

Dealing with **Historical Corpus Data**: Investigating the Adjective Intensifier *well* from **Early Modern English** to **Present Day English**

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Lauersdorf's Principle

The present study is an **illustration** of the **importance** of using
“**all the data**” in a historical analysis

(Lauersdorf 2018, 2019)

What are (adjective) intensifiers?

An **intensifier** is a **device** which scales a quality **up, down** or somewhere **between** the **two** (Bolinger 1972: 17)

Adjective Intensifiers: an adverbial which intensifies an adjective

It is hot

(In theoretical terms: *it is \emptyset hot*)

It is *very* hot

It is *really* hot

Quirk et al. (1985)

Quirk et al. (1985: 590) divide **intensifiers** into **two sub-categories** depending on their intensifying function

Amplifiers: “scale upwards from the assumed norm”

e.g., *hot* > *very hot*

Downtoners: “scale down from the assumed norm”

e.g., *hot* > *a little bit hot*

Amplifiers

Quirk et al. (1985) subdivide **amplifiers** further depending on their **semantic function** into *boosters* and *maximisers*

Boosters: “a high point on the scale”

e.g., it is *really* hot

Maximizers: “upper extreme point on the scale”

e.g., it is *completely* ridiculous

The Adjective Intensifier *well* in British English

(1a) It's *well* hot today

(1b) I'm *well* glad

(1c) That film is *well* funny

(1d) This is *well* knacker

> Terminologically speaking, it is an amplifier, more specifically a booster

> Recent studies suggest that **its use** has significantly **increased** in the **last two decades** (Stenström 2000; Aijmer 2018; Stratton 2018)

Historical Trajectory

- It has been used since **Old English** (Peltola, 1971: 656)
- According Fettig (1935: 15-21) and Mustanoja (1960: 319–327), it **became most popular** in the **13th century**, but by the **mid-14th century** it **reduced in frequency**.
- After the mid-14th century it was **rarely used** and appeared only in **retentions** such as *well aware* and *well worthy* (Ibid).

(1) (a) Engelond his a **wel** **god** lond
England is a well good land

‘England is a very good land’

[Robert of Gloucester, *Metrical Chronicle*, 1297; from *Robert of Gloucester’s Chronicle*, (ed.), Thomas Hearne (Oxford), line 1 (cited in *OED2*)]

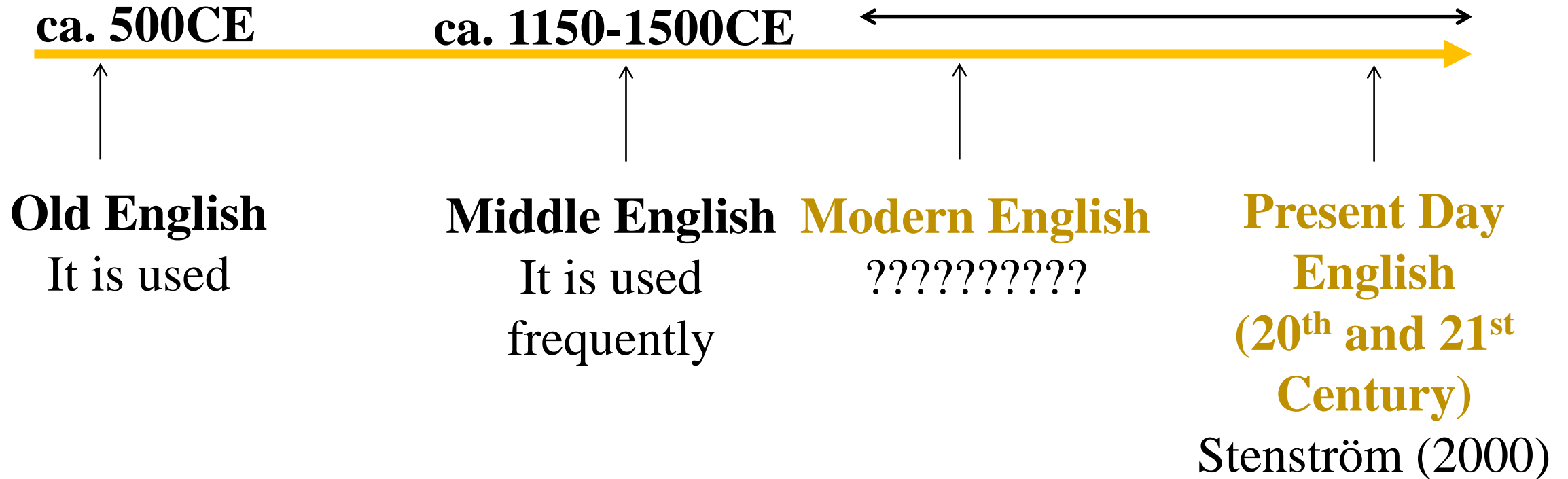
(b) In þat forest... þer woned a **wel** **old** cherl
In that forest there lived a well old man

‘A really old common man lived in the forest’

[Walter William Skeat, *a1375*; from *William of Palerne* (cited in *OED2*)]

These examples were extracted from the OED (Oxford English Dictionary)

Timeline



Dichotomy

➤ Does the current intensifying use of *well* in British English reflect **a continued development from Middle English?**

or

➤ Is the current intensifying use of *well* **an innovation** on the part of **modern language users** resulting in the same use of *well* but via different paths

Dichotomy

Ebb and Flow:

- Hickey (2002: 125) warns researchers from readily assuming that the use of present-day forms which existed historically were “**transmitted unchanged throughout history**”

Research Question

Other than being an intensifier of a limited set of regular adjectives such as *aware* and *able*, is there any **evidence** to suggest that *well* as an **intensifier** of other regular adjectives **really disappeared** between **EModE** (Early Modern English) and **PDE** (Present Day English)?

Why did *well* + *aware*, *able* remain?

Fossilization

- They **remain** because they have **become fixed** due to their **high frequency**. A decrease in frequency of intensifiers results in a **reduction of collocates**, and the collocates which remain are restricted, and exist only because they have become fossilized throughout time (Méndez-Naya 2003: 377).

Scale Structure

- They have a **closed scale structure** (minimum and maximum value). Open-scale Adjectives (e.g., *tall*, *hot*) lack coordination points (Kennedy & McNally 2005)

Therefore, after ME, **there was a change in scale structure**

Methodology (Corpora)

- Used **5 Spoken/Speech Related Corpora** from **1560-2014**
- “**intensification** is primarily a **dialogic** phenomenon” (D’Arcy 2015: 451)

Table 1. The Corpora Used in the Present Study

Corpus	Geographical Area	Word Count	Text Type	Dates	Period
CED (Corpus of English Dialogues)	Britain	1,183,690 words	Dialogues from face-to-face communication	1560- 1760	EModE
OBC (Old Bailey Corpus 2.0)	London	21,023,241 words	Criminal court trial proceedings.	1674-1913 ^o	EModE + PDE
DCPSE (The Diachronic Corpus of Present-Day Spoken English)	Britain	885,436 words	Recordings of spontaneous speech	1958- 1990	PDE
Spoken component of the BNC (British National Corpus 1994)	Britain	10,585,847 words	Recordings of spoken conversations	1994	PDE
Spoken BNC (British National Corpus 2014)	Britain	11,209,172 words	Recordings of spontaneous speech	2014	PDE

Methodology (Corpora)

- The speech-related corpora **represent** mostly **south-eastern British English** and mostly the **incipient standard variety**. How about dialectal sources?
- **Corpus data** are also supplemented with **dialectal sources**

Dialectal Sources

- *English Dialect Dictionary* (EDD 3.0)
- Tim Bobin's comic dialogue *Tummus and Meary* written in Lancashire dialect (1819)
- Sternberg's *The Dialect and Folklore of Northhamptonshire* (1851)
- Ferguson's *The Dialect of Cumberland* (1873)
- Diary of *Joseph Turrill of Garsington* (1863-1876)
- *Freiburg English Dialect Corpus* (FRED – “oral histories” – recorded in 1970s-1990s)
- Video/Audio Clips from the 20th century (using *BYU TV Corpus*)

MOSTLY A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS FOR DIALECTAL DATA

Methodology (Search Queries)

- *Well* + **adjective**, which varied from corpus to corpus depending on the **POS (Part of Speech)** tagging:
 - BNC1994 = the query '*well* _AJ0'
 - OBC and the CED the query '*well* _JJ'
- To ensure that tokens were not missed, an additional search was run for the lexical entry '**well**' in each corpus to check for missed instances of *well* + **adjective** due to incorrect tagging
 - In the CED *woorthie* was incorrectly tagged as a noun, which meant that *well woorthie* did not appear in the initial search query '*well* _JJ'.

RESULTS

Figure 1. The Frequency of the Adjective Intensifier *well* from Early Modern English to Present Day English



What about Dialectal Sources?

Some attestations of its use can be found in dialectal sources between Middle English and the late 20th century:

- (a) “came **well wet** to the Callander” (Kühner 1566)
- (b) “it were **well waird** to take mell and knock out his harns” (Ferguson Prov [1641])
- (c) “this appareth to be **well hard**” (Ruce, Sermons (1631)
- (d) “A’d get **well drunk**, if a tho’t it ud do my head good” (1843)

Lancashire Dialect

- (a) I steart like o wil cat un wur **welly gaumless** (1819: 16)
- (b) ‘I tell the Meary, I’r **welly moydart** (1819: 19)

Cumberland Dialect

- (a) the University troop dined with the Earl of Abingdon, and came back
well fuzzed (1873: 50)

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

Did this intensifying use of *well* really disappear?

- The evidence suggests that **it remained** in certain dialects of English
- However, we know **little about how frequent** it was (qualitative attestation)
- Several researchers have **explicitly** referred to this ‘**newer**’ use (Aijmer 2018) as an innovation (Milroy 1992: 198; Paradis 2008: 322)
- Stenström (2000: 177) reports that adults seem to believe this use was ‘**new**’ or ‘**innovative**’

“My mum says, I go yeah that’s **well nice**, and she goes erm **well nice...(?)....**
That’s it yeah I know I’m always saying **well, well cool** and I keep on saying
that, I’ve said it like, about so many things when we’re home, and she goes, **what**
is this you always saying well with everything”

(Taken from Stenström 2000: 177)

Is the current intensifying use a continuation of its ME use?

- Not necessarily
- generally speaking, it is **not common for diffusion** to work from **remote varieties outward** (Trudgill 1972, 1974; Chambers and Trudgill 1980: 176; Labov 2001: 285)
- Its current use may have developed in analogy with *well aware, well able* (etc.), which results in the change in scale structure
Closed Scale Adj → Closed Scale + Open Scale become permissible
- There are also prosodic differences between the former use and ‘newer’

Ebb and Flow of Intensifiers

“Once a word has evolved to have an intensifier function it remains in the reservoir of forms that a language user may deploy to boost meaning from that point onwards regardless of whether it actually becomes one of the favoured forms or not” (Tagliamonte 2008: 391).

What should researchers investigating (historical) language variation and change remember when using Corpora?

Using Corpora as Research Tools

- **POS-Tagging** is not perfect! Incorrect tagging can result in skewed results in the concordance lines. Check tagging accuracy
- The **lack of attestation** in a corpus **does not necessarily mean** that something did **not exist** (language is **infinite** but corpora are **finite**) which is in line with Lauersdorf's formulation of using "all the data" (2018)

Thank you for listening!

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Further Examples and Data

21ST CENTURY

(Degree)

- (a) I was like **well impressed** cos it's taken her twenty years to buy me a book (BNC2014)
- (b) if my parents got a divorce I'd be **well upset** (BNC2014)
- (c) I was **well upset** that I missed it, I like a good storm (BNC2014)
- (d) I am **well confused** with all of this stuff man (BNC2014)

Increase in its Use as an Intensifier of Adverbs and Prepositional Phrases

- (12) (a) then I shall be **well at ease** (1567, CED)
(b) the lightest weighed **well over 1 ½ cwt** (1905, OBC)
(c) Chris was **well out of order** (BNC1994)
(d) ... but you need to know **well in advance** (BNC1994)
(e) ... the arrangements towards this move are **well on track** (BNC1994)
(f) that's been like that for well **over a year** (BNC2014)
(g) you're **well into cooking** I can see (BNC2014)
- (13) (a) when the hower was **well nigh** come (1631, CED)³¹
(b) beeing therefore of **well neere** fourescore Acres (1582)
(c) They tend to keep themselves to themselves and **well away** from the road (DCPSE)
(d) The plans are **well underway** for next year (BNC1994)
(e) he was **well early** this year (BNC2014)
(f) it was seriously a good day so we got the train **well early** (BNC2014)