *quite* contributes meaning, it is ambiguous in neutral discourse (Paradis, 1997; see also Section 1.2.1). This ambiguity is considered thoroughly in the rest of this study, so it is not extensively discussed here. Most important at this point is that *quite* can be seen as an intensifier if its meaning is not static, and therefore not consistently truth-conditional. Forgoing further discussion on the exact semantic status of *quite*, it can be concluded that its uses clearly include intensification.

- (7) Speaker A: The Eiffel Tower is huge, isn’t it?  
Speaker B: Quite/<sup>?</sup>It is quite/It quite is!

Returning to the general topic, it should be stressed that the most frequently used intensifiers are not as ‘intense’ as *fucking*. Other relatively expressive intensifiers include *damn* and *bloody*, but in spoken British English the most common intensifiers are *very*, *quite*, and *rather*. The main difference

between these intensifiers seems to be in ‘offensiveness’ or expressivity, i.e. the former group expressing more a more emotional speaker attitude than the latter. A brief look on syntactic restraints proves this is not the complete picture. Examples are taken from (sentences containing *bloody* as an intensifier in) the BNC. Examples are noted in boldface with their respective text identifier and sentence number in the BNC, which is the manner of referencing suggested by the developers.

All intensifiers can modify attributively used adjectives, see (8), but more ‘offensive’ intensifiers modify nouns DP-internally as opposed to the DP-external modification of ‘less offensive’ intensifiers (e.g. *that’s quite a car*; see also examples (6) and (10)). Example (9) shows that expressive intensifiers are sensitive to focus particles, and even seem to require some indication of focus as opposed to less expressive intensifiers. Crucially, however, the examples with verbs in (11) and (12) show that a simple offensiveness-dichotomy does not offer much explanatory power, as intensifiers with similar levels of ‘offensiveness’ differ in grammaticality. Instead, intensifiers are sensitive to linguistic cues as well as extralinguistic social cues. The complex picture that emerges from this interplay is the topic to be explored in this work.

First, the etymology of *quite*, *bloody*, and *fucking* is summarized and discussed in Section 1.2. The multiple factors of intensifier usage are more thoroughly explored in Section 1.3 and 1.4. Specifically, Section 1.3 considers the importance of social factors when comparing intensifiers with a clear difference in expressivity, which serves as the set-up for the diachronic comparison of data from the ‘original’ BNC with data from the recently compiled BNC2014 (BNC2014, 2017) in Section 2. Section 1.4 summarizes attempts at linguistic classification and provides a framework to be used for a questionnaire in Section 3. Section 1.4.1 deals with quantification of intensifiers, while Section 1.4.2 deals with the adjectival part of the construction at discussion. Section 1.4.3 combines the notions from Sections 1.4.1 and 1.4.2 into a model for intensifier-adjective constructions. Section 1.5 presents the questions and aims of the current study.

(8) **KRO 1360**: They make them in  $\left. \begin{array}{l} \text{bloody} \\ \text{damn} \\ \text{fucking} \\ \text{quite} \\ \text{very} \\ \text{rather} \end{array} \right\}$  big batches now.

(9) **KCG 1606**: If he can lie <sup>b</sup>(<sup>a</sup>that)  $\left. \begin{array}{l} {}^a\text{bloody} \\ {}^a\text{damn} \\ {}^a\text{fucking} \\ {}^b\text{quite} \\ {}^b\text{very} \\ {}^b\text{rather} \end{array} \right\}$  easily.

(10) **KBE 9665**: It’s only a  $\left. \begin{array}{l} \text{bloody} \\ \text{damn} \\ \text{fucking} \\ * \text{quite} \\ * \text{very} \\ * \text{rather} \end{array} \right\}$  car.

(11) **KBE 8009**: I don’t  $\left. \begin{array}{l} \text{bloody} \\ * \text{damn} \\ \text{fucking} \\ \text{quite} \\ * \text{very} \\ * \text{rather} \end{array} \right\}$  know.

- (12) KC7 1240: She's got so much tuna she could  $\left. \begin{array}{l} \text{bloody} \\ * \text{damn} \\ \text{fucking} \\ ? \text{quite} \\ * \text{very} \\ ? \text{rather} \end{array} \right\}$  start an aquarium up.

## 1.2 Etymology

### 1.2.1 *Quite*

An etymological account of *quite* is difficult to find or compile. Given its flexible linguistic environment this does not come as a surprise. The development of modern *quite* as an intensifier of linguistic content involves, in the least, two separate uses of the term: either maximizing or moderating that which follows *quite*. This confusing state of affairs stems from the parallel, and not entirely separate, development of the related term *quit*. The words do clearly have a common root in Latin, however, as is noted below. After establishing the origin of the words, it is argued that the intensifier interpretation(s) of modern *quite* are founded in Middle French influence.

*Quite* is unattested in Old English, which suggests that the word must have entered the English language after the Norman conquest of 1066. The Anglo-Norman, i.e. Middle French, lexical item *quit(t)e* is the most probable origin of the Middle English root *quit*, which is best translated as being 'exempt' or 'free' (of obligation). *Quit(t)e* itself has its origins in Latin *quiēs*<sup>[3]</sup> (and derived forms, e.g. *quiētus*), which is a noun translating into 'rest' or 'silence', but has often been used in poetry to refer to a myriad of related concepts. Poetic use of *quiēs*, as documented by Pinkster (2011), has been to refer to the 'eternal sleep', i.e. death, and thereby portraying the freedom (or release) of earthly troubles. Pinkster also notes the poetic senses of 'sleep' and even 'peace of mind'. This broad usage of its origin foreshadows the flexible use of *quit* and derived forms in later ages.

Further evidence for assigning 'being free' to *quit* comes from the frequently found phrase *quite and free*<sup>[4]</sup>, and similarly in Middle French *franc et quitte* (or alternatively *franchement et quittement*), in early forms of English (see (13), taken from the OED). These frequently co-occurring words must have (closely) related senses as they are connected by conjunctive *and*. Similarly, *quit* has been used to refer to remittal in the context of possible misdeeds, see (14), which is a sense still related to the modern term *acquittal*. All in all, there is ample evidence for assigning a broad semantic feature [free(dom)] to (early) usage of *quit*.

- (13) a. Blynd I ame *quhyt & fre*. (referred to in *Legends Saints Sc. Dial.*, W. Metcalfe (1896); composed in 1400)  
 b. The great fysshe ar taken. Where as the small escapyth *quyte and fre*. (in *Brant's Shyp of Follys*, A. Barclay (1509))
- (14) *Quitt* and cleere from doing wrong. (in *Psalme CXIX*, Countess of Pembroke (c. 1595))

The question remains how to derive and disentangle the moderating and maximizing senses of *quite* as an intensifier. The OED notes that *quite* nowadays is ambiguous in most environments, but that the maximizing sense evolved from *quit* first. Material for deriving the latter sense from the [free(dom)] sense is thin at best, but the OED states that the sense emerged after (presumably considerable) influence from Middle French *quittement*, which had developed the sense of 'totality' or 'completeness'. As the OED provides no further information on the etymology of Middle French

<sup>[3]</sup> The roots of *quite* have been suggested to go back to as far as Proto-Indo-European roots, which makes it the intensifier with the most extensive history in this comparative work.

<sup>[4]</sup> Note that *quite* and *quit* still had a similar pronunciation, and *quite* can be interpreted as *quit* here.



*quittement*, the ‘lexical portal’ of the National Centre for Textual and Lexical Resources (CNRTL) was consulted. The definition of *quittement*, declared obsolete nowadays, contains the crucial example in (15). This expression, literally translating into *to play quits or double*, was reportedly used figuratively and expresses ‘risquer tout pour la tout’, i.e. risking everything for everything. The idiomatic expression has survived into Modern French, and is used for situations in which the winner takes all (at great risk). Given its idiomaticity, and the general significant influence of French culture at the time, an account of Middle French influence on Middle English *quite* is plausible. Direct evidence for such borrowing of Middle French *quittement* is recorded in written form, see (16), although only once (by an unknown author and of uncertain date).

(15) Jouer à *quitte* ou à double. (in *Le Jouvenel*, Jean de Bueil (c. 1461))

(16) He gaue a dente than Aboue the eye vpon the pan; The skull braste with that dente, The ryght eye flewe out *quytement*. (in *Richard Coer de Lyon*, Unknown Author (1450-1509))

More reliable evidence for the maximizing interpretation comes from the now obsolete form *quitely* (see (17)). The OED claims this form was derivationally formed from *quit*, but it is worth noting that most quoted examples have a morphologically ambiguous form with *quietly*. Having established above that both words derive from a common Latin ancestor, however, the validity of the analysis is irrelevant for current purposes. Note that *quytly* appears to intensify the universal quantifier *all*, which excludes an interpretation of moderation. On the whole, the departure from *quit* and its [free(dom)] feature can best be understood as a result of medieval language change<sup>[5]</sup>, which resulted in *quite* being assigned a [completeness] feature, and thereby also planting the seeds for the transformation into an intensifier.

(17) Ane bastarde..That *quytly* all his land distroyit has. (in *Bk. King Alexander*, G. Hay (1540))

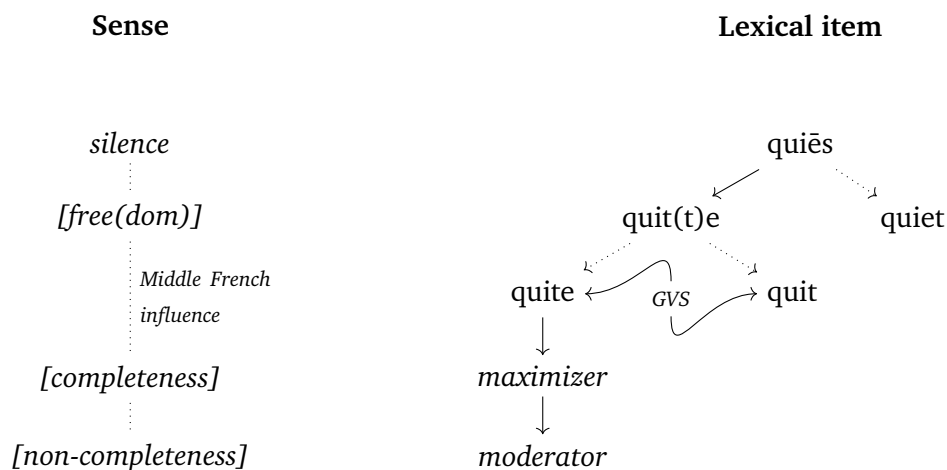
The modern ambiguity of *quite* stems from the fact that most environments do not exclusively allow a moderating or maximizing interpretation. The earliest accounts of a solely moderating interpretation are therefore difficult to pinpoint. Crucially, the OED entry of *quite* even includes minimally three senses: a maximizing and two non-maximizing interpretations. The latter interpretations are different as to how strong the moderation is, but the ‘between maximizing and moderating’ interpretation (a level of quantification expressed by adverbs such as ‘very much’ or ‘truly’) is highly dependent on context. Examples of such ambiguous cases are shown in (18). Note that *quite* can be substituted with a maximizing modifier in each case, such as ‘completely’ or ‘totally’. Even in the last example, for which the preceding clauses are provided as context, it is not clear whether the interpretation should be maximizing or moderating or between. Given the preceding sentence containing *ever saw in your life*, it seems more reasonable to interpret *quite* as a maximizing instead of a moderating intensifier, but the OED reports it as a non-maximizing example. Without further context, it is inappropriate to conclude that a moderation interpretation was readily available by the end of the 18th century. This is not to say that such an interpretation was not possible, and in the OED it is claimed that the modern strictly moderating sense has developed out of this intermediate sense. The exact steps are difficult to trace, but it has been suggested that the moderating sense originated from female idiolects in the 18th century (see [González-Díaz, 2014](#)).

The first examples of *quite* being used in an exclusively moderating context are reported in (19). These examples provide direct evidence to the usage of *quite* as a moderating adverb. In (19a) the

<sup>[5]</sup> An earlier version of this work contained an analysis in terms of the Great Vowel Shift (GVS; see Figure 1), but is left out for conciseness of the argument. It can be summarized as follows: medieval verb *quit(t)e* (compare by-now-archaic Dutch *kwijten*) had a long vowel, but the frequent use of the participle *quit* gave rise to morphologically related *quit* with a short vowel.

author in essence stipulates that interpretation of *quite* should be less than maximally intensifying by mentioning a more intense state of drunkenness. In (19b) the author specifically comments on his or her usage of *quite*, specifying that *quite* is used for less-than-maximal intensification. It can therefore be concluded that the moderating interpretation of *quite* has emerged by the 19th century, although possibly earlier. The complex development of *quite* is summarized in Figure 1.

- (18) a. Here was now *quite* a new face of the Romane Church, yea, it was now made a new Church of it self. (in *Vigilius Dormitans*, R. Crakanthorpe (1631))  
 b. Something.. *quite* a scandal not to learn. (in *Satires of Horace II*, A. Pope (1738))
- (19) a. In other words, he was *quite* drunk when he entered, but still more drunk at the time alluded to. (in *Thistleton's Illustr. Jolly Giant III*, G. Thistleton (1874))  
 b. The lithographer has done his work *quite*, though hardly very, well. (in *Science*, scientific journal (1886))



**Figure 1**

A summary of the development of ‘quite’ to its modern (mostly ambiguous) senses.

### 1.2.2 Bloody

The etymology of *bloody* has been considered extensively by Biscetti (2008). Rejecting a contemporary status quo, Biscetti argues that the word emerged in the age of the Reformation (usually considered to be between 1517 and 1648). *Bloody* originated as an adjective pertaining to something of a ‘bloody’ or violent nature, which is still acceptable in specific usage today, e.g. *bloody shooting spree* (BNC1994, A95 59). This taboo word was then mostly found as a collocation, specifically *bloody drunk*. It is not directly evident why this collocation came to be sufficiently widespread, but Biscetti’s argumentation is heavily, and conjecturally, based on the social context of this rigid word combination. Specifically, the Reformation is marked by the persecution of Protestants by the Catholics in more powerful social positions.

The foundation of the phrase *bloody drunk* is as follows according to Biscetti. Wine is drunk during the Eucharist (or similar names for rituals symbolizing the Last Supper, such as ‘Communion’ or ‘(Lord’s) Supper’) in Christian tradition, which is seen as a transubstantiation of the blood of Jesus Christ. An excess consumption of wine therefore had the connotation of a sacrilegious act. The vice of drunkenness that follows from such an act was declared illegal by the Drunkenness Act of 1606, which posits the ‘loathsome and odious sin of drunkenness’ to be finable with five shillings or

equal punishment (Glatt, 1958). Such a law is only required when mass drunkenness is an actual social issue. Interestingly, the extent of the problem was so large that even the Catholic clergy itself not infrequently sinned, notably giving rise to the toast *bibamus papaliter*<sup>[6]</sup>, i.e. ‘let us drink like a pope’. Further evidence for this interpretation of *bloody* can be found in (20), taken from historical sources cited in the OED, which clearly portrays the blasphemous nature of drunkenness. Given this undertone, it is no surprise that *bloody drunk*, i.e. sacrilegiously drunk, developed into a widely used phrase by the suppressed Protestant population.

- (20) In short, I was drunk; *damnably* drunk with Ale; great Hogen Mogen bloody Ale: I was porterly drunk. (in *Wild Gallant*, Dryden (1669))

The modern usage of *bloody* is vastly different. It is no longer found as collocational *bloody drunk*, nor does it usually signify anything of an actual sanguine nature. Biscetti argues that *bloody* has developed along a distinctive path when compared to other intensifiers. After the Reformation, *bloody* was frequently found alongside *cruel* (but not in collocational structure), see (21). In the 16th century, therefore, *bloody* had a connotation of violence and cruelty, which is still reasonably related to the original meaning of the word. In as early as the 17th century, however, *bloody* was also found as a negatively connotating intensifier (see (22)).

- (21) The one in hand an yron whip did strayne, The other brandished a *bloody* knife. (in *Faerie Queene*, Spenser (1590))

- (22) He has been a *bloody* Cuckold-making Scoundrel in his time. (in *Souldiers Fortune* III, T. Otway (1681))

Biscetti conclusively suggests that *bloody* may roughly have followed the following path: *Bloody* is connected with drunkenness and its semantics are expanded with a sacrilegious connotation → the sacrilegious connotation is (extremely) negatively evaluated by users of the word → the negative evaluation replaces the solely sacrilegious connotation of *bloody*, thereby providing support for the modern intensifying function → the negative connotation becomes increasingly bleached, resulting in a template intensifier for both negative and positive environments. While full progress into the latter stage is debatable for *bloody* owing to the expressive nature of the intensifier, the transition from the second to the third stage has clearly run its course.

### 1.2.3 *Fucking*

Unlike *bloody*, *fucking* does not have its origins in the English language. *Fucking* is the participle form of the ambitransitive verb *fuck*. In English, participle forms are often used in similar ways as adjectives, which is certainly true for *fucking*. *Fuck*'s origins are difficult to determine, but the earliest attested occurrences (see (23)) are from the 16th century, thereby excluding an Anglo-Saxon origin.

- (23) a. Bischopis..may *fuck* thair fill and nocht be mareit. (in *Satyre*, D. Lindsay (1568))  
 b. Fottere, to iape, to sard, to *fucke*, to swive, to occupy. (in *Worlde of Wordes*, J. Florio (1598))

Sheidlower (2009) suggests that *fuck* is related to other Germanic verbs, such as Dutch *fokken* (‘to breed’), German *ficken*, regional Swedish *fokka*, and Norwegian *fukka* (all meaning ‘to copulate’).

<sup>[6]</sup> This proverbial phrase, also found in the form *bibere papaliter*, originated in the time of Pope Benedict XII (1285 - 1342) as a result of his lavish lifestyle. This is directly suggested in Book I, p. 17, of *The Hunch-back of Notre Dame* by Hugo (2013). The use of the phrase has persisted after his life-time, which indicates Pope Benedict XII the only commonly drunk clergyman.

Sheidlower continues by advancing that the lexical item was ‘probably borrowed into English in the fifteenth century from Low German, Flemish, or Dutch’ (p. 123). Drawing from the online version of the ‘Etymologisch woordenboek van het Nederlands’ (Van Der Sijs et al., 2009), it must be concluded the etymology of *fokken* is unclear, and that words with morphological resemblance (e.g. *fockre*, *feucken*, and *focken*) have been used in such different contexts that establishing a common semantic core is impossible. Instead, it is suggested that *fuck* has a Scandinavian origin, as the earliest occurrences are from Scotland. Sheidlower, however, claims that early use was not confined to Scotland, and suggests that the taboo connotation may simply have been less strong in that region. Given the lack of evidence for an Anglo-Saxon (or in fact otherwise) root, however, a Scandinavian derivation is currently the best lead<sup>[7]</sup>.

Returning to the use of *fuck* specifically in the English language, it is clear that by the 16th century the word was borrowed thoroughly enough to occur in texts. The transition from *fuck* to intensifying *fucking* can be derived as follows. While the original reference to copulation is still widely available nowadays, the intensifying use is likely prevalent in the spoken register. Determining early cases of this use are difficult, because of its preferred register. Early slang lexicographers (Farmer & Henley, 1909) noted at the end of the 19th century that it was a common ‘intensitive and expletive; a more violent form of *bloody*’ (p. 89). This signifies two key characteristics of *fucking*. First, the non-literal interpretation was widespread during the 19th century. Second, it was already considered offensive at that time, which is further exemplified by the enactment of the Obscene Publications Act 1857. This law prevented the print of works containing swearing, but was repealed by the Obscene Publications Act 1959, in essence allowing the use of swearing in publications. Regrettably, the OED cites no intensifying uses of *fucking* between the slang dictionary and the literal uses of the 16th century, which serves as indication of how severe it has been considered profane language as there have been a multitude of sources citing *bloody* across the centuries. Erring perhaps on the side of caution, it must be concluded that (1) *fucking* is the newest intensifier of the current study, and (2) there is no (in)direct indication of when the intensifying use emerged besides the literal use.

Note that the examples thus far pertain to negative expressive contexts. Both *quite* and *bloody* are being used in positive contexts, which is expected of intensifiers. Such contexts have been found for *fucking* as well, although it seems to be a recent development (see (24a)), but (24b) shows that *fucking* could be used with positive adjectives in personal correspondence by the middle of the 20th century. The taboo status on *fucking* has presumably not faded at the present time, so there remains a preference for using the intensifier in negative contexts in most social situations.

- (24) a. Tony was delighted. ‘Fan-fucking-tastic!’. (in *Blue Movie*, T. Southern (1970))  
 b. I must say I shall be *fucking* glad when Hilly is too blown out with a child conceived 8 of wedlock for us to go near either of our parents. (in *The letters of Kingsley Amis*, K. Amis (1948))

### 1.3 Extralinguistic factors

Etymology is now returned to the background. This section and Section 1.4 deal with factors that contribute to the overall meaning of intensifiers. This section pertains to extralinguistic social factors, e.g. the speaker age and social class of the speaker using intensifiers. The influence of these factors on specific intensifier usage is difficult to formalize, but it becomes clear that there are clear patterns across social factors as a whole.

The prevalence of specific intensifiers in any conversation depends largely on immediate context and is an important aspect of successful sociolinguistic behavior. Different social factors can predict the

<sup>[7]</sup> An inventory of other (failed) proposals can be found at <https://www.etymonline.com/word/fuck> and in Sheidlower’s book introduction. This list is substantial, but draws attention away from the issue at hand without merit.

speaker preference for specific intensifiers. Corpus research into a set of 33 intensifiers<sup>[8]</sup> has shown that speaker age and social class are interesting predictors of intensifier use. The authors analyzed the BNC data for written and spoken registers, but admit that the picture is complex for most social factors (Xiao & Tao, 2007), e.g. gender, education level, and audience factors. The conclusions for the latter group of factors are inconclusive, partially because the BNC has more speakers of an undefined group (i.e. missing meta-data) than defined groups for factors such as years of education. The factors speaker age and social class will be looked at more specifically for the intensifiers under current scope, as they are most reliably documented.

### 1.3.1 Speaker age

Before proceeding to the actual data, it must be stressed that viewing this type of data requires caution. There are two main possibilities for interpretation when viewing age-based linguistic data. One attractive way of interpretation is assuming that generational differences directly reflect a linguistic change. In other words, the older generations exhibit the earlier linguistic preference, and the linguistic behavior of the younger generations reflects the most current development. This theoretical construct is commonly known as the ‘apparent time hypothesis’, of which the validity is defended by amongst others Tagliamonte (2011). While it is advantageously straightforward to interpret, there is a contrasting manner of interpretation. It is possible that the linguistic construct at investigation is simply what can be termed ‘age-graded’, which means that a different level and kind of social pressure is exerted across age cohorts. Tagliamonte claims (citing earlier studies) that ‘age-graded change typically involves linguistic features that: (1) have a high degree of social awareness, or (2) ‘have a rapid life-cycle’. Intensifiers stand on the bleeding edge of semantic change (Peters, 1994, p. 269), and their usage undergoes constant change. Moreover, the more expressive *bloody* and especially *fucking* are expected to be suppressed in socially sensitive conversations. *Quite* is not notably expressive, and is therefore expected to be equally distributed across age groups.

Age-graded linguistic change is typically visualized as a U-shaped curve with either a maximum or minimum at the center, because speakers in their middle-years (approximately between 35 and 50) tend to be sensitive to which forms are considered prestige forms and which are not. This social pressure is expected to be lesser or even absent for speakers before and beyond this life phase. Assuming such a trajectory, it is to be expected that *bloody* and *fucking* are more used by (pre-)adolescents. More interestingly, it is also predicted that usage of *bloody* and *fucking* is higher in old age than it is for middle age.

The following paragraph simply presents the intensifier distribution that is to be compared to the 2014 data later on. More specifically, it establishes that there is an internal expressivity of intensifiers that is reflected by the frequency values found across age groups. If an intensifier is sensitive to conscious repression under social pressure, a skewed distribution is expected for subgroups. If expressivity is not an important component of intensifier usage, a flat distribution is expected that reflects that frequency does not relate to social variables. Such findings would be unintuitive, and Xiao and Tao unsurprisingly confirm that the use of intensifiers differs with age for the spoken register.

See Table 1 for a comparison between the superset of 33 intensifiers and the BNC data available for spoken *quite*, *bloody*, and *fucking*. Inferential statistics are postponed until the diachronic comparisons in Section 2. The largest contrast is found between the group of children under 15, who use notably less intensifiers, and the group of the speakers of older than 15 years. The group between 15 and 35 are the biggest users of intensifiers, but older age groups still make frequent use of intensifiers. Note that the ‘Unknown’ category was not included in the calculation, but in the worst case consists

<sup>[8]</sup> Specifically: absolutely, awfully, badly, bloody, by far, completely, considerably, damn, dead, deeply, enormously, entirely, exceptionally, extremely, fully, greatly, heavily, highly, incredibly, jolly, particularly, perfectly, pretty, quite, real, really, severely, terribly, thoroughly, totally, utterly, very, and wholly.

**Table 1**  
*Distribution of intensifiers by age group in the spoken BNC.*

Age group	Occurrences per million words			
	Xiao and Tao (2007)	Specific current data		
	<i>Sum of 33 intensifiers</i>	<i>Quite</i>	<i>Bloody</i>	<i>Fucking</i>
0-14	3778	488	218	384
15-24	6578	925	691	1198
25-34	6154	1131	544	521
35-44	5445	1066	433	66
45-59	5683	978	508	106
60+	5756	1054	457	16
Unknown	-	1118	139	106

of the speech of 1312 speakers (for *quite*<sup>[9]</sup>), thereby excluding a large group of speakers from social variable analysis.

Taking into scope the intensifiers relevant for the current study, it becomes clear that *quite* is the most frequent intensifier ( $\bar{\Omega}$ <sup>[10]</sup> = 940), followed by *bloody* ( $\bar{\Omega}$  = 475), and *fucking* ( $\bar{\Omega}$  = 382). The patterns for the superset of 33 intensifiers are similar for *quite* and *bloody*, but the differences are less marked between middle-aged and late-aged groups. The case of *fucking* is interesting, as it was clearly not a frequent intensifier for the 35+ age group in the early 90s, but a subtle peak is found for the 45-59 age group. It is also striking that *fucking* is seemingly the only intensifier that is not produced significantly less by children under 15, while this group of speakers produces (1) the least intensifiers in the superset analysis, and they produce (2) *quite* and *bloody* the least as well. Taking these facts together, there is evidence that (1) intensifiers have indeed some internal expressivity, which is reflected by their age group distribution, and that (2) *bloody* and *fucking* display a typical age-graded pattern that can be tested in Section 2.

### 1.3.2 Social class

In their chapter on ‘social stratification’, Nevalainen and Raumolin-Brunberg (2016) note that ‘social class as a speaker variable is not only complex in interpretation but also in definition’ (p. 133). Factors such as age are biologically determined and relatively simple to use as features in an analysis, but social class depends heavily on chosen measurement system. For instance, it is possible to derive social class from occupation, income, or education. These are not completely interchangeable, because someone with an advanced doctoral education can have a low-paid, but prestigious, job. Assuming, together with countless sociological studies employing the measure, that there is at least a weak correlation between these factors, it is safe to consider the construct of social class to be valid.

Interpretation in Section 2 can be greatly aided by establishing predictions pertaining to social class before proceeding, but this is not straightforward. The link between the use of specific words and social class has rarely been the topic of research. Instead, commonly found interactions with social class are usually phonological or phonetic in nature, i.e. run-of-the-mill prejudices about accents. According to the so-called curvilinear hypothesis, it is expected that the middle class leads ‘change from below’ (see e.g. Tagliamonte, 2012). Note that such change from below is usually characterized

<sup>[9]</sup> The web interface allows for searching with the restriction ‘unknown age’. It is then reported how many different speakers fall into this category.

<sup>[10]</sup>  $\bar{\Omega}$  is used as shorthand for the measure ‘number of occurrences per million words’.  $\bar{\Omega}$  is the mean value across social groups, which is in this case age groups.

as pertaining to unconscious behavior, such as regional pronunciation differences (famously recorded for British variants by [Trudgill, 1974](#)). It is difficult to assume this holds also for complete lexical items. *Bloody* and *fucking* are obviously not prestigious forms either, so it is unlikely that dominant social classes encourage this linguistic change. Altogether, it seems that more specific assumptions are needed instead of assumptions for ‘offensive’ intensifiers as whole.

**Table 2**

*Distribution of intensifiers by social class in the spoken BNC.*

Social class	$\Omega$			
	<i>Quite</i>	<i>Bloody</i>	<i>Fucking</i>	<i>Blooming</i>
AB	1186	258	75	24
C1	844	699	152	54
C2	668	875	514	85
DE	704	1090	1311	31
Unknown	1141	220	137	11

The distribution of intensifiers across social classes is reported in [Table 2](#). The social classes, based on the NRS (National Readership Survey) social grade system, are approximately as follows: AB = (upper) middle class, C1 = lower middle class, C2 = skilled working class, and DE = (non-)working class. In general terms, [Xiao and Tao](#) found that the AB social class expressed the most intensifiers [\[11\]](#), with a clear downwards tendency for each incrementally lower social class. They noted that the prevalence of *bloody* in the DE class resulted in a (slightly) higher total frequency than the C2 class. The social class asymmetry between *quite* and *bloody* reflects what can be called a taboo effect, and is also exemplified by the stark contrast between *quite* and *fucking*. Both *bloody* and *fucking* furthermore display what [Tagliamonte \(2012\)](#) terms ‘gradient stratification’: a monotonic decrease in use from lower to higher classes. Such a pattern is commonly found for stigmatized markers ([Labov, 1990](#)), and is *ceteris paribus* expected to remain visible in the 2014 data. The question can then essentially be diluted into whether or not the stigmatic connotation of the intensifiers has changed over the past twenty years. Note that the social class differences are expected to be correlated with the age-graded pattern. If social class differences have changed, the age-gradation should be deteriorated to a certain degree as well. This is not to say that linguistic patterns across age and social class identical, but both factors reflect in some way the stigma on a specific intensifier.

A point needs to be made about levels of taboo for different forms of *fuck*. Intuitively, the adjectival *fucking* seems to be less offensive than the more direct reference to copulation that *fuck* portrays. This subtle overt difference with significant covert consequences has been confirmed by [Beers Fägersten \(2007\)](#). Analyzing spontaneous speech samples, she noted that 98% of the uses were as an adjectival intensifier, and only in 2% of the cases an inflected verb. Furthermore, adjectival *fucking* was the most frequent swear word and given (relatively) low offensiveness ratings by participants. Crucially, while *fuck* is clearly a highly offensive word to use (e.g. [Gao, 2013](#); [Hughes, 2006](#)), *fucking* is more easily evaluated as less offensive. *Fucking* is in many cases presumably an integral part of the rhythm of an utterance, whether stressed or unstressed, which is exemplified by the fact that it occurs in infixation. *Fucking* therefore behaves much more as an intensifier than *fuck*, which is more expressive and is closer to ‘actual’ swearing in terms of force. Such examples of such infixation were already found before 1994, however, and does therefore not directly constitute evidence of a stigmatic change over the past two decades. On the whole, a social stigma on *fucking* seems to remain relatively strong.

<sup>[11]</sup> The authors admit that the BNC web interface did not accommodate regular expression search at the time, which barred syntagmatic analyses. The results were based on singular queries, so polysemous intensifiers may be overestimated.

Alternative methods are clearly required if strong expressivity is desired in more socially sensitive situations. A popular strategy for achieving this is through using euphemisms. The problem with such euphemisms is that they are relatively infrequent and more difficult to reliably identify in a corpus. Fergusson (1993) notes *blistering* ( $\Omega = 0$ ) and *blooming* ( $\Omega = 21$ ) as euphemisms for *bloody*. The Oxford English Dictionary (OED; [online version](#)) claims that *bee* ( $\Omega = 3$ ), *bleeding* ( $\Omega = 21$ ), *blerry* ( $\Omega = 0$ ), *plurry* ( $\Omega = 0$ ), *ruddy* ( $\Omega = 7$ ), and *sanguinary* ( $\Omega = 0$ ) are also possible euphemisms. It is difficult to approximate the influence of euphemisms in corpus data, because they are often polysemous. *Bleeding* is polysemous with the participle of the verb *to bleed*, and other suggested euphemisms are simply too infrequent.

One relatively frequent euphemism, i.e. *blooming* (see Table 2), is readily analyzable as it is (nearly) unambiguously used as an intensifier. The pattern deviates from the pattern found for established intensifiers in that the frequency for the highest and lowest social class differs only slightly, thereby providing slight support for a notion of euphemistic alternatives to ‘vulgar’ intensifiers being used by higher social classes. Such a conclusion is clearly premature, given the low frequency of the euphemism. It should parsimoniously be concluded that social class is an important social factor in determining the usage of intensifiers, especially for the current analysis. In Section 2 the distribution of *quite*, *bloody*, and *fucking* across social classes is extensively checked for both the BNC1994 and the BNC2014. In accordance with what is hitherto discussed, it is predicted that *quite* displays a flat distribution across social classes, while *bloody* and *fucking* are preferred by lower classes.

## 1.4 Linguistic factors

### 1.4.1 Intensifiers and quantification

Huddleston and Pullum (2002) use the term *degree adjuncts* or *degree modifiers* to refer to the category in which most intensifiers syntactically belong. It is noted that using the term ‘intensifier’ is misleading when referring to the superset, because there are also plenty items that express the negative part of a scale (see e.g. (26)), but for most cases at discussion this is not a problem. Degree adjuncts apply to some gradable property of another grammatical item, such as *like* in (25). To what degree the speaker likes (presumably eating) radishes determines the choice of degree adjunct, as *totally* implies a higher level of preference than *rather*. Huddleston and Pullum have proposed a subgrouping of degree adjuncts, of which selected examples are given in (26). The full list of items per group is debatable and not documented here, but the division is intuitively plausible.

The first three subgroups pertain to positive quantification, while the latter three indicate negative quantification. Paucal degree adjuncts are ambiguous in this respect. Members of the *maximal* group are usually not allowed to be quantified further, as *very absolutely* is ungrammatical but there are idiosyncratic exemptions to this, such as *more completely than ever before*. The same holds for the *multal* group, but these degree adjuncts indicate a quantification somewhere between moderate and maximal. The lexically small *moderate* group is not constrained in such a way, as *I like radishes very little* is grammatical, but is constrained semantically to verbs not expressing a property with a high grade: *\*I slightly adore radishes*. Note that the first three groups seem the only relevant ones for the intensifiers at discussion, but when used in negation or negative contexts the last three types become relevant.

The *minimal* group consists of negative as well as non-affirmative items, such as in (26f). Non-affirmatives require a negation element in order to be grammatical: *\*I like radishes in the least*, while the negatives do not. Items of the *approximating* group express that the truth conditions of a sentential proposition are partially fulfilled, but not completely. The truth value of the proposition is nonetheless affected by such degree adjuncts: the addition of *almost* to *I like radishes* results in the speaker liking radishes being untrue (or specifically: only partially so) even though it is ‘almost’ true. Notably,



when *quite* is negated as in *not quite* (e.g. *I do not quite agree*), it becomes approximating in degree modification. In specific cases, *bloody* provides a minimal quantification, such as in *I'm not bloody surprised* (*bloody* can be substituted with *at all*). Lastly, the *relative* group consists of items requiring two (sets of) conditions and quantifies the relation between these conditions, instead of a single constant scale. In (26h), for example, *more* compares to what degree the speaker likes radishes to the degree likes brussel sprouts.

(25) I  $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{rather} \\ \text{totally} \end{array} \right\}$  like radishes.

- |         |   |                                  |
|---------|---|----------------------------------|
| (26) a. | I (*very) <i>absolutely</i> like radishes.        | <b>maximal</b>                   |
| b.      | I (*very) <i>particularly</i> like radishes.      | <b>multal</b>                    |
| c.      | I like radishes <i>a little</i> .                 | <b>moderate</b>                  |
| d.      | I <i>slightly</i> like/*adore radishes.           | <b>paucal</b>                    |
| e.      | I <i>barely</i> like radishes.                    | <b>(negative) minimal</b>        |
| f.      | I don't like radishes <i>in the least</i> .       | <b>(non-affirmative) minimal</b> |
| g.      | I <i>almost</i> like radishes.                    | <b>approximating</b>             |
| h.      | I like radishes <i>more</i> than brussel sprouts. | <b>relative</b>                  |

While this classification is insightful, the interpretation of intensifiers at discussion is dependent on more than quantification, but it is difficult to pinpoint what exactly determines the interpretation. Huddleston and Pullum note that *quite* belongs to the maximal group when it modifies a property intrinsically expressing a 'high degree', such as *adore*, but *quite* belongs to the moderate group when it modifies other properties, such as more general *like*<sup>[12]</sup>. It is unclear, however, whether or not a listener always interprets cases such as (27a) unambiguously as either maximal or moderate. For example, if the immediate preceding context is as in (27b), a maximal interpretation by Speaker A is more likely than a moderate or approximating interpretation. Similarly, in the context of (27c), an approximating or moderate interpretation is more likely than a maximal interpretation (if the stress falls on *still* in the preceding sentence). This raises the question of how such sentences are interpreted in discourse-neutral contexts, which is the main question taken up in Section 3.

- |         |  |                               |
|---------|--|-------------------------------|
| (27) a. | I have quite finished it.  |                               |
| b.      | Speaker A: Have you done your homework yet?<br>Speaker B: I have quite finished it.          | <b>maximal</b>                |
| c.      | Speaker A: Are you <u>still</u> doing your homework?<br>Speaker B: I have quite finished it. | <b>approximating/moderate</b> |

### 1.4.2 Adjectival types

A part of the answer to the interpretation question raised in the previous subsection can be found in the nature of the property that is being modified. For instance, adjectives that indicate the end of a scale or express 'extremeness' license degree modifiers that also express a maximal quantification, e.g. example (28). This view is extensively defended by Morzycki (2012), who posits two innovations for analyzing degree modifier-adjective constructions. The first is a so-called 'perspective scale', and the second is a division into two subtypes of extreme adjectives.

The perspective scale pertains to what degree values are salient and relevant in the context of the utterance. It can best be thought of, as Morzycki himself suggests, the numbers on a car

[12] There is also historical evidence of interpretations of *quite* between maximal and moderate, i.e. multal, which are reported in Section 1.2.1

speedometer, which are usually reported in intervals of 10 units (miles or kilometers). While you may at any point drive at a speed between the marked intervals, for example 89.87 kilometers per hour, these exact values are simply not interesting to the driver. If asked to state the current speed, he or she will in all likelihood respond with ‘around 90’. Contextually extreme adjectives work in a similar fashion in that they portray that the limit of a scale has been surpassed. No scale exists beyond that point, and the quantification is simply ‘beyond the line’. In (29), for example, the degree of ‘coldness’ exceeds the limit of the standard interpretation of *cold* through the modification *downright* provides. Note that this holds if the soup in that context is usually served hot, but not if the soup in question is usually served cold. In other words, contextually extreme adjectives are discourse-sensitive.

(28) The  $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{completely} \\ \text{absolutely} \end{array} \right\} \left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{brilliant} \\ ?? \text{good} \\ ?? \text{adequate} \end{array} \right\}$  bachelor thesis.

(29) The soup was downright cold.

The second innovation is a division of extreme adjectives into those that are lexically extreme (e.g. *brilliant*) or contextually extreme. The innovation is the latter group, although it can hardly be called a group given the definition: ‘an adjective is contextually extreme in a given context if and only if it is not lexically extreme, but its standard lies outside the context’s perspective scale.’ (p. 595). Clearly, the nature of contextually extreme adjectives is loosely defined as the complement of lexically extreme adjectives except those non-extreme adjectives that can not in any conceivable context ever be extreme. The group of exceptions is probably small, because it is possible to be endlessly creative in this respect. It must accordingly be concluded that extremeness is a property that can be expressed in (almost) any discourse. Morzycki (2015) pleasingly summarizes the elementary distinction between ‘ordinary’ adjectives and (lexically) extreme adjectives as in (30). Simply put, extreme adjective *gigantic* differs from *big* in context (C) in that *gigantic* concerns a degree that exceeds (the maximum of) the contextually salient degrees or scale. Note that *gigantic* is consequently less precise than *big*, as the boundaries of *big* are better defined. *Gigantic* is simply ‘off the scale’.

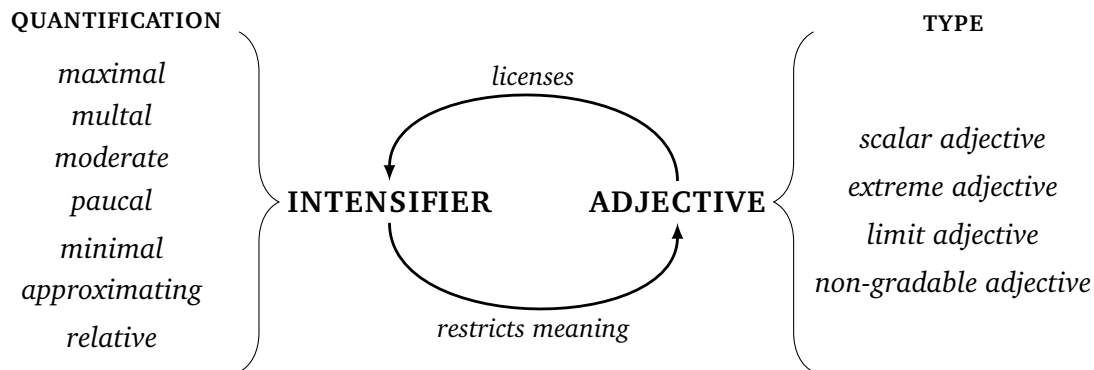
(30) a.  $[[\text{big}_C]] = \lambda x \lambda d. d \in C \wedge \mathbf{big}(d)(x)$   
 b.  $[[\text{gigantic}_C]] = \lambda x \lambda d. d > \mathbf{max}(C) \wedge \mathbf{big}(d)(x)$

Paradis (1997) provides further features of the picture that is forming. The relevant adjective clearly licenses a subset of modifiers. There are naturally more types of adjectives than extreme adjectives. She notes that there is a major distinction between adjectives: gradable and non-gradable adjectives (e.g. *Dutch* or *classical*). Paradis claims that decontextualized non-gradable adjectives do not license degree modification, e.g. <sup>?</sup>*the completely daily routine*. Similar distinctions have been pronounced earlier in the past, e.g. Bierwisch (1989), which is unsurprising given its intuitive appeal. Bierwisch notes that the distinction is intuitively stronger than it is empirically, as non-gradable adjectives can easily be contextually coerced to have gradable interpretations (e.g. *The influence of the English language results in overuse of spaces between morphemes, which is not very Dutch.*). There is no doubt this contextual modulation is routinely applied in everyday conversation, but there is no reason to conclude from this that the distinction does not exist in the language system.

A further subdivision is possible for the gradable adjectives: scalars (e.g. *good*), extreme adjectives (e.g. *excellent*), and limit adjectives (e.g. *true*). The first two subdivisions are at this point clear, but the third requires further explanation. These are conceptually binary, such as the following pairs show: something is either *true* or *not true*, *possible* or *not possible*, or *sufficient* or *insufficient*. Limit adjectives are distinguishable from the others by trying to form a comparative or superlative, e.g. *\*truer* or *\*truest*, which clearly fails. Generalizing across types of adjectives, Paradis concludes

that once the degree modifier is chosen the relevant degree modifier again limits the gradability of the adjective. Paradis and Morzycki in effect seem to agree that the final interpretation of modifier-adjective constructions is a complex interdependent relationship between both elements, and is highly flexible by merit of discourse context. With current prolegomena it has become clear that adjective type is a factor that must be controlled for in the questionnaire of Section 3.

### 1.4.3 Intensifier-adjective constructions



**Figure 2**

*A model for interpretation of intensifier-adjective constructions in discourse-neutral cases.*

It is clear that the meaning of intensifier-adjective constructions depends on both adjectival type and the ‘internal’ quantification of the selected intensifier. The quantification of an intensifier influences how strong or weak an adjective is, such as *quite* moderating the prototypical gradable scalar adjective *good*. At the same time it seems that not all degree modifiers are equally preferable given any adjective (see example (28) about lexically extreme adjectives).

Meaning derivation for such constructions (inspired by Figure 3–6 in Paradis, 1997) is hence assumed to be bidirectionally dependent, as portrayed in Figure 2. Note that the upper arrow is not strictly applicable to intensifiers, because true intensifiers are usually flexible enough to forgo strict selection by adjectival type. Especially scalar adjectives are combinable with almost every intensifier, but many intensifiers are also polysemously degree modifiers. *Totally* is a typical (US English) example of this. Once again, only discourse context can provide a clear indication as to whether or not *totally* in the phrase *That test was totally difficult* is an intensifier or degree modifier. As the model aims to be accurate for neutral-discourse contexts, there is reason to include the licensing claim, because degree modifiers of maximal quantification are ungrammatical in context of a scalar. Instead, a multal degree modifier such as *very* should be opted for. Nonetheless, ‘intensifier’ is not replaced with ‘degree modifier’ in the model (as is done in Paradis, 1997) for sake of consistent nomenclature, and the specific aim of applying this model to *quite*, *bloody*, and *fucking*.

Recall from Section 1.1 that *bloody* and *fucking* do not necessarily introduce truth-conditional content. That statement needs amendment if the model is to be suitable for all intensifiers at discussion. Specifically, there need to be cases in which *bloody* and *fucking* can be considered degree modifiers as opposed to pure intensifiers, such as when they appear to be directly ‘modifying’ a noun (see example (10)). Uncoincidentally, when *bloody* and *fucking* modify gradable properties, such as adjectives, they appear to have *both* quantificational as illocutionary consequences. In other words, *bloody* and *fucking* can be considered expressive degree modifiers. *Quite* can also be considered such, but with a much lower level of expressivity.

A final step is to approximate to what extent *bloody* and *fucking* modify their respective gradable

properties. For *bloody* a similar pattern to *quite* emerges when its distribution is considered. Biscetti (2004) notes that ‘*bloody* can be considered neither a prototypical booster<sup>[13]</sup>, nor a prototypical maximizer’ (p. 290). She draws this conclusion following an analysis of right collocates of *bloody* in the full BNC. In reproducing this (see Table 3) for the spoken BNC, it becomes clear that the most common right-hand adjectives of *bloody* and *fucking* can be both scalar and extreme. Limit adjectives are of course the hallmark indication of maximal quantification, but the diagnostics proposed by Paradis are problematic for spontaneous language data, because contextual modulation easily coerces limit adjectives into scalars, and contextual modulation is impossible to reliably exclude in a corpus. Nonetheless, the frequent co-occurrence with extreme adjectives (which can combine with maximal degree modifiers, e.g. *completely brilliant*) indicates that both *bloody* and *fucking* express positive degrees ranging from moderate to maximal, much like *quite*, in non-negative contexts.

**Table 3**

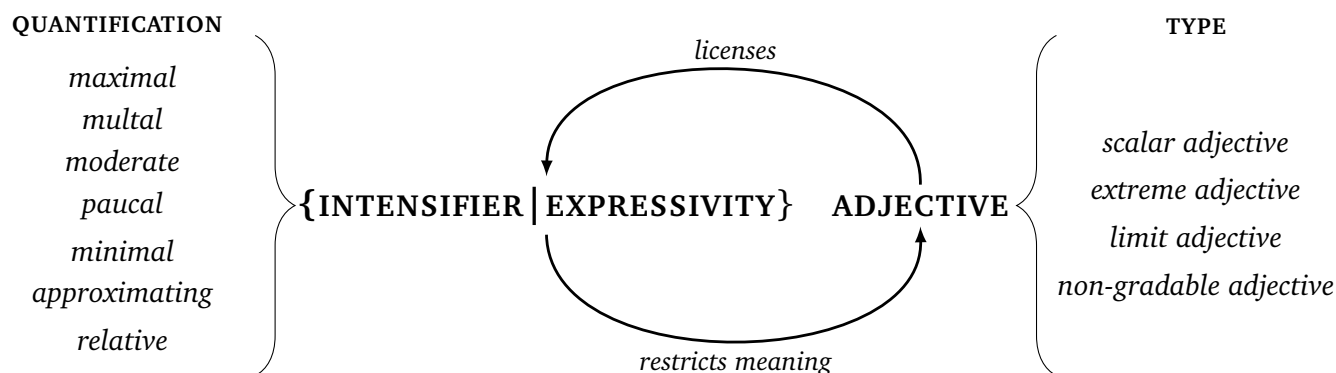
*Most frequent right-hand adjectives of intensifiers in the spoken BNC.*

Adjective	<i>Quite</i>	Adjective	<i>Bloody</i>	Adjective	<i>Fucking</i>
	Occurrences		Occurrences		Occurrences
Happy	284	Good	39	Brilliant	17
Nice	267	Great	34	Stupid	12
Sure	254	Awful	22	Good	12
Clear	158	Big	20	Mad	10
Right	136	Stupid	16	Easy	9
Interesting	134	Right	11	Right	9
Difficult	91	Disgusting	10	Useless	7
Funny	75	Useless	10	Horrible	7
Honest	71	Ridiculous	9	Big	7

The naive conclusion is to stop here, but as already noted, there is a difference in expressivity between the intensifiers. *Quite* is presumably the least expressive, followed by *bloody*, and *fucking* is the most expressive option of the three. This is reflected by the adjectives each intensifier modifies. *Quite*, for example, is mostly selected as a companion for more neutral and positive terms. *Bloody* clearly takes the intermediate position, as it combines with both positive *good* and *great* as negative *awful* and *stupid*. A similar pattern is found for *fucking*, but it seems to have a slightly higher preference for extreme adjectives, such as *brilliant* and *mad*. This difference is not very pronounced in terms of numbers. A closer investigation of the directly preceding sentences in the BNC shows that *fucking* is often used when it was already used in the conversation. *Bloody* on the other hand more often occurs independently and singularly. This weakly suggests, in other words, that there is a preference for *fucking* at the expense of *bloody* for more heated discussions or intense topics.

Assuming that a higher level of expressivity correlates with stronger quantification, and there is no obvious reasons to assume otherwise, the prediction is as follows. *Fucking* is most easily interpreted as quantifying maximally, followed by *bloody*, and finally *quite*. Specifically, *bloody* and *fucking* are expected to be assigned maximal quantification in the context of extreme and limit adjectives, and are assigned moderate quantification in context of scalar adjectives. Its low expressivity requires *quite* to modify a limit adjectives in order to receive a maximal reading, and instead *quite* has a moderate meaning in other cases, i.e. extreme and scalar adjectives. A slightly modified version of the model that incorporates an estimated internal expressivity is portrayed in Figure 3. This is obviously an oversimplified view of reality, as it is logical to think of the exact expressivity as at least partially socially determined. Hence the necessary diachronic investigation in Section 2.

[13] Boosters are closest to what Huddleston and Pullum coined the multal subgroup.



**Figure 3**

*A model for interpretation of intensifier-adjective constructions given discourse-neutral expressivity.*

This model is useful for disentangling the myriad of meanings that can be created with intensifiers as it provides neutral-discourse predictions. These predictions are tested through a questionnaire, which is by nature without discourse context. Two crucial questions can be answered by interpreting the results: (1) whether or not these intensifiers should in the (most) unmarked case be interpreted as degree modifiers, and (2) if they are to be considered (truth-conditional change inducing) degree modifiers whether or not they are ambiguous irrespective of adjectival type. In other words, it is to be tested if native speakers use these lexical items as full-fledged intensifiers as opposed to intensifiers in specific discourse contexts.

## 1.5 Aims of current study

**Table 4**

*Summary of selected intensifier environments in the spoken BNC ( $i$  = intensifier variable).*

Environment	BNC Query	$\Omega_{\text{quite}}$	Example	$\Omega_{\text{bloody}}$	Example	$\Omega_{\text{fucking}}$	Example
$i$ + noun/DP	$i \text{ (}_{\{N\}} \text{   } \_ \text{ATO})$	278	6 <sub>DP</sub> , 18 <sub>DP</sub>	197	10 <sub>noun</sub>	80	10 <sub>noun</sub>
$i$ + verb/VP	$i \text{ (}_{\{V\}})$	43	11, 12, 27	43	11, 12	48	11, 12
$i$ + adj./AP	$i \text{ } \_ \text{AJ0}$	441	8, 19b	44	8	25	8, 24
$i$ + adv./AdvP	$i \text{ } \_ \text{AV0}$	153	9, 19c	8	9	4	9

The first part of this work has been concerned with the many facets of intensifier usage. Examples are dispersed at this point, so a selective summary of linguistic environments of the intensifiers together with example numbers is displayed in Table 4.

A few questions arise about the use of the intensifiers at discussion. A first topic to explore is the development of intensifiers in recent years. The investigation of *bloody*'s history has proven that (especially expressive) intensifiers are a pillar of language change. Attractive as it is to study intensifiers only from a linguistic point of view, it undeniably leads to an incomplete impression. Partington (1993) argues that linguistic investigation should be both synchronic and diachronic. The former type allows charting of *how* language fits together and the latter approach of *why* it fits together. To that end, a comparison is made between data from the BNC1994 and the recently compiled BNC2014.

Recall that the use of intensifiers is clearly socially stratified (Table 2 in Section 1.3) in the data from the 'original' BNC. Speakers from the lower social classes used *bloody* and *fucking* to a much higher degree than speakers from the (upper) middle class. *Quite* was used by all social classes, but lower classes seemed to use *quite* less often (although this was not statistically tested). It is tempting

to conclude that lower classes simply employ more expressive intensifiers, and the BNC1994 data are compatible with such a claim, but this is clearly against all intuition. Moreover, it is ludicrous to suggest that lower classes are incapable of using more neutral intensifiers. Less slapdash is to propose that in twenty years time there is a shift in preference for social classes. For example, if indeed *bloody* has become ‘somewhat passé’ (p. 36), as Hughes (2006) claims, it is expected that the BNC2014 reflects such change by lower frequencies across the board. Hughes furthermore conjectures that the tolerance of *fucking* is accelerated by the rise of popular (American) culture, notably through film and television. A consistent rise of *fucking* is then to be expected besides a decrease in *bloody*. These distributional changes are not expected for age groups. Recall that *bloody* and *fucking* display an age-graded pattern, i.e. peaks in use before and after middle age, and it is expected that this is still true twenty years later. These predictions are tested in Section 2.

As a second topic, it is desirable to determine how the flexible nature of intensifiers provides meaning. It must by now be clear that the status of *quite*, *bloody*, and *fucking* is simply confusing. In one context, they can be used to modify the degree of adjectives, while in another they seem to connote an emotional speaker perspective to the whole utterance. In the majority of the cases, it is safe to assume they do both. The exact meaning seems to be tangent on this balance, and correlates with ambiguity of the intensifier. This relation is not directly tested here, but intensifier ambiguity can be tested. By eliminating the dynamic balance of an actual utterance and context, it is possible to at least investigate part of the equation.

As is continually repeated, *quite* is ambiguous in its degree quantification as it allows a scalar interpretation ranging from moderator to maximizer. A listener must therefore derive its exact meaning either from phonological cues (stress patterns or intonation) or the earlier context of the conversation. While not as pronounced, a similar case can be made for *bloody* given its colloquial use. Specifically, the expressiveness of *bloody* is not as high as it may seem, despite its appearance in the often used expletive *bloody hell*. Hughes (2006) notes that the overuse of *bloody* has given rise to a general interpretation of ‘loss of intensity’. While the use of *bloody* was frowned upon until well into the 20th century, or completely scorned in some cases, it nowadays even occurs in *abso-bloody-lutely*<sup>[14]</sup>. In the latter case *bloody* serves a (mildly) intensifying purpose, but does so mostly by serving as a rhythmic marker. These contrasting cases allude a pattern similar to that of *quite*, which raises the question what the insertion of *quite* and *bloody* into utterances entails in terms of degree modification. There is no direct reason to assume such patterning for *fucking*, as it is difficult to imagine how it could imply a moderating quantification, but it is nonetheless included for completeness.

Section 3 is therefore concerned with a questionnaire among native speakers of British English. Specifically, a model of intuitions is set-up based on the facts from Section 1.4 and its predictions are tested against concrete speaker intuitions. It is constructed in such a way that there are no obvious clues for a preferred quantificational interpretation of the intensifiers. Native speakers are shown a set of sentences containing intensifiers (syntactically functioning as degree modifiers) and are offered alternative sentences that differ only in which intensifier is employed. They are asked which alternative best replaces the original intensifier, either a maximizer (such as *completely*) or a moderator (such as *partially*). The questionnaire provides insight into the nature of the intensifiers in question, which are frequently used in spoken registers of (British) English. Specifically, the following questions are tackled: (1) whether the intensifiers are fully developed intensifiers or degree modifiers in discourse-less context, and (2) whether or not the intensifiers are ambiguous in quantification.

<sup>[14]</sup> Note that this is also commonly found for *fucking*, for example in *un-fucking-believable* and example (24).

## 2 Diachronic use

### 2.1 BNC2014

The original BNC was compiled before the mid-nineties and has been a great source of linguistic research since. In fact, it has remained a popular choice for analysis until this day. [McEnery, Love, and Brezina \(2017\)](#) note that the BNC is involved in many international corpus linguistics conferences, despite the fact there are many more contemporary web-crawled databases available. This is slightly problematic, as it is well known that the lexical repositories of languages are subject to constant change. As noted before, intensifiers are one of the most innovative and creative parts of the speaker lexicon ([Lorenz, 2002](#)). Not only have many new words entered the English language in the past twenty years, but many have become unused as well. In effect, if the analysis in this work would only make use of the original BNC, the data form an outdated picture.

Fortunately, the BNC2014 was compiled and made public in the autumn of 2017. The sizes of the corpora are relatively the same: 10,409,858 words for the spoken BNC1994, and 11,422,617 words for the BNC2014. The data were collected between 2012 and 2016 (hence the designation being the median year 2014), which makes it the best candidate corpus for analysis. A collective effort of many people has resulted in a balanced orthographically transcribed spoken corpus of informal British English speech. The general improvements introduced in the BNC2014 serve the current topic greatly. Importantly, most data was collected inside homes and informal settings, which means there is little social pressure to avoid more expressive intensifiers. Moreover, there was a low threshold for the public to contribute data. Anyone interested in participating could simply fill in an online form and was consequently contacted by a Cambridge team. Whenever a certain social category seemed under-represented, e.g. the elderly, that group was targeted through campaigns. Smartphone recordings were accepted, which further ensured a large collection with minimal effort.

The same POS-tagger was used for both BNC versions, so the linguistic data is highly comparable. These design choices allow for a direct comparison of both databases. The log-likelihood was calculated for each 1994-2014 difference and reported. A log-likelihood of 15.13 is the critical value for a 99.99% confidence level. The calculation of log-likelihood for each comparison is as in (31; see [Rayson & Garside, 2000](#)). The expected frequency of an intensifier are calculated as in (32). Note that these calculations require the raw frequency ( $f$ ) instead of the normalized frequency.

$$(31) \quad LL = 2 \left( \left( f_{1994} * \ln \left( \frac{f_{1994}}{E_{1994}} \right) \right) + \left( f_{2014} * \ln \left( \frac{f_{2014}}{E_{2014}} \right) \right) \right)$$

For which  $f$  = raw frequency of intensifier, and  $E$  = expected frequency in social sub-corpus.

$$(32) \quad E = \frac{C(f_{1994} + f_{2014})}{(C_{1994} + C_{2014})}$$

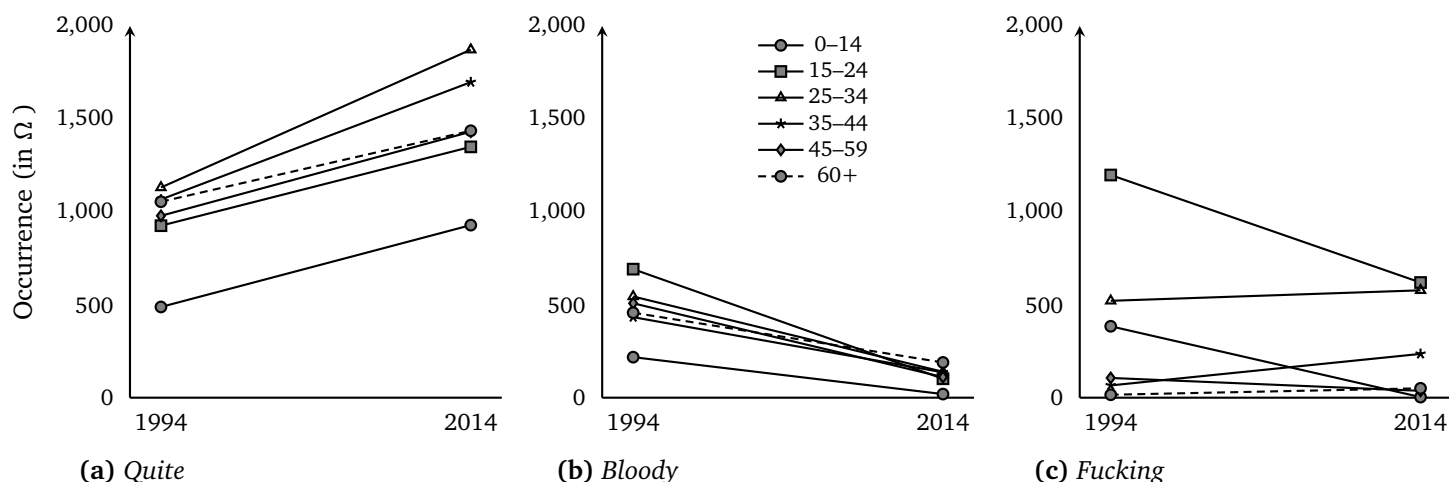
For which  $f$  = raw frequency of intensifier, and  $C$  = sub-corpus size.

### 2.2 Shifting preferences

Recall from Section 1.3 that intensifier usage differed across social variables. A study by [Xiao and Tao \(2007\)](#) into a large set of intensifiers established the most robust effects were found between age groups and social classes. A logical first step is to check that similar patterns are still found twenty years later. The distributional differences for age groups is discussed first, and is followed by a consideration of social class.

#### 2.2.1 Speaker age

Table 5 and Figure 4 report the findings for age. For *quite* there is a rise in use across all age groups. There is no obvious reason to assume a different popularity of *quite* in the present decade, so it

(a) *Quite*(b) *Bloody*(c) *Fucking***Figure 4**

BNC1994–BNC2014 comparison of normalized frequencies between age groups.

**Table 5**

Diachronic comparison of intensifier frequency by age group.  $^{+/-}LL$  = significant increase/decrease.

Age	Rel. corpus size 1994/2014	<i>Quite</i>			<i>Bloody</i>			<i>Fucking</i>		
		1994	2014	LL	1994	2014	LL	1994	2014	LL
0-14	1.25	188	287	+48.29	84	6	-64.61	148	1	-164.02
15-24	0.21	550	3748	+74.88	411	283	-598.20	712	1721	-197.65
25-34	0.69	1267	3037	+241.46	610	226	-353.74	584	937	3.82
35-44	0.78	1147	2342	+174.15	466	188	-201.32	71	325	+119.37
45-59	0.75	1603	3140	+158.92	832	243	-536.19	174	81	-67.32
60+	0.62	1199	2650	+81.71	520	350	-166.18	18	93	+25.62

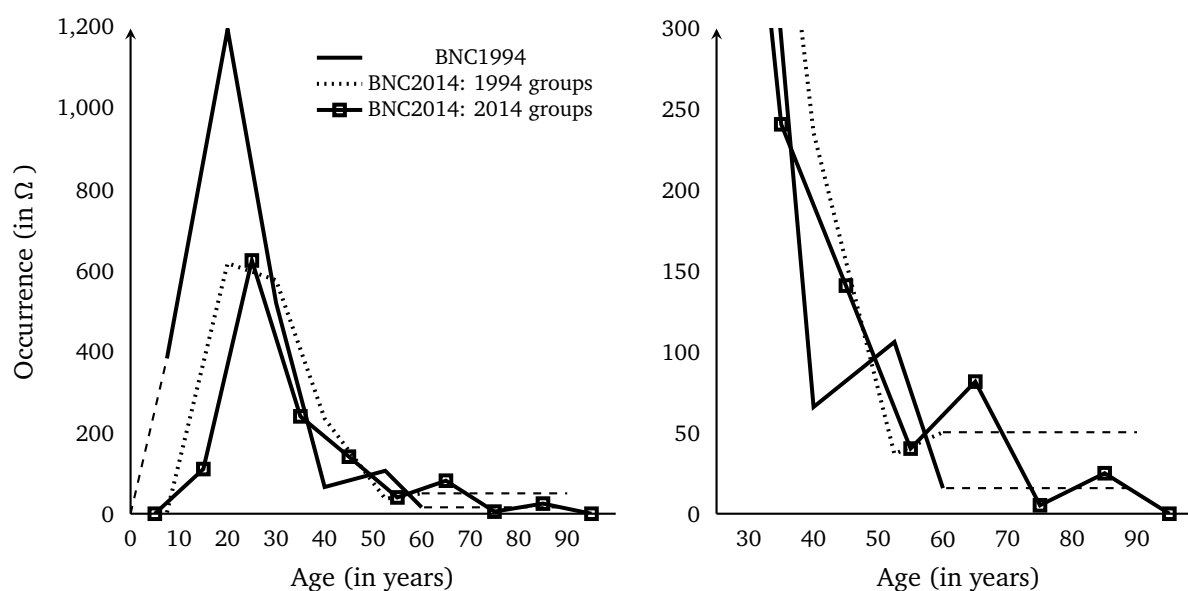
is not clear why this is the case. Suggestions for what may have caused this rise for the (already most frequent) intensifier follow in Section 2.2.3, but for now it suffices to conclude that its high frequency is still apparent twenty years later. For *bloody*, the story is different. In sharp contrast with *quite*, there is a significant decrease across the line. This is much in line with what Hughes (2006) claimed about *bloody* becoming ‘somewhat passé intensifier’. The inherent expressiveness of *bloody* has steadily decreased over the years, which is indirectly suggested by Withington (1930). He notes that ‘the word continues to shock’ (p. 31) and wonders what has made ‘the word the pariah it now is in England’ (p. 35). He suggests a few times, as linguists often do, that the prolonged profane connotation is a consequence of purist views on language. As is then to be expected, it seems that *bloody* is slowly reaching the end of its life cycle in common speech. Note that it may still takes ages for it to actually disappear entirely given its already extensive history and the general slow pace of discharging grammaticalized lexical items.

The case of *fucking* is less invariable and requires careful consideration. Some age groups clearly use *fucking* more readily than twenty years ago, such as the groups 35-44 and 60-plus. For the 25-34 group there is a non-significant increase, but note that an increase of 0.02 in LL would make it significant. A significant decrease is found for the 0-14 age group, but there reason to assume this is not informative given the small sample size (15 participants; not reported for reasons of readability). The most striking decreases are to be found in the groups of 15 to 24 and 45 to 59 year olds.

Turning to the 15-24 age group, it is clear that the findings clash with the predictions set out in Section 1.3. If *fucking* is expected to be stigmatized and subject to social pressure, there is no reason to



expect dwindling use in the life phase when language prestige pressure is low. Lorenz (2002) provides a mode of interpretation, crucially claiming about intensifiers that ‘just as they are becoming accepted and adopted on a wider scale, they are ‘out’ and obsolete in their in-group function’ (p. 143). In other words, *fucking* is subtly becoming integrated into mainstream usage, while it is equally subtly phased out in the innovative age group. This is clearly reflected by the fact that *fucking* is on the rise for post-adolescence age groups. The 15-24 age group has presumably moved to new alternatives for *fucking*. Considerable creativity is to be expected in this respect, because *fucking* is already flexible. In terms of euphemisms, there is a subtle rise between 1994 and 2014 for the 15-24 age group. Take for example *frigging* ( $f = 1 \rightarrow 24$ ), *freaking* ( $f = 0 \rightarrow 14$ ), and *effing* ( $f = 0 \rightarrow 6$ ), but also note that *flipping* dropped in frequency ( $f = 49 \rightarrow 16$ ). A more effective way to approximate innovations is to employ web searches, such as in Napoli and Hoeksema (2009), but this is left for future investigation. All in all, *fucking* is clearly being substituted in adolescent age groups.



(a) Development across all age groups.

(b) Zoomed in view for 25+ age groups.

### Figure 5

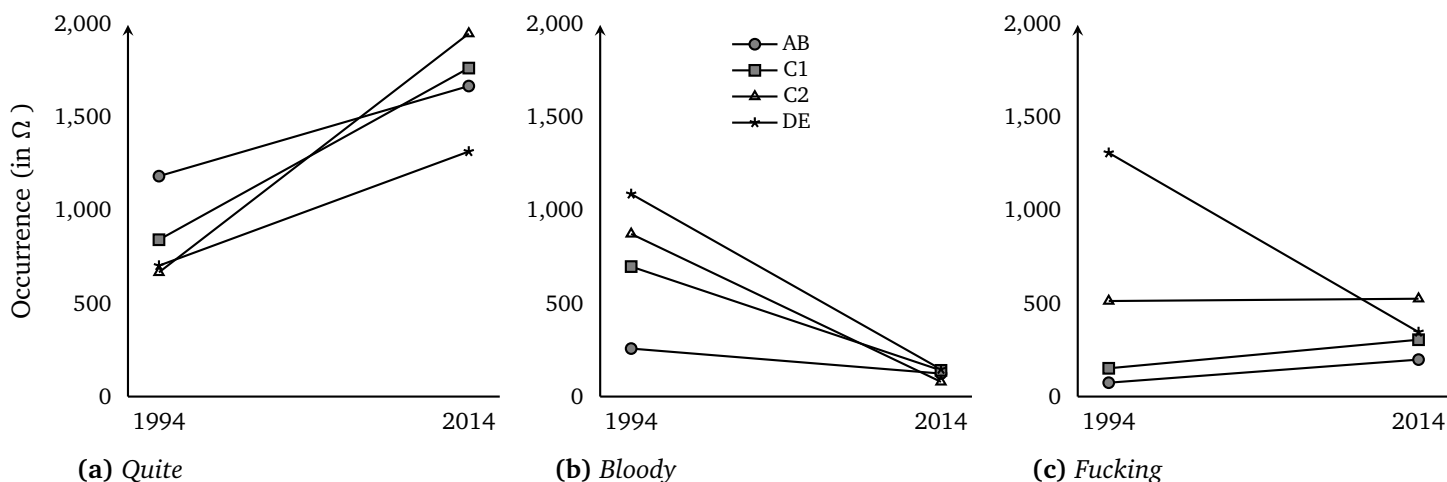
Normalized frequency across age groups for ‘fucking’. Mean age of an interval is taken as a single point.

The 45-59 age group is still left unexplained, but note that in 1994 the same group also displayed a post-adolescence peak for *fucking*. In 1994, this group similarly used *bloody* relatively often. Recall from Section 1.3.1 that age-graded linguistic features, such as *fucking* and *bloody*, are expected to also peak post-working age. Taking into scope Figure 5, an interesting relation emerges between the 1994 and 2014 patterns. The BNC2014 new 10-year gapped classification<sup>[15]</sup> allows for a more fine-grained glimpse. The contrast between the adolescents and post-adolescents is less extreme, but still pronounced, in 2014. Note that whether the frequency centroid (52.5 years) is more representative of speakers closer to 45 years than 60 years using the 1994 classification is impossible to approximate, which complicates interpretation of age-graded variation. Using the new classification scheme a subtle late age ‘peak’ can be discerned to be still present in the 2014 data. It can be concluded that *fucking* still exhibits an age-graded pattern across age group, but the middle-age taboo on *fucking* seems to have lessened. In effect, the age group differences are more equalized than they were twenty years

<sup>[15]</sup> Remarkably, the numbers of hits that fall into the ‘unknown age’ category drops from 393 to 78 when using the 2014 instead of the 1994 classification, which effectively renders the 2014 classification more useful and the data more complete. It is unclear why this happens, as any age can be mapped onto either scheme.

ago.

## 2.2.2 Social class



(a) *Quite*

(b) *Bloody*

(c) *Fucking*

**Figure 6**

BNC1994–BNC2014 comparison of normalized frequencies between social classes.

**Table 6**

Diachronic comparison of intensifier frequency by social class.  $^{+/-LL}$  = significant increase/decrease.

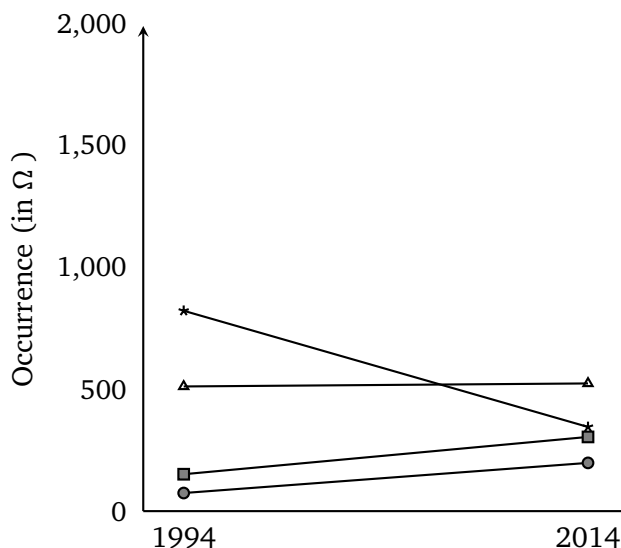
Social class	Rel. corpus size 1994/2014	<i>Quite</i>			<i>Bloody</i>			<i>Fucking</i>		
		1994	2014	LL	1994	2014	LL	1994	2014	LL
AB	0.17	969	8195	+118.02	211	604	-73.48	61	1006	+81.65
C1	0.52	660	2669	+331.58	547	213	-452.48	119	462	+52.39
C2	4.07	481	345	+209.26	630	14	-187.13	370	93	0.04
DE	0.10	318	5860	+138.65	492	583	-983.74	592	1767	-513.72

Table 6 and Figure 6 report the findings for social class. Again, there is a rise for *quite* across all social subgroups. The strongest increases are found in C1 and C2, which represent the lower middle class and skilled working class. Interpretation of these facts is postponed to Section 2.2.3.

For *bloody* the patterns resemble the findings for age, i.e. a noteworthy decrease across all social classes. While the lower classes used the intensifier more often than the middle and higher classes in 1994, this socially stratified preference has now eroded. Although it is difficult to directly glance from Figure 6b, the C1 and DE groups are now approximately equal in terms of normalized frequency ( $\Omega = 141$  vs  $\Omega = 147$ ). In fact, the values are closely followed by the highest social class ( $\Omega = 123.79$ ). A further investigation of the 1994 data shows that the greatest contributors to *bloody* seem to mostly be the speakers of old age (e.g. speaker ‘PS04B’ ( $f = 81$ ), speaker ‘PS01B’ ( $f = 57$ ), and speaker ‘PS01A’ ( $f = 50$ )). These facts indicate that (1) *bloody* is relatively rapidly losing popularity in the population, and (2) the use of *bloody* is unlikely to turn any heads nowadays as . In accordance with Hughes (2006), it is possible that in another twenty years heads will turn for the use of a – by then – old-fashioned word.

Once again, the case of *fucking* is less straightforward. The word may be slightly less socially stigmatized, as use in the AB and C1 classes has significantly increased (see Table 6). Preference in the C2 class has remained seemingly unchanged. Unexpectedly, the normalized frequency of *fucking*

in the DE class has plunged from 1311 to 347. At this point, it is useful to consider why this decrease is so large. A closer inspection of the DE class in the 1994 data shows that 238 occurrences out of the 592 were uttered by a single speaker ‘PS1GF’. This has heavily influenced the normalized frequency of *fucking* in that dataset. Removing this outlier results in an adjusted normalized frequency of 826. Comparing the adjusted 1994 data with the 2014 data results in Figure 7. The decrease remains statistically significant even when adjusted ( $\chi^2 = 136.99$ ).



**Figure 7**

Outlier adjusted BNC1994–BNC2014 comparison of ‘fucking’.

The pattern that *fucking* displays reflects a distinct development. Given its stigmatized nature, the rise in the upper classes AB and C1 is unexpected. The fact that *fucking* is used less frequently than twenty years ago in the lowest social class suggests that its trajectory is similar to a ‘change from below’, but this notion must immediately be discarded given its clear lexical and conscious use. Such changes are assumed to go unnoticed by its speakers, and usually pertain to phonological or phonetic changes. Moreover, such a notion can not account for the fact that the use has not changed in the C2 class. If *fucking* followed a ‘change from below’ pattern, the shift in use should be the largest for this social class. Note also that the largest as opposed to the lowest increase is in fact found for the highest social class. Appealing to traditional explanations of social class stratification for general linguistic phenomena is therefore insufficient.

It is possible to construct an ad-hoc framework for *fucking*. Reasonably assuming *fucking* to be the most forceful and expressive intensifier at discussion, it is easy to question the sensitivity the word shows to broader sociolinguistic influences. Tagliamonte and Roberts (2005) conclude that intensifiers are ‘subject to fashion’ after analyzing intensifier usage in the popular show *Friends*. They note that their real-time (i.e. season to season) data shows similar patterns to other contemporary ‘apparent-time’ corpora<sup>[16]</sup>. Regrettably, their study did not include *fucking* or otherwise highly expressive intensifiers, so their conclusion is not directly applicable for the current case. Their study once again stresses how rapidly intensifiers change when left at a socially free rein, but *fucking* is clearly ‘hampered’ by the fact that it is stigmatized. Sparse frequency data may therefore not be the most reliable indicator of linguistic innovation for highly expressive intensifiers.

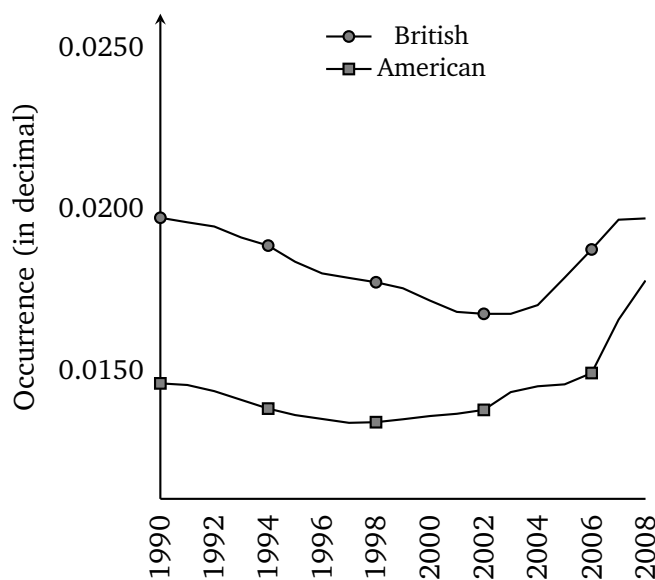
A study into offensive language on so-called prime-time television by Kaye and Sapolsky (2004)

<sup>[16]</sup> They consequently conclude that the analysis of speech data from television series may serve as a prediction for linguistic innovation in the general public. This is an attractive idea, but clearly needs further work on different intensifiers in order to be established completely.

offers some insight into the diachronic frequency of *fuck*, but makes no distinction between *fuck* and  *fucking*, which is problematic given the earlier observation that the two forms should not be analyzed as a single swear word. Both words can however be seen as ‘sexual words’, which is the term Kaye and Sapolsky use, and these words show a sinusoidal pattern of frequency between 1990 and 2001<sup>[17]</sup>. This can perhaps best be interpreted as an indication that swear words are indeed fashionable and their social preference is temporally sensitive to events in the society as a whole (such as Irish singer Bono swearing on television, see p. 558 of Kaye and Sapolsky). It is therefore difficult to be conclusive, as it seems that the stigma for a relatively young and expressive intensifier is difficult to model as a function of social class. Unpredictable social events and a highly individual attitudes contaminate the picture at this point in time. A more detailed analysis is not possible in the space of this work, and it is obviously difficult to construct a socially stratified real-time corpus. What can safely be concluded is that following relatively low-information frequency data there seems to be some evidence of  *fucking* becoming less stigmatized the past twenty years, although it must also be conceded that disproving this conclusion may prove altogether difficult.

### 2.2.3 The case of *quite*

The case of *quite* remains. Interestingly, the oldest intensifier seems to recently have regained popularity among British speakers. It is useful to consult other corpora to check whether or not a general increase of *quite* can be found between the 1990s and 2000s/2010s.



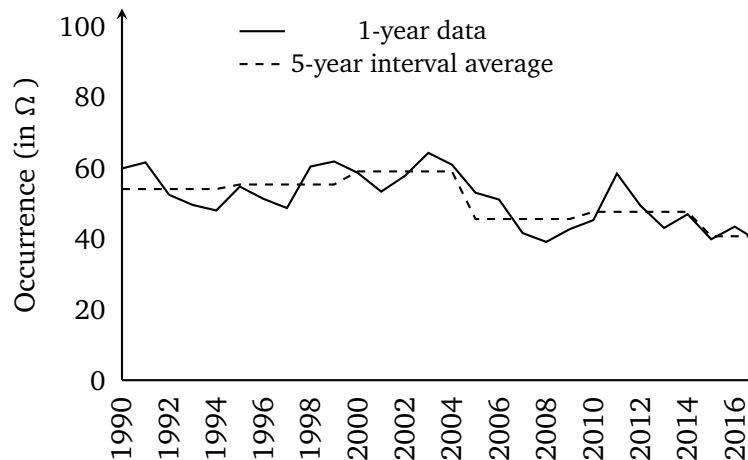
**Figure 8**

*N*-gram trajectory of ‘quite’ in American and British English between 1990 and 2008. Smoothing = 1.

Google N-grams (compiled by Michel et al., 2011) is presumably the largest (freely accessible) corpus in the world. It consists of textual data from millions of digitized books. It is not a particularly balanced or pure corpus, but it is useful for investigating general developments. An investigation of *quite* in the British sub-corpus between gives the following information (see Figure 8). *Quite* was subtly losing popularity until the early 2000s, but rapidly rose again after 2003. Note that these data pertain to a specific type of written genre, and are not necessarily parallel to the development in spoken language. Spoken British corpora are difficult to obtain, but there is another observation to be

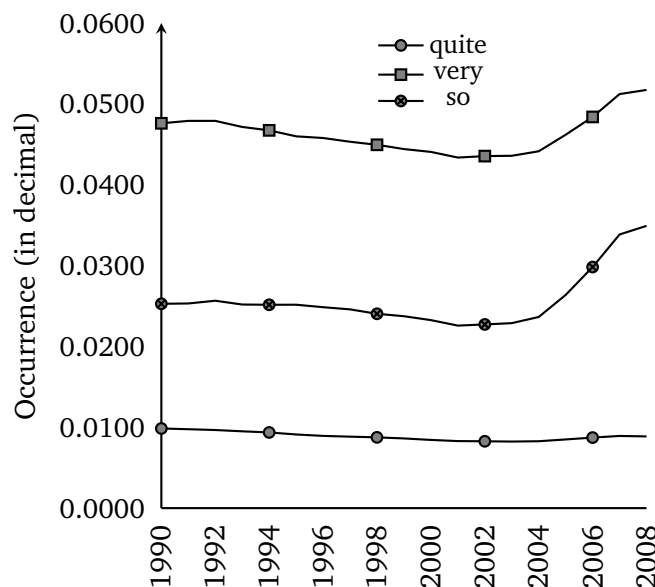
<sup>[17]</sup> The specific data are: 47 ‘incidents’ in 1990, 91 in 1994, 64 in 1997, and 77 in 2001

made. The American and British trajectories of *quite* in the written genre are similar (Pearson's  $r = 0.57$ ), as can also be seen in Figure 8.



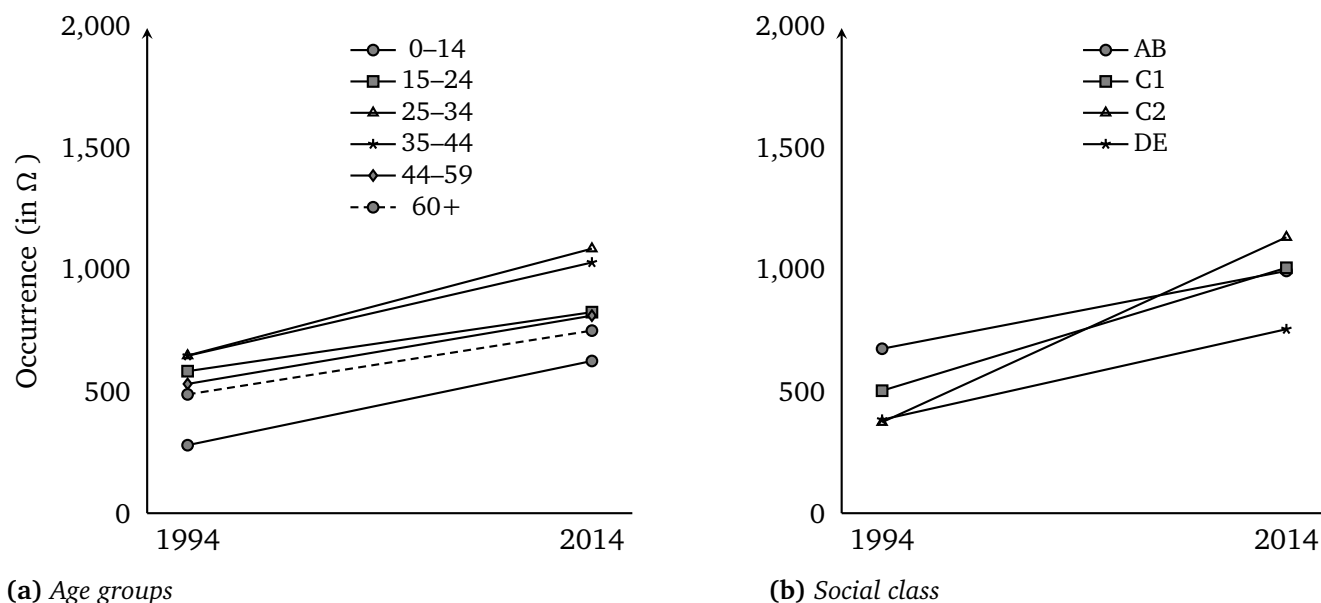
**Figure 9**  
COCA trajectory of 'quite' in spoken American English between 1990 and 2017.

Given this similarity, it may prove interesting to check whether or not *quite* has also increased in use in spoken American English. The closest equivalent to the spoken BNC is COCA (Corpus of Contemporary American English; maintained by Davies, 2008). The data is summarized in Figure 9. The corpus size per year is approximately 20 million words. If American use of *quite* is similar to the British use, there is seemingly conflicting data about recent years. While *quite* has increased in written genres in both British and American English, it has apparently increased among British speakers and decreased among American speakers. For the most part, it seems that *quite* has indeed risen in popularity in recent years.



**Figure 10**  
*N*-gram trajectory of intensifier-stipulated 'quite', 'very', and 'so' in British English between 1990 and 2008. Smoothing = 1.

One possible explanation can be sought in the different syntactical forms of *quite*, e.g. in affir-



(a) Age groups

(b) Social class

**Figure 11**

BNC1994–BNC2014 comparison of normalized frequencies between social classes for intensifier-stipulated ‘quite’.

mative ‘Yeah, quite’. Not all of these are necessarily intensifying. Simply querying ‘quite’ will therefore result in an overestimation of *quite* as an intensifier. If the data are restricted to the cases in which *quite* directly modifies an adjective, the pattern becomes more apparent. See for example Figure 10, in which the British trajectories of the intensifiers *quite*, *very*, and *so* are displayed (*bloody* and *fucking* are much less frequent in the N-gram data). *Quite* has remained virtually unchanged in terms of popularity as an intensifier, while *very* and *so* have clearly become more popular.

The intensifier-stipulated data for the spoken BNC is summarized in Figure 11. There is still a rise visible for *quite*, but it is less extreme if the cases are constrained to typical intensifier constructions. Notice as well that the social preference seems virtually unchanged (in line with Figures 4 and 6). A distinctive rise remains visible for the C2 social class, but note from Table 6 that the 1994 corpus was over 4 times as large, so comparison between these subgroups is problematic. It is therefore concluded that intensifying *quite* has mildly increased in popularity for the British population between the BNC1994 and BNC2014 datasets, but that pattern should be checked against real-time measures. An initial attempt at such measures, i.e. the N-gram data, shows that such an effect is not found in written language. Moreover, while the American and British populations covary in terms of popularity of *quite* in written language, *quite* seems to be slightly decreasing in popularity among American speakers.

## 3 Synchronic use

### 3.1 Questionnaire design

A list of 60 items was compiled and presented in random order. The items are constructed as follows. All items were short, mostly mono-clausal, colloquial sentences (see Table 13 in the Appendix for the complete list). Half of the items contained intensifier-adjective combinations (i.e. either *quite*, *bloody*, or *fucking*). The other half contained control constructions with identical syntactic makeup, but intensifiers were substituted with general degree modifiers. Adjectives were either scalar, extreme, or limit

adjectives. Thus, there are nine intensifier-adjective combinations the model needs to account for. In effect, there are optimally nine possible interpretations of the intensifiers. It is likely there are more than nine meanings to be derived from the adjectives, regardless of which are chosen, but assuming ideal monosemy for decontextualized sentences is plausible. Adjectives were used predicatively so as to (1) bar any lexical effects of an embedded noun, and (2) it allows the use of a semantically bleached finite (linking) verbs, e.g. a form of *to be*, which similarly maximizes comparability of items. Moreover, predicative use of intensifiers has been shown to be more frequent than attributive use in other corpora (e.g. Barnfield & Buchstaller, 2010).

Participants were asked to choose from two alternative phrasings of the stimulus item. For example, in the case of the first sentence, *That book John is reading is quite good*, the alternatives were *That book John is reading is perfectly good* and *That book John is reading is rather good*. In other words, participants were asked to opt for a maximal or a moderate alternative. For each item, they were also offered the options *Both options are equally possible*, which indicates that the intensifier was assigned a purely intensifying and non-quantificational interpretation, and *Neither option makes sense*, which is difficult to interpret straightforwardly and can therefore best be seen as the ‘rest’ case.

**Table 7**

*Model predictions for intensifier interpretation.*

Prediction type	Intensifier	Adjective	Expressivity	Quantification prediction
1	Quite	Scalar	+	Moderate
2	Quite	Extreme	+	Moderate
3	Quite	Limit	+	Maximal
4	Bloody	Scalar	++	Moderate
5	Bloody	Extreme	++	Maximal
6	Bloody	Limit	++	Maximal
7	Fucking	Scalar	+++	Maximal
8	Fucking	Extreme	+++	Maximal
9	Fucking	Limit	+++	Maximal

In Table 7 the implicit predictions from Figure 3 (Section 1.4.3) are linearly rephrased. Recall that internal expressivity is expected to co-influence the choice of intensifier in intensifier-adjective constructions, as opposed so solely adjectival type. *Fucking* is therefore expected to always bear a maximal interpretation in decontextualized sentences, but note that in the context of scalar adjectives *fucking* may also be assigned a multal-to-maximal interpretation. Multal alternatives were not offered, however, so as to not over-complicate the questionnaire for participants.

### 3.2 Participants

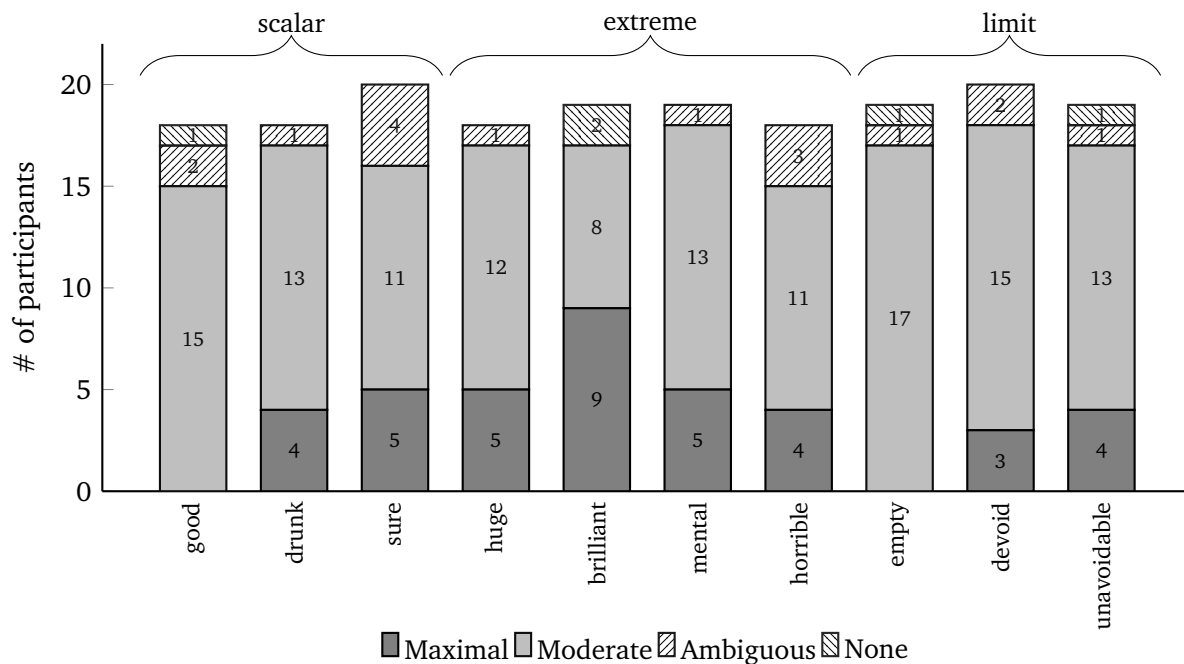
A total of 27 Native English speakers were recruited for the questionnaire by means of snowball sampling. Six participants were left out of analyses, because they did not provide an answer to half of the 30 test items. One more participant was left out as he or she was born in Canada and currently lives in Switzerland, so it is unclear to what degree his or her English is influenced by British English. Of the remaining 20 participants 12 were born in the south of England, and 8 were born in the north<sup>[18]</sup>. The average age was 23 years (SD= 5.5 years). Only 6 participants were over 25, however, and they had all completed either post-graduate (n=5) or graduate degrees (n=1). The ‘younger’

<sup>[18]</sup> This divide is influenced by definition of artificial borders. In fact, most speakers were from what can be called the Midlands, but demarcating this area is even more problematic.

participants were given their age presumably in further (n=5), undergraduate (n=7), or graduate education (n=2). Most participants were therefore students, although a reasonable subset were of early working age (between 26 and 36 years).

### 3.3 Results

#### 3.3.1 Between-subject analysis



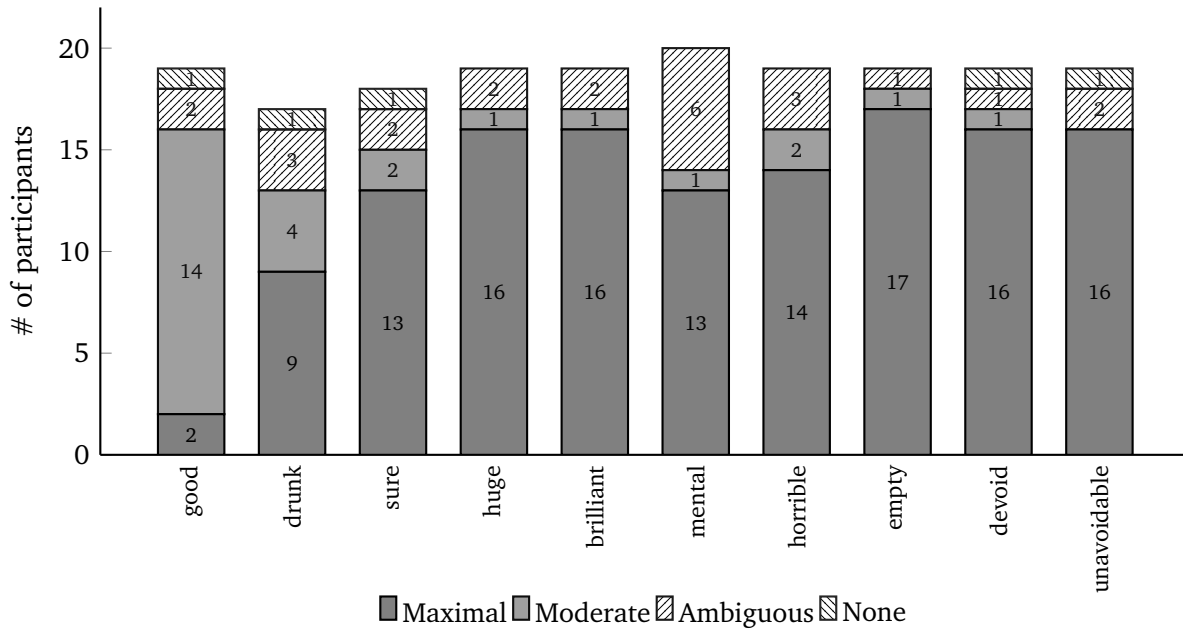
**Figure 12**

Responses to test items for ‘quite’.

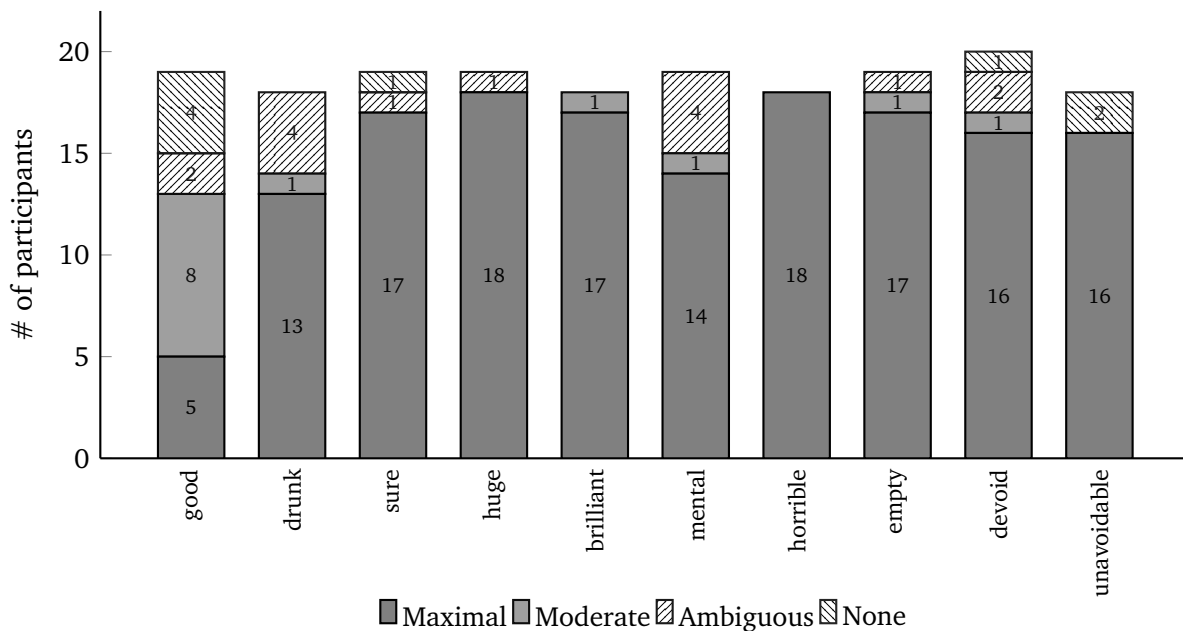
The results for *quite*, *bloody*, and *fucking* are reported in Figures 12 – 14. For *quite* the found pattern indicates that it is generally unambiguous when interpreting decontextualized sentences, because in almost all cases the moderator interpretation is preferred by the majority of speakers. Note that the one obvious case for which the maximal interpretation seems preferred, i.e. *quite brilliant*, concerns an extreme adjective. It is interesting that *quite* is interpreted again as a moderator for the limit adjectives *empty*, *devoid*, and *unavoidable*. It should be expected that limit adjectives exert greater semantic pressure on the quantificational interpretation than extreme adjectives do. Especially the fact that participants opt for the maximal option *less* for limit adjectives than for extreme adjectives indicates that (1) *quite* is not highly influenced by adjectival type, and (2) *quite* has a mostly unambiguous core meaning.

Recall that *bloody* was considered a somewhat passé intensifier by Hughes (2006). Following that line of thinking, *bloody* is expected to have an intermediate level of internal expressivity. This is reflected in the pattern portrayed in Figure 13, but in a peculiar manner. *Bloody* is mostly interpreted as a moderator in *bloody good*, but is more often interpreted as a maximal modifier in *bloody drunk*. Moreover, in *bloody sure* it is interpreted as maximal, although this can partially be a consequence of the corresponding sentence *I am bloody sure my pen was stolen*. It is difficult to imagine that *bloody* is not stressed when pronouncing the sentence, which presumably renders an ubiquitous maximal





**Figure 13**  
Responses to test items for 'bloody'.



**Figure 14**  
Responses to test items for 'fucking'.

interpretation<sup>[19]</sup>.

*Bloody* is assigned a maximal interpretation when combined with extreme and limit adjectives. A slight deviation is found for *bloody mental*, but mainly pertaining to ambiguity and not a strictly moderating interpretation. Note also that the corresponding sentence *The new American president*

<sup>[19]</sup> It is not unimaginable that *quite* undergoes the same effect, and that its rare fully maximal interpretation hinges crucially on pronunciation. The case of *quite brilliant* can then be explained as in practice always being pronounced with stress on *quite*, but this is conjecture.

*seems bloody mental to me* refers to a person, i.e. the American president, which may be susceptible to the subjective mind. The patterns for *bloody mental* and *fucking mental* are similar, which is unexpected given the higher expressivity of *fucking*, so such an interaction effect is not ruled out. The evidence is nonetheless clearly in favor of a maximal interpretation for decontextualized *bloody*, despite its heyday being over.

The case of *fucking* is barely different from the case of *bloody* in terms of interpretation. The prototypical scalar adjective *good* again departs from the general pattern. A maximal interpretation is assigned to *fucking* in every other case. The phrase *fucking good* is mainly interpreted as a moderator environment, but note that participants responded *Neither options makes sense* relatively often. It is not entirely straightforward to interpret this finding, but it possibly indicates that *fucking good* is only used in very specific contexts and unsuitable for decontextualized presentation. It can therefore best be concluded that *fucking good* is ambiguous in terms of quantification.

A similar but weaker case can be made for *fucking drunk*. The majority of participants assigned a maximal interpretation to the phrase, but five did not do so. *Drunk* is considered a ‘hybrid anto-complementary adjective’, which can receive ‘both a scalar and non-scalar reading’ (p. 136 in Paradis, 1997). It can be adjusted by both maximal, moderator and even minimal modifiers (e.g. *a bit drunk*) as opposed to its complement *sober*, which is more restricted (e.g. *\*a bit sober*). *Drunk* can therefore be taken to be ambiguous, but note that the adjective is ambiguous and not the intensifier. Comparing the results for *drunk* across the three categories confirms this. While *drunk* can receive a scalar reading, the expressivity clearly correlates with the reading. In terms of the model, this means that the meaning of this particular adjective depends more heavily on the properties of the intensifier than the other adjectives, which display hardly any difference between *bloody* and *fucking* constructions.

### 3.3.2 Model evaluation

**Table 8**

*Model accuracy per participant.*

<i>Partic.</i>	Correct predictions	Total responses	Percentage in %	<i>Participant</i>	Correct predictions	Total responses	Percentage in %
1	18	30	60	11	21	30	70
2	21	30	70	12	15	30	50
3	22	30	73	13	22	30	73
4	10	30	33	14	23	30	77
5	23	30	77	15	22	30	73
6	18	30	60	16	19	30	63
7	12	15	80	17	21	30	70
8	19	30	63	18	18	30	60
9	17	30	57	19	15	18	83
10	22	30	73	20	11	19	58

The attention is now shifted to the model set out in Section 3.1. Nine prediction types were devised to capture the complex interplay of expressivity, adjectival types, and intensifiers. Each prediction type resulted in either a moderate prediction or a maximal prediction. The most relevant manner in which the model’s predictions can be used is in predicting within-subject patterns instead of between-subject patterns. It is especially useful to check why the model in some cases fails to predict the majority of responses correctly. The model accuracy per participant is reported in Table 8. These results are simply the sum of cases in which the predicted case, i.e. either moderate or maximal,

was (not) confirmed by the response of a participant. Options 3 (*Both options are equally possible*) and 4 (*Neither option makes sense*) are always considered to be a wrong prediction, which means that the reported accuracy values are relatively strict at the expense of the model. Only 1 out of 4 options counts towards the sum of correct predictions.

For 9 participants, over two thirds of the predictions were correct. The fact that the highest accuracy was 77% for participants who responded to the full 30 test questions seems unpromising, but this is not unexpected given the pattern for prediction types 3 (*quite* + limit adjectives). These were predicted to result in a maximal interpretation, but are instead most often assigned moderate readings. Leaving these out of analysis would result in an model accuracy increase between 4% and 11% for all participants. This is not to say that the model is any better, but it is an unexpected result that further demands reevaluation of the model. Discussion follows in Section 4.

### 3.3.3 Ambiguity choices

**Table 9**

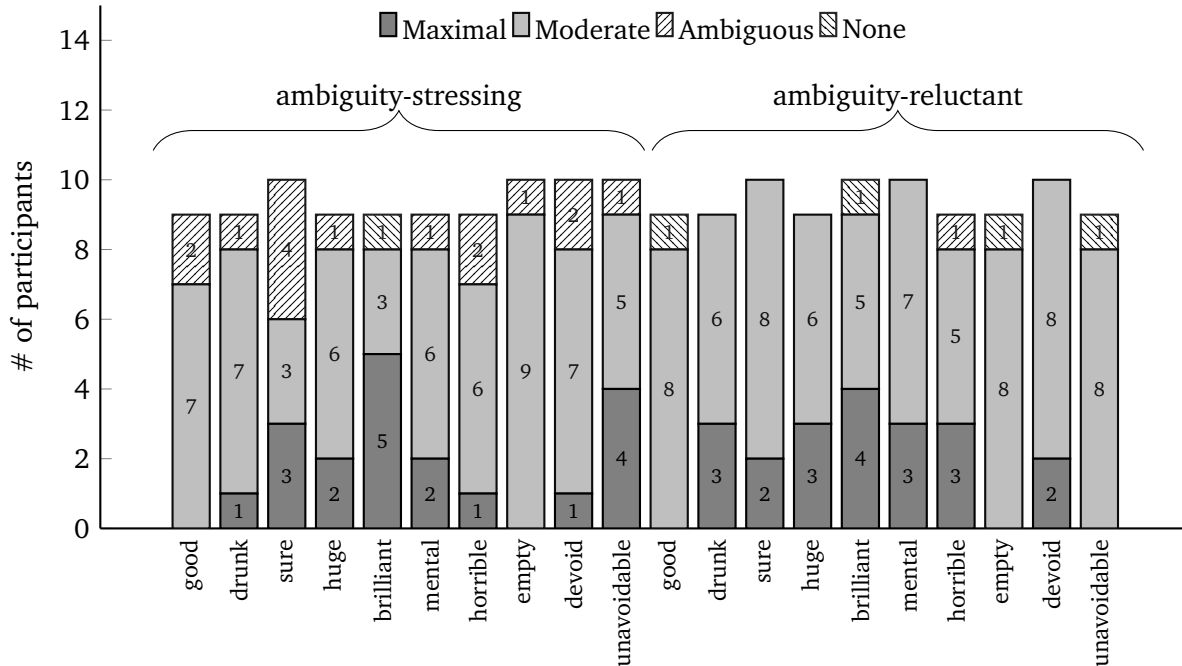
*Sum of ambiguity option choices for test and control items per participant.*

Participant	Ambiguity option count			Participant	Ambiguity option count		
	Test	Control	Total		Test	Control	Total
1	7	2	9	11	0	0	0
2	3	7	10	12	10	6	16
3	0	2	2	13	1	1	2
4	16	10	26	14	1	8	9
5	1	19	20	15	0	1	1
6	0	0	0	16	0	1	1
7	0	5	5	17	2	1	3
8	1	17	18	18	5	11	16
9	0	0	0	19	2	0	2
10	0	1	1	20	6	8	14

For one participant the model accuracy is particularly low, i.e. 33% for participant 4. At closer inspection the reason for it is easily discovered. Participant 4 chose *Both options are equally possible* 16 out of 30 test items and a further 10 times for the control items. The same pattern is found for the next-to-lowest model accuracy case, i.e. participant 12 with 50% correctly predicted responses. Participant 12 opted for the ambiguity option 10 out of 30 times for the test items and a further 16 times for the control items. The problem is that there are two ways of establishing that an intensifier is ambiguous in its quantification. Either the between-groups pattern is balanced between maximal and moderate readings, which is the case for *quite brilliant* (see Figure 12). The other indication is if a participant chooses to opt for the ambiguity option consistently, which is indiscernible from between-subject comparison.

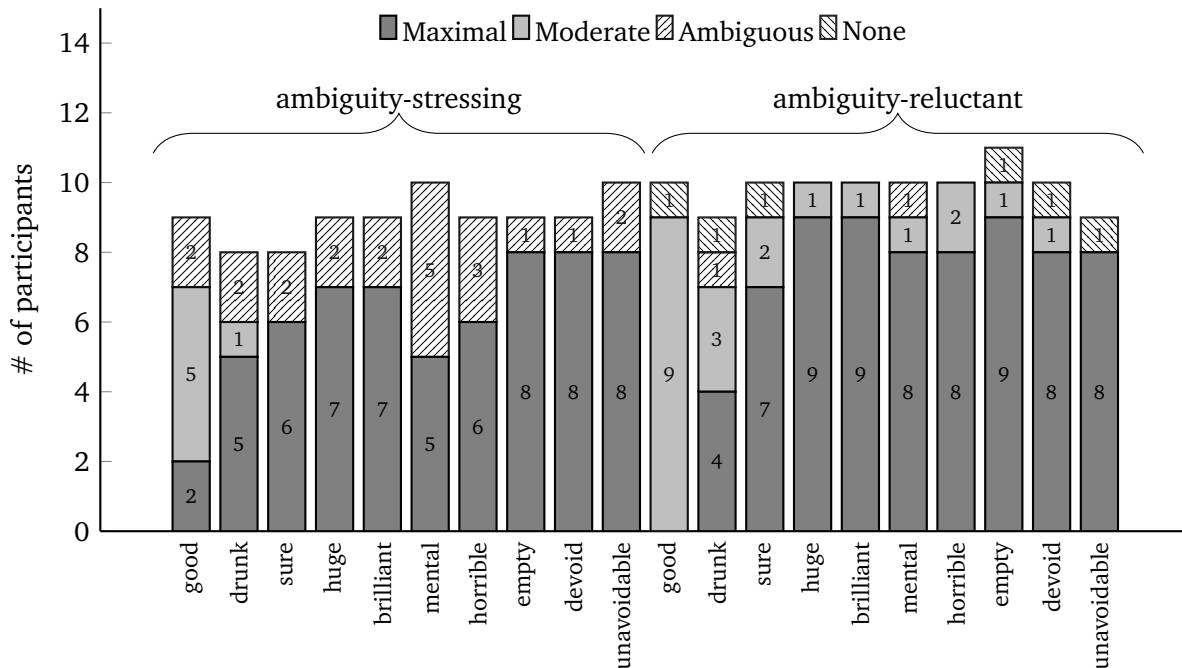
Leaving out the ambiguity option is obviously undesirable, because the participants should be offered the option, but there is a noticeable difference between participants in terms of using the ambiguity option. As can be seen from Table 9, half of the participants used the ambiguity option less than three times, while the other half ranged from 5 to 26 times. Half of the participants have seemingly been reluctant to use the ambiguity option altogether, although it was not implied in the questionnaire instructions that the option was less desirable. It does beg the question whether the general pattern can be better explained when the data is split between these two ‘types’ of participants.

The data from Figures 12 – 14 are split into an ‘ambiguity-stressing’ group, i.e. participants



**Figure 15**

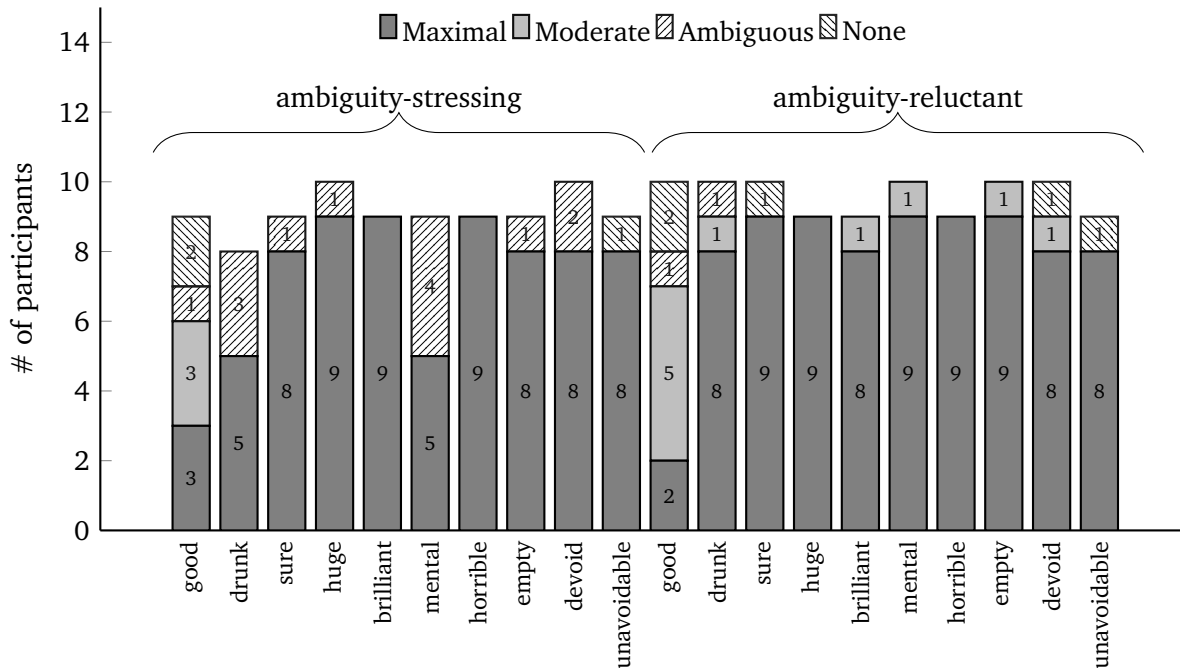
Responses to test items for 'quite' split into ambiguity-stressing and ambiguity-reluctant participants.



**Figure 16**

Responses to test items for 'bloody' split into ambiguity-stressing and ambiguity-reluctant participants.

more often opting for the ambiguity option when in doubt, and into 'ambiguity-reluctant', i.e. the participants who seem to prefer to avoid the ambiguity option (and presumably opting for either a moderate or maximal option). These results should not invalidate the earlier analysis, but they may offer some insight as to the degree of ambiguity (i.e. balance in the ambiguity-stressing group) and whether speakers prefer the moderate or maximal interpretation when 'forced' to choose. In the case



**Figure 17**

Responses to test items for ‘fucking’ split into ambiguity-stressing and ambiguity-reluctant participants.

of conflicting results, the earlier analysis is preferred. Essentially, only covertly ambiguous cases can be *added*, and conclusions of the earlier analysis are not *disregarded*. The new partitioning is shown in Figures 15 – 17.

The ambiguity-stressing groups are considered first. Interestingly, *quite* seems ambiguous in the case of *quite sure*<sup>[20]</sup>, because the ambiguity-stressing participants opted for the ambiguity option relatively often. In the main analysis, however, the case was made that *quite sure* is assigned a moderator interpretation. It is best concluded that *quite* is interpreted as a moderator in the context of decontextualized *sure*, especially given *quite*’s prevailing moderator reading overall. *Quite brilliant* seems to be leaning towards the maximal reading in this case, but recall from Section 3.3.1 that *quite brilliant* was the case for which the interpretations were balanced across the whole group. It is therefore concluded that *quite brilliant* is also ambiguous. For all other cases, across both groups, the moderator interpretation prevails over the maximal interpretation, thereby once again indicating that *quite* is unambiguous.

The ambiguity-stressing dilution of *bloody* confirms the earlier analysis. The exceptional case remains *bloody good*, which is unambiguously interpreted as a moderator environment of *bloody*. The case of *bloody mental* is slightly more pronounced under the new analysis, as it is clearly ambiguous as portrayed by the balance in the ambiguity-stressing group. Nonetheless, the first best alternative is a maximal interpretation. Similar patterns are found for *fucking good* and *fucking mental*. The differences in interpretation between *bloody* and *fucking* seem altogether marginal in intensifier-adjective constructions. *Fucking* is assigned maximal interpretations slightly more often than *bloody* (151 versus 132 times in total), which is an indication that *fucking* is slightly more expressive, but this expressivity does not reflect in noteworthy differences in terms of interpretation.

The results are summarized in Tables 10 – 12. Note that in almost all cases the participants

<sup>[20]</sup> It is possible there is some interference from the fact that *sure* is theoretically a limit adjective. This is how *sure* is used in Paradis (1997), but this has deliberately been avoided in this work, because a frequency distribution of the spoken BNC shows that *sure* is often combined with scalar modifiers, such as *fairly*. It is often found in negative environments of the type ‘not + modifier + *sure*’, e.g. *not entirely/absolutely sure*, which also indicate scalar-type gradability.

**Table 10***Summary of ambiguity of decontextualized 'quite'.*

<i>Phrase</i>	<i>Intensifier ambiguous</i>	<i>Quantification tendency</i>
<i>Quite good</i>	×	Moderate
<i>Quite drunk</i>	×	Moderate
<i>Quite sure</i>	×	Moderate
<i>Quite huge</i>	×	Moderate
<i>Quite brilliant</i>	✓	Moderate
<i>Quite mental</i>	×	Moderate
<i>Quite horrible</i>	×	Moderate
<i>Quite empty</i>	×	Moderate
<i>Quite devoid</i>	×	Moderate
<i>Quite unavoidable</i>	×	Moderate

**Table 11***Summary of ambiguity of decontextualized 'bloody'.*

<i>Phrase</i>	<i>Intensifier ambiguous</i>	<i>Quantification tendency</i>
<i>Bloody good</i>	×	Moderate
<i>Bloody drunk</i>	×	Maximal
<i>Bloody sure</i>	×	Maximal
<i>Bloody huge</i>	×	Maximal
<i>Bloody brilliant</i>	×	Maximal
<i>Bloody mental</i>	✓	Maximal
<i>Bloody horrible</i>	×	Maximal
<i>Bloody empty</i>	×	Maximal
<i>Bloody devoid</i>	×	Maximal
<i>Bloody unavoidable</i>	×	Maximal

**Table 12***Summary of ambiguity of decontextualized 'fucking'.*

<i>Phrase</i>	<i>Intensifier ambiguous</i>	<i>Quantification tendency</i>
<i>Fucking good</i>	×	Moderate
<i>Fucking drunk</i>	×	Maximal
<i>Fucking sure</i>	×	Maximal
<i>Fucking huge</i>	×	Maximal
<i>Fucking brilliant</i>	×	Maximal
<i>Fucking mental</i>	✓	Maximal
<i>Fucking horrible</i>	×	Maximal
<i>Fucking empty</i>	×	Maximal
<i>Fucking devoid</i>	×	Maximal
<i>Fucking unavoidable</i>	×	Maximal

have indicated that the chosen decontextualized phrases are not ambiguous. This holds even when the participants are split into groups who used the ambiguity option of the questionnaire reluctantly or those who used it more willingly. Every intensifier has only one ambiguous case. Moreover, *quite* has a prevailing moderate reading, as opposed to the pervasive maximal reading of *bloody* and *quite*.

## 4 Discussion

The group of lexical items termed intensifiers in this work interact in unique semantic ways with their syntactic heads. More specifically, the intensifiers at discussion simultaneously impose semantic restrictions on their right-hand adjectival arguments, but are also preferred depending on the desired expressive force of the speaker in a given context. This dependency complex led to the hypothesis that the intensifiers are ambiguous in terms of quantification in decontextualized contexts. The analysis of the questionnaire data showed, however, that native British speakers seem to (largely) agree about the quantificational imposition of intensifiers on adjectives despite the confusing state of affairs. *Quite* is generally interpreted as moderating the meaning of right-hand adjectives, while *bloody* and *fucking* ‘maximize’ the meaning. *Quite* has been proven to be marginally more prone to ambiguity than *bloody* and *fucking*, as it was more balanced between moderator and maximal readings.

There are only three obvious exceptions to these tendencies, i.e. the ambiguous phrases *quite brilliant*, *bloody mental*, and *fucking mental*. Interestingly, these adjectives are all extreme adjectives (i.e. *brilliant* and *mental*). As was noted in Section 1.4.2, extreme adjectives may either be lexically or contextually extreme, but the latter type is barred through design. Lexically extreme adjectives may be especially sensitive to contextual modulation and therefore prone to ambiguity. Given that these patterns do not extend across all extreme adjectives, it is not to be considered a semantically sensitive category, but the semantics of these specific sub-items may be such that they are especially sensitive to these intensifiers. Such an investigation must be left to a future study, but can for instance concern collocational patterns of extreme adjectives and whether or not they are typically used in positive or negative emotive settings.

A major component of the proposed model is the type of adjective to be intensified or modified. Note that the semantic distinctions in gradability did not offer the desired granularized predictions of intensifier quantification. For each intensifier only one case of the questionnaire differed from the internal ‘standard quantification’. The influence of adjectival type for general degree adjuncts is attested by others (e.g. Paradis, 1997; Huddleston & Pullum, 2005), so there is no direct reason to doubt its validity as a construct. The fact that *bloody* and *fucking* have proven to be similarly expressive clouds the degree to which adjectival type correlates with expressivity, because there is essentially not a three-way distinction, but a two-way distinction. This means that almost extreme and limit adjectives for *bloody* and *fucking* were in accordance the predictions, but it is impossible to determine whether that is from merit of the model or a consequence of their internal expressivity. The model has to be tested for a greater set of expressive intensifiers in order to definitely (dis)prove the role of adjectival type in intensifier-adjective constructions.

The case of *fucking good* remains especially peculiar, because *fucking* is expected to not combine as a moderator, i.e. not even with scalar adjectives. It is not a collocation in the BNC data, and no intonation pattern was provided to participants to provide contextual modulation. Yet, most participants opted for the moderator interpretation that is presumably only possible when the phrase is contextually modulated. Recall from Figure 14 that of the 19 people who answered the question only 5 opted for the expected maximal option, but note also that 4 participants opted for ‘neither option makes sense’. This is interesting, because this option was not used frequently by participants, i.e. only 18 times in total for the test items for all participants<sup>[21]</sup>, and was at most chosen twice by participants for other phrases. This indicates that to a considerable group of participants the phrase or its alternatives seemed unnatural in some manner when it is presented this way.

One possible explanation for the unexpected deviation is that participants conjured up a mental context when reading the sentences, which is corroborated by the in-questionnaire suggestion to ‘imagine having a heated discussion with a close friend who will not scorn you for using offensive

<sup>[21]</sup> The option was used a further 62 times for the control items, so this option was not avoided in general.

words'. This suggestion was inserted directly after the warning that many sentences contained swear words, which may seem unnecessary to some but very important to others. It is unlikely that this played a significant role in the patterns for *quite*, and presumably only mildly influenced those for *bloody*, but the phrases containing *fucking* are most prone to this suggestion. It is impossible to determine, however, to what degree this applies to all phrases, because only *fucking good* (and possibly *bloody good*) indicate such influence. This suggestion is therefore best rejected in absence of more direct evidence. This regrettably leaves the case of *fucking good* unexplained at the present time. Taking together the facts at this point, it must be concluded that adjectival type is a weak determinant of intensifier quantification. The properties of the intensifier, such as its internal expressivity and external sociotemporal setting, are instead the main determinant of intensifier meaning.

Another interesting finding is that the patterns for *bloody* and *fucking* are nearly the same. If expressivity and maximal readings are assumed to be correlated, this is an indication that the two items are similarly expressive, although the a priori assumption was that *fucking* would be more expressive than *bloody* given its recent diachronic trajectory. The loss of expressivity of *bloody* is clearly manifested, but that of *fucking* is a possible innovation in the British population. Put another way, even though *fucking* is assigned high offensiveness ratings by broadcasting regulators, the flexibility it has among (young to working-age) speakers shows that its expressivity is appreciated in day-to-day speech. Many of the sentences used in the questionnaire can easily be used in a conversation between friends that is not emotionally charged on the whole<sup>[22]</sup>. This suggests that *fucking* is still being socially stigmatized in 2018, but its linguistic status has expanded beyond that of a simple swear word. This is not to say that there will come a day when *fucking* is no longer considered swearing by the whole or even majority of the population, but its stigma is ostensibly weakening and will presumably continue to do so in the foreseeable future.

Recall that the conclusion on the basis of the corpus comparison was that *fucking* displays age-graded variation, which means that frequency distribution is sustained at later points in time. This was also assumed for *bloody*, but it is difficult to ascertain given its substantial loss in popularity in recent years. This 'rapid' drop occludes the expected age-gradation, because the normalized frequencies in the BNC2014 are consequently almost all between 100 and 190. Remaining with the BNC1994 data, when *bloody* was still relatively frequent, the age-gradation also remains discernible. The non-expressive intensifier *quite* does not show a age-graded pattern, but the age distribution in 2014 is remarkably similar to that of 1994 considering there is no social stigma on its use. A more 'random' distribution is expected between the two time points if no social factor is involved at all, but it none is obvious. This similarity is likely coincidence, and can be solved by comparing between more points in time. In fact, in order to make strong conclusions about socially dependent and independent intensifiers a real-time study is clearly the superior method. The BNC comparison of this study can best be seen as an optimal solution to this problem given the absence of sufficiently large spoken datasets. It was not necessary to 'resort' to a strictly apparent-time analysis, but a future study should preferably employ a real-time research design. This is especially true of intensifiers, which are subject to fashion and rapid language change.

This work started out with a quote of Stephen Fry, who once upon a time expressed that swearing is neither a lack of education nor a lack of verbal interest. Both have proven to hold under empirical testing, although this naturally concerns only *bloody* and *fucking*, and not so much *quite* as it can hardly be seen as swearing. The common factor for these words is that they express some emotional attitude, albeit at completely different levels. Still, it is clear that these words require a different tool of analysis than words that are solely descriptive. Approaches to this combined meaning are scarce at the moment. One seemingly well developed theory is that of hybrid semantics (see [Gutz-](#)

<sup>[22]</sup> Most adjectives had non-human (e.g. *book* and *electricity bill*) or non-participant referents (e.g. *Stephen* and *the new American president*), which kept the associated offensiveness low.



mann, 2015), but expressivity remains difficult to formalize. This latter fact surprises none who read this, but the importance of developing tools seems to go largely unnoticed. Even the relatively local meaning implications that follow from syntactically embedded ‘swear words’ are difficult to capture in traditional linguistic theories. Beyond the endless fascination that linguists experience for such intricacies, it seems irresponsible to squander ‘the entirety of humanity, the angry, hateful, or enticing emotional expressions all languages contain’ (p. 157 in Jay, 2009). In fact, to ignore the most human part of the most human tool in existence is quite a waste.

## 5 References

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## 6 Appendix

### 6.1 Questionnaire item list

**Table 13**

*Sentences used in questionnaire. Listed in designed order. Presented in random order to participants.*

#	Sentence	Quant. prediction	Adjective type
1	That book John is reading is <b>quite good</b> .	Moderate	Scalar
2	That book John is reading is <b>bloody good</b> .	Moderate	Scalar
3	That book John is reading is <b>fucking good</b> .	Maximal	Scalar
4	The electricity bill is <b>quite huge</b> .	Moderate	Extreme
5	The electricity bill is <b>bloody huge</b> .	Maximal	Extreme
6	The electricity bill is <b>fucking huge</b> .	Maximal	Extreme
7	I think Stephen is <b>quite drunk</b> .	Moderate	Scalar
8	I think Stephen is <b>bloody drunk</b> .	Moderate	Scalar
9	I think Stephen is <b>fucking drunk</b> .	Maximal	Scalar
10	I have difficulty concentrating, because my stomach is <b>quite empty</b> .	Maximal	Limit
11	I have difficulty concentrating, because my stomach is <b>bloody empty</b> .	Maximal	Limit
12	I have difficulty concentrating, because my stomach is <b>fucking empty</b> .	Maximal	Limit
13	I am <b>quite sure</b> my pen was stolen.	Moderate	Scalar
14	I am <b>bloody sure</b> my pen was stolen.	Moderate	Scalar
15	I am <b>fucking sure</b> my pen was stolen.	Maximal	Scalar
16	There is a new choice of chicken pie in the pub and it is <b>quite brilliant</b> .	Moderate	Extreme
17	There is a new choice of chicken pie in the pub and it is <b>bloody brilliant</b> .	Maximal	Extreme
18	There is a new choice of chicken pie in the pub and it is <b>fucking brilliant</b> .	Maximal	Extreme
19	The new American president seems <b>quite mental</b> to me.	Moderate	Extreme
20	The new American president seems <b>bloody mental</b> to me.	Maximal	Extreme
21	The new American president seems <b>fucking mental</b> to me.	Maximal	Extreme
22	I recently sustained a kneecap injury and the pain was <b>quite horrible</b> .	Moderate	Extreme
23	I recently sustained a kneecap injury and the pain was <b>bloody horrible</b> .	Moderate	Extreme
24	I recently sustained a kneecap injury and the pain was <b>fucking horrible</b> .	Maximal	Extreme
25	I feel like this winter is <b>quite devoid</b> of sunlight.	Maximal	Limit
26	I feel like this winter is <b>bloody devoid</b> of sunlight.	Maximal	Limit

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27	I feel like this winter is <b>fucking devoid</b> of sunlight.	Maximal	Limit
28	Losing good people in wartime is <b>quite unavoidable</b> .	Maximal	Limit
29	Losing good people in wartime is <b>bloody unavoidable</b> .	Maximal	Limit
30	Losing good people in wartime is <b>fucking unavoidable</b> .	Maximal	Limit
31	They are <b>strongly negative</b> about the first three movies.	Multal	Scalar
32	The twins are indistinguishable when you are <b>sufficiently far away</b> .	Relative	Scalar
33	Where can you possibly go with that <b>practically ancient</b> car?	Approximating	Extreme
34	At the moment I am not <b>entirely clear</b> what the difference is.	Approximating	Limit
35	The room was <b>deeply charmed</b> by the time he finished playing.	Multal	Scalar
36	My brother tends to be <b>somewhat critical</b> of my relationships.	Moderate	Scalar
37	I am <b>slightly jealous</b> of royalty, because money is probably not a problem.	Paucal	Scalar
38	Your ability in sport is <b>partially determined</b> by your genes.	Moderate	Scalar
39	I did not do <b>particularly well</b> , but it was not a complete drama either.	Moderate	Scalar
40	A week can be an <b>awfully long</b> time in political journalism.	Multal	Scalar
41	Getting around the internet is <b>fairly straightforward</b> thanks to powerful search engines.	Moderate	Scalar
42	Keep it simple if it is <b>at all possible</b> .	Minimal	Limit
43	Police say a terrorist strike is <b>highly unlikely</b> .	Multal	Scalar
44	It is perhaps not <b>totally coincidental</b> she stopped visiting often.	Approximating	Limit
45	The hotel was <b>fully booked</b> after we left, because of the jazz festival.	Maximal	Scalar
46	The summers in Korea are <b>extremely hot</b> .	Multal	Scalar
47	My son is not <b>particularly studious</b> .	Multal	Scalar
48	I am not <b>massively convinced</b> by the political rally.	Multal	Scalar
49	I am <b>really hungry</b> , so I would like a sandwich.	Multal	Scalar
50	I was in an <b>absolutely fantastic</b> mood after they told me.	Maximal	Extreme
51	London is a <b>vastly different</b> place from the rest of England.	Multal	Scalar
52	The planned talks with North Korea are <b>genuinely exciting</b> news.	Multal	Scalar
53	I like the taste, but I am unsure about the <b>rather strange</b> textures of these prawns.	Moderate	Scalar
54	Why don't you use a <b>slightly smaller</b> tool?	Paucal	Scalar
55	I think she is <b>well aware</b> of my feelings.	Maximal	Limit
56	People were <b>immensely proud</b> of what Wales did in the last World Cup.	Multal	Scalar
57	I would <b>much more</b> prefer to do that myself.	Multal	-
58	They have the same problems, but in <b>rather different</b> forms.	Moderate	Scalar
59	The beef in this restaurant is <b>slightly pricey</b> but worth it.	Moderate	Scalar
60	I think the reason why she did it is <b>particularly important</b> .	Multal	Scalar

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