

# **Intensifiers in Swabian German: changes in social meaning across the lifespan**

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GLAC 2024



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# Overview

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- 1. Background**
- 2. Methodology**
- 3. Results**
- 4. Discussion**
- 5. Conclusion**

# Background

# Intensifiers

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An **intensifier** is a **device** which scales a quality **upward** or **downward** from an assumed norm (Bolinger, 1972: 17)

It is hot

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

It is *very* hot

It is *really* hot

# Quirk et al. (1985)

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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*

# Previous Research on English Intensifiers

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## Linguistic:

**Collocational width** (e.g., Méndez-Naya, 2019)

**Syntactic function** (e.g., Tagliamonte & Denis, 2014)

## Social:

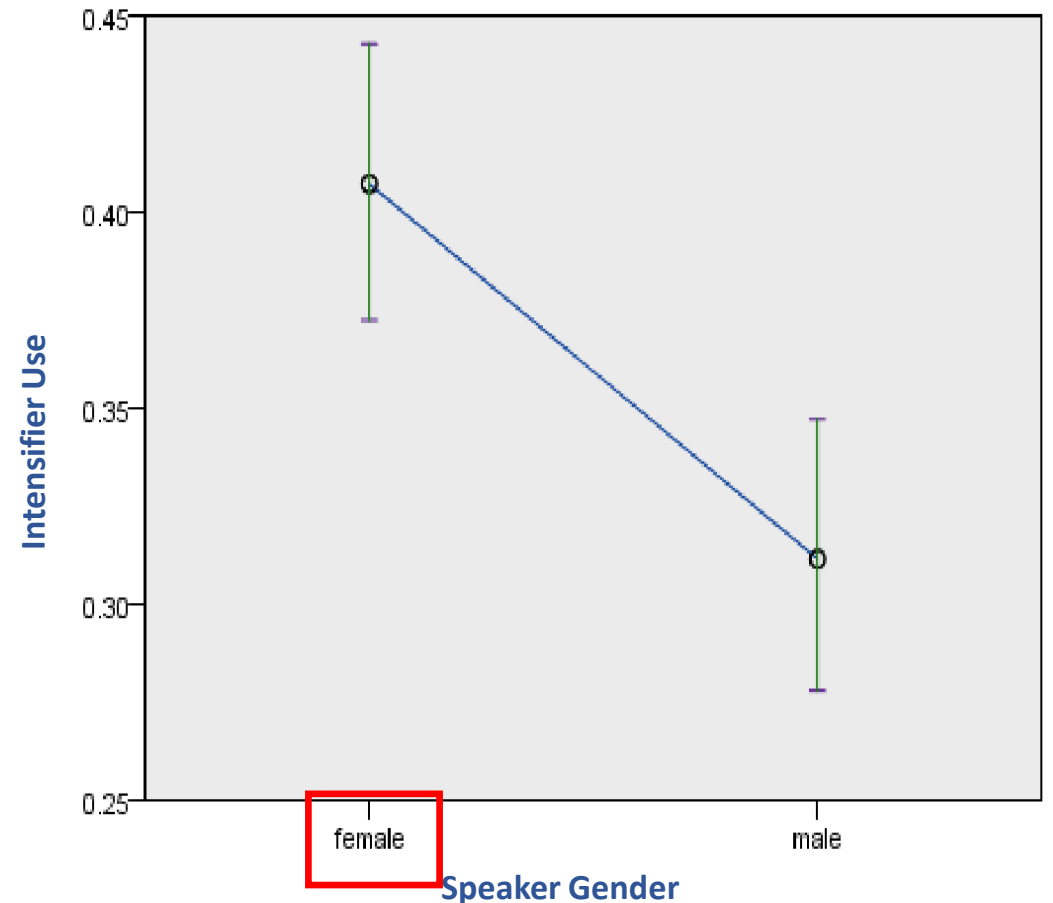
**Age** (e.g., Ito & Tagliamonte, 2003)

**Gender** (e.g., Fuchs, 2017)

**Social class** (e.g., Macaulay 1995, 2006)

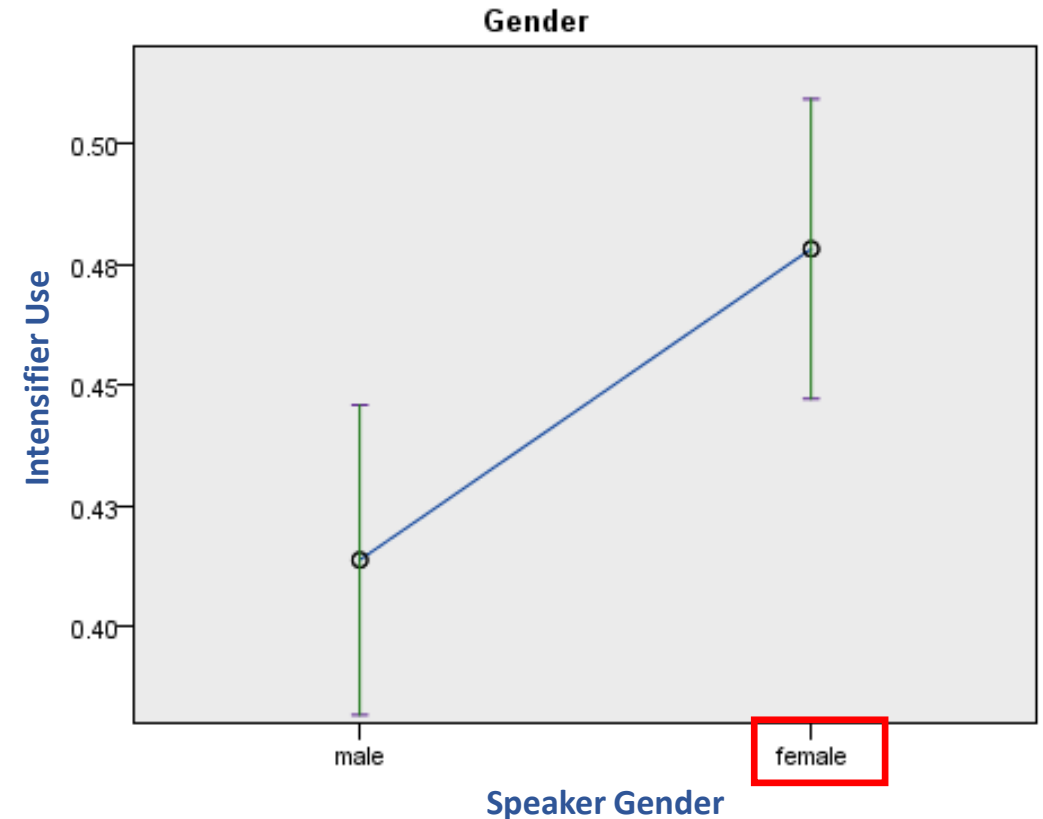
# German (Stratton, 2020)

- Based on a binary mixed effects logistic regression model, **female speakers intensify adjectives more frequently** than male speakers ( $p < .001$ )
- While women intensify more, **male speakers are more likely to use downtoners** than female speakers



# Norwegian (Stratton & Sundquist, 2022)

- Based on a binary mixed effects logistic regression model, **females intensify adjectives more frequently** than male speakers ( $p < .001$ )





# Why intensify?

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Intensifiers provide speakers with resources to **impress**,  
**persuade**, **praise**, and **generally influence** the interlocutor's  
reception of a message

(Partington, 1993:178)

# Intensifiers can modify various POS

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- (a) Adverbial intensification: he talks **very** quickly
- (b) Adjective intensification: she is **so** beautiful
- (c) Nominal intensification: he is **such** a liar
- (d) Verbal intensification: he **really** annoys me
- (e) Prepositional intensification: he is **really** in favor of the war against Ukraine

# Some intensify all POS (Stratton, 2018)

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- (a) Adverbial intensification: he runs **well** quick(ly)
- (b) Adjective intensification: she's **well** beautiful
- (c) Verbal intensification: that **well** hurt
- (d) Nominal intensification he's **well** Jimmy Savel
- (e) Prepositional intensification: that was **well** out of order

# Emphasis on adjective intensification in Germanic

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English: *very good!*

Standard German: *sehr gut!*

Swabian German: *sehr gued!*

# Intensifiers in German

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- Ample research on:
  - Classification (van Os, 1989; Breindl, 2009)
  - Development (Kirschbaum, 2002; Claudi, 2006)
  - Select intensifiers (Pheiff, 2023, Visser, 2024)
  - Frequency on social media (Sheffler et al., 2023)
  - Effect of social factors (Stratton, 2020)

# Research Questions

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- (1) What is the **frequency** and **function** of intensifiers in Swabian German?
- (2) Is intensifier use and choice sensitive to **social factors** in Swabian German?
- (3) How has **intensifier** use **changed** across the **lifespan** and within Swabian speech communities?

# **Methodology**

# Swabian Corpus (Beaman, 2024)

	1982					2017				
	mid-age >30 yrs		younger <30 yrs			older >60 yrs		mid-age <60 yrs		
	men	women	men	women		men	women	men	women	
Community										
Stuttgart	0	1	4	2		0	1	4	2	
Schwäbisch Gmünd	1	2	6	4		1	2	6	4	
Subtotal by Sex	1	3	10	6		1	3	10	6	
Subtotal by Age	4		16				4		16	
Subtotal by Year	20						20			



# Envelope of Variation

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Intensification of adjectives:

Adjectives:

*das war so super* ‘it was so great’ [lit. ‘super’]

Verbs:

*mir gefällt’s sehr gut* ‘I really liked it’

Adverbs:

*ging so schnell* ‘[it] happened so fast’

# Narrowing the Envelope of Variation

Following previous work (Stratton, 2020), non-comparable contexts removed:

- Comparative contexts (e.g., *isch net sehr gued* ‘it’s not very good’)
- Superlative contexts (e.g., *e bissle trockener* ‘a bit drier’)
- Negative contexts (e.g., *ist au net schlimm* ‘it’s also not bad’)
- Non-gradable adjectives (e.g., *berufstätig* ‘employed’)
- Classifiers/adj compounds (e.g., *soziale Intelligenz* ‘social intelligence’)

# Dependent variable

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- **Adjectives** were coded **binomially** for **intensification**
  - *i bi Ø ald* ‘I’m old’ (not intensified = 0)
  - *i bi sehr ald* ‘very old’ (intensified = 1)
- Each **intensifier** was coded as an **amplifier** or **downtoner**
  - *i bi sehr ald* ‘very old’ (amplifier = 1)
  - *i bi e bissle ald* ‘very old’ (downtoner = 2)

# Independent Variables

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Recording year (1982, 2017)

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Community (Stuttgart, Gmünd) Social class (scale from 0-15)

Age (younger, older) Identity (scale from 1-5)

Gender (men, women) Mobility (scale from 0-100)

Education (*Abitur*, no *Abitur*)

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# Results

# Overall Intensification Rate in Swabian

Intensified		Not Intensified	
%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>
<b>27</b>	832	73.3	2292

(*n* = 3,131)

Total words in the Swabian panel study corpus = 206,577

# Intensification Rates by Gender

## Women

Intensified		Not Intensified	
%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>
<b>32</b>	415	68.5	903

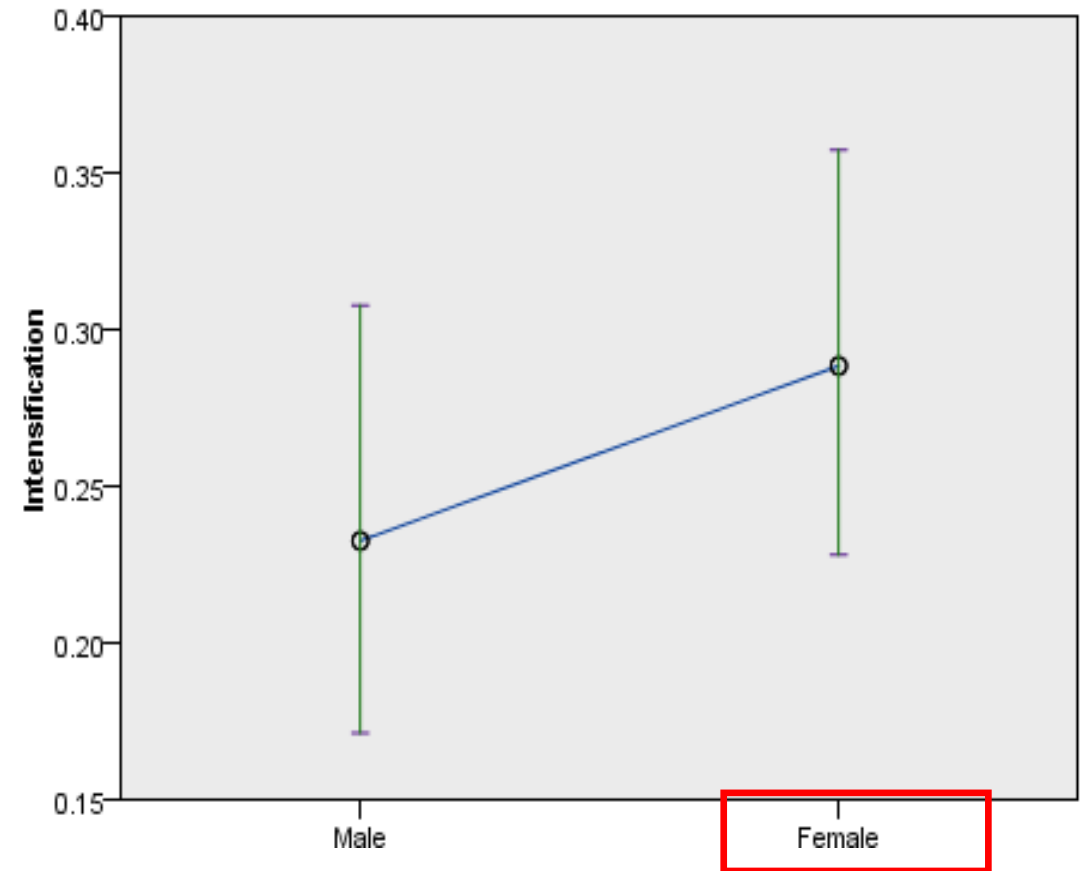
(*n* = 1,319)

## Men

Intensified		Not Intensified	
%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>
<b>23</b>	420	76.8	1391

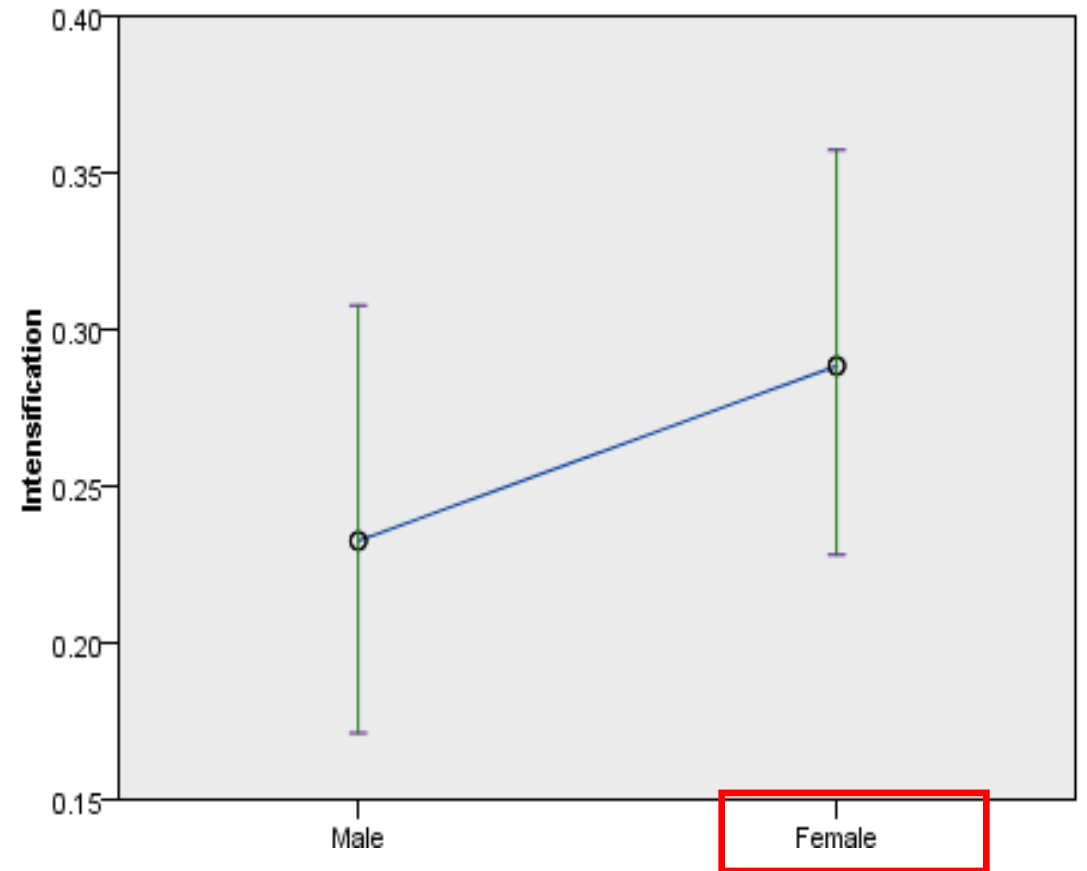
(*p* < .001)

(*n* = 1,812)



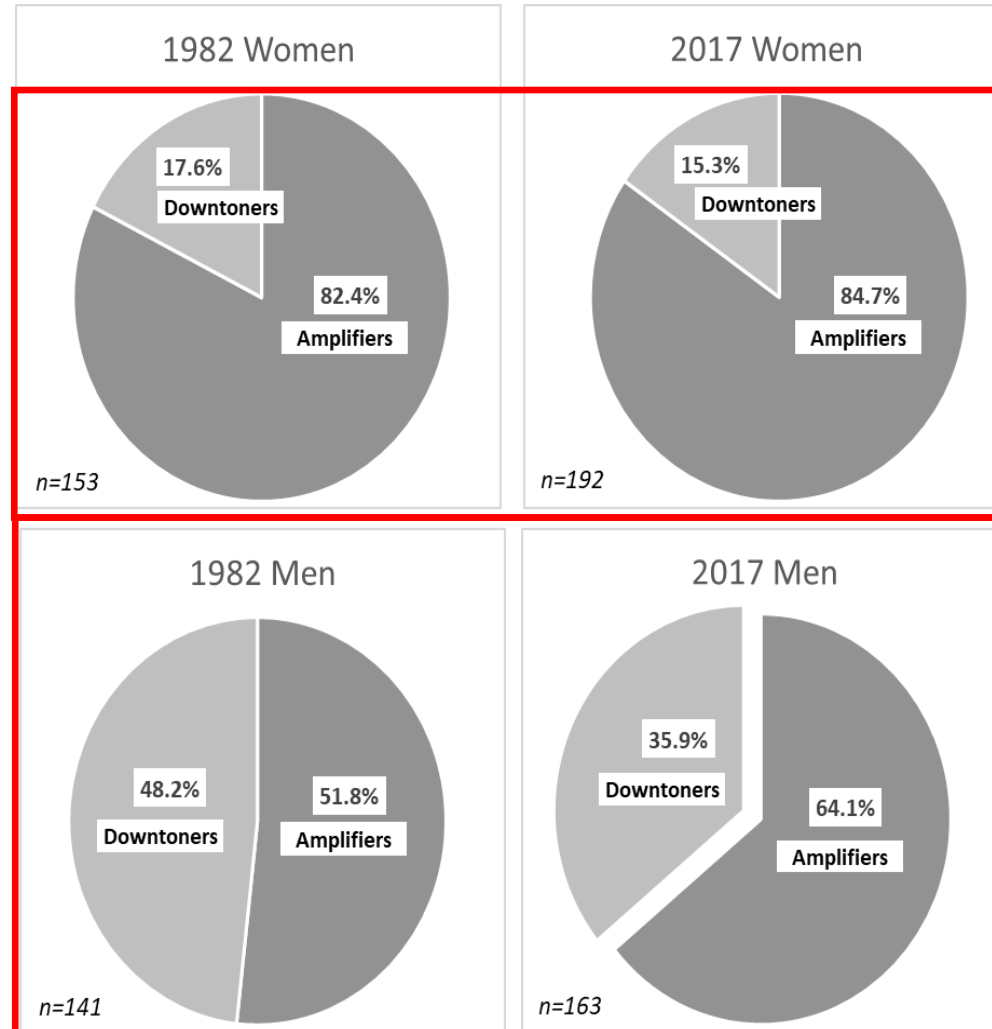
# Intensification Rates by Gender

- While women used more amplifiers, **male speakers used more downtoners** than female speakers ( $p < .001$ )





# Intensification across the lifespan



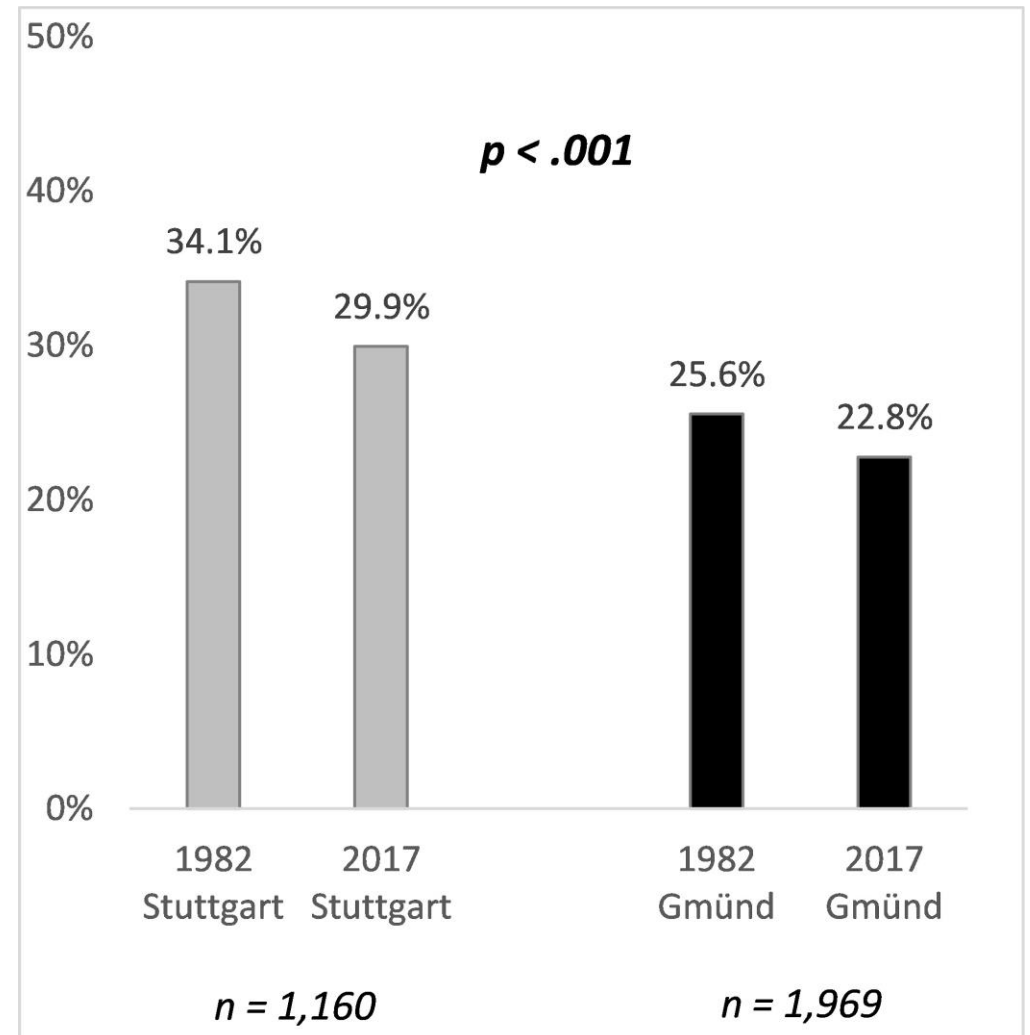
# Swabian Intensifiers

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Perhaps **with age, men no longer** feel the need to **exert identities of masculinity, toughness, and nonchalance**, conveyed through the use of downtoners, and rather they **turn their focus to cooperation and partnership**, converging with the more **positive-oriented intensifiers** found in women's speech

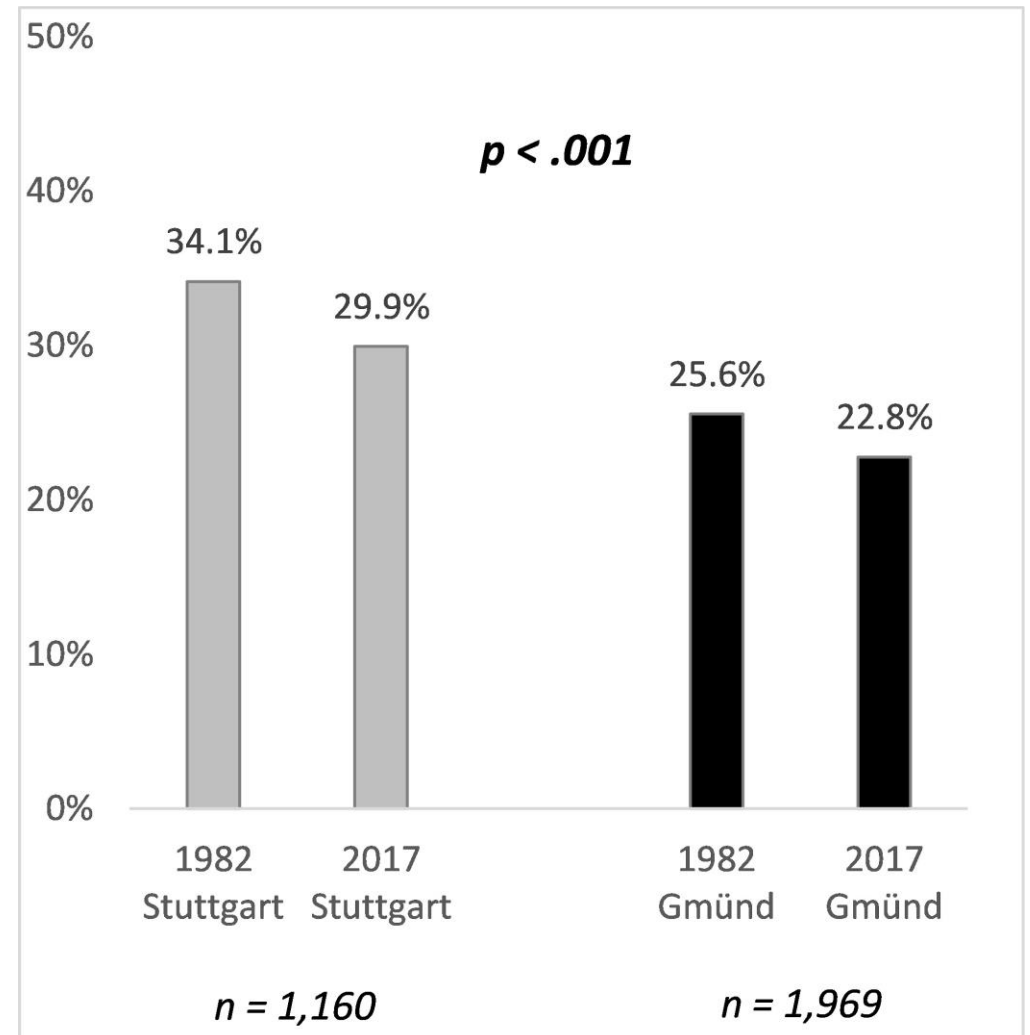
# Speech Community

- Speakers in **Stuttgart** (34%) **intensified** adjectives **more frequently** than semi-rural town of Schwäbisch Gmünd (24%) ( $p < .001$ )



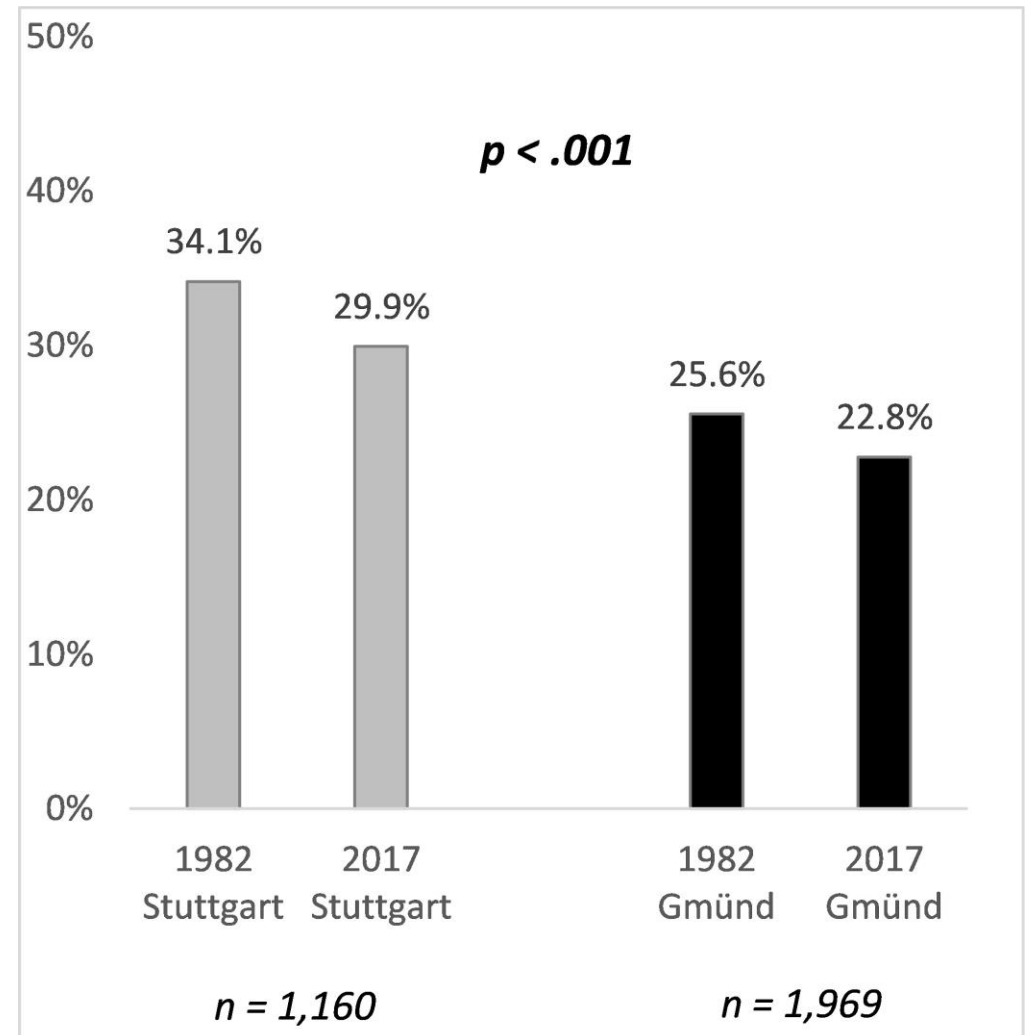
# Speech Community

- Speakers reduced intensification rate in both communities over time, but the **difference** between both communities **remained stable**



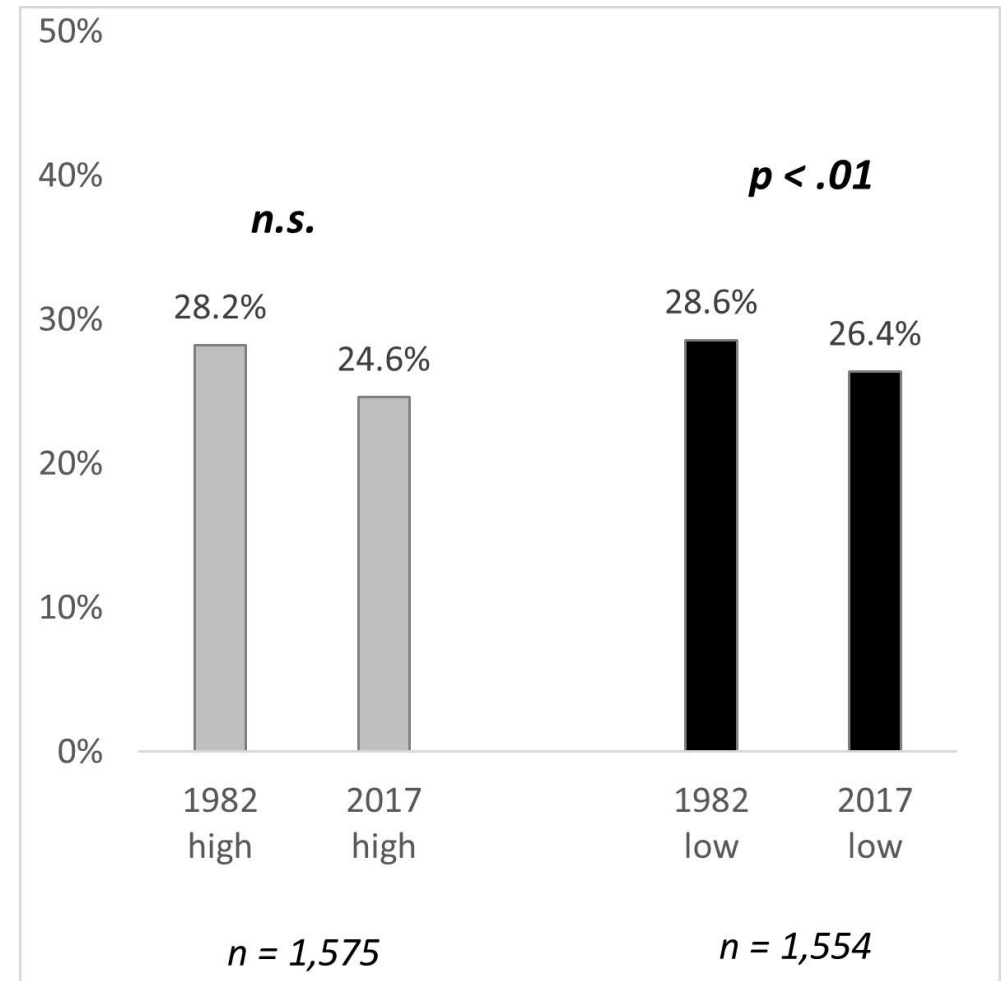
# Speech Community

- **Amplifiers** used more frequently in **Stuttgart**
- **Downtoners** used more frequently in **Gmünd**  
( $p < .001$ )



# Residential Mobility

- Speakers with the **lowest residential mobility** reduced their **intensification** the most as they aged  
(1982 = 29% vs. 2017 = 23%)  
( $p < .01$ )



# Identity

- **Swabian Orientation Index** (see Beaman, 2024)
- Based on previous indices:
  - Gal’s (1978) *Peasantry Index*
  - Cheshire’s (1982) *Vernacular Culture Index*
  - Hoffman & Walkers’ (2010) *Ethnic Orientation Index*
- **Swabian Orientation Index**
  - Based on responses to **12 questions**
  - Evaluated based on a **1-5 scale**

**Formula for Swabian Index**

$$LOI = \frac{\sum_{i=1}^n \lambda_i}{n}$$

# Swabian Orientation Index

## A. Swabian Allegiance

– e.g., *Are you a ‘real’ Swabian?*

[5 = definitely, 4 = maybe, 3 = don’t know, 2 = not really, 1 = no]

– e.g., *Do you know people who are not Swabian?*

[5 = no, 4 = a few, 3 = don’t know, 2 = many, 1 = a lot]

## B. Swabian Language Attitudes

– e.g., **What do you think of Swabian? Is it ‘good’ or ‘bad’ German?**

[5 = super, 4 = good, 3 = don’t know, 2 = bad, 1 = awful]

– e.g., **Do you think it is strange when a non-Swabian speaks German?**

[5 = very strange, 4 = funny, 3 = don’t know, 2 = good, 1 = great]

## C. Swabian Cultural Knowledge

– e.g., **Are there different Swabian dialects? Are there specific Swabian features?**

[5 = definitely, 4 = some, 3 = don’t know, 2 = not much, 1 = no]

– e.g., **Do you know how to make *Spätzle*?**

[5 = of course, 4 = somewhat, 3 = don’t know, 2 = not really, 1 = no]



# Identity

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- Speakers with a **higher Swabian Orientation Index** and speakers who identified as more “**Swabian**” used more **dialectal intensifiers** ( $n = 99$ ,  $M = 3.8$ ,  $SD = .6$ ,  $p < .001$ )
- Dialectal intensifiers (*fei, gut, unheimlich, e bissle, sau*)

# Swabian and dialect intensifiers

## *fei*

*des fei schee ja da Handarbeite* ‘very nice’ (Louise, 2017)

*des schrotet mã ganz fei* ‘totally nice’ (Rupert, 1982)

## *gut*

*die sind gut froh* ‘quite happy’ (Louise, 2017)

*der mit dem Lääbe gut fertich wird* ‘well finished’ (Berdine, 1982)

## *e bissle*

*der Trump isch e bissle bleed,* ‘a bit dumb’ (Rachael, 2017)

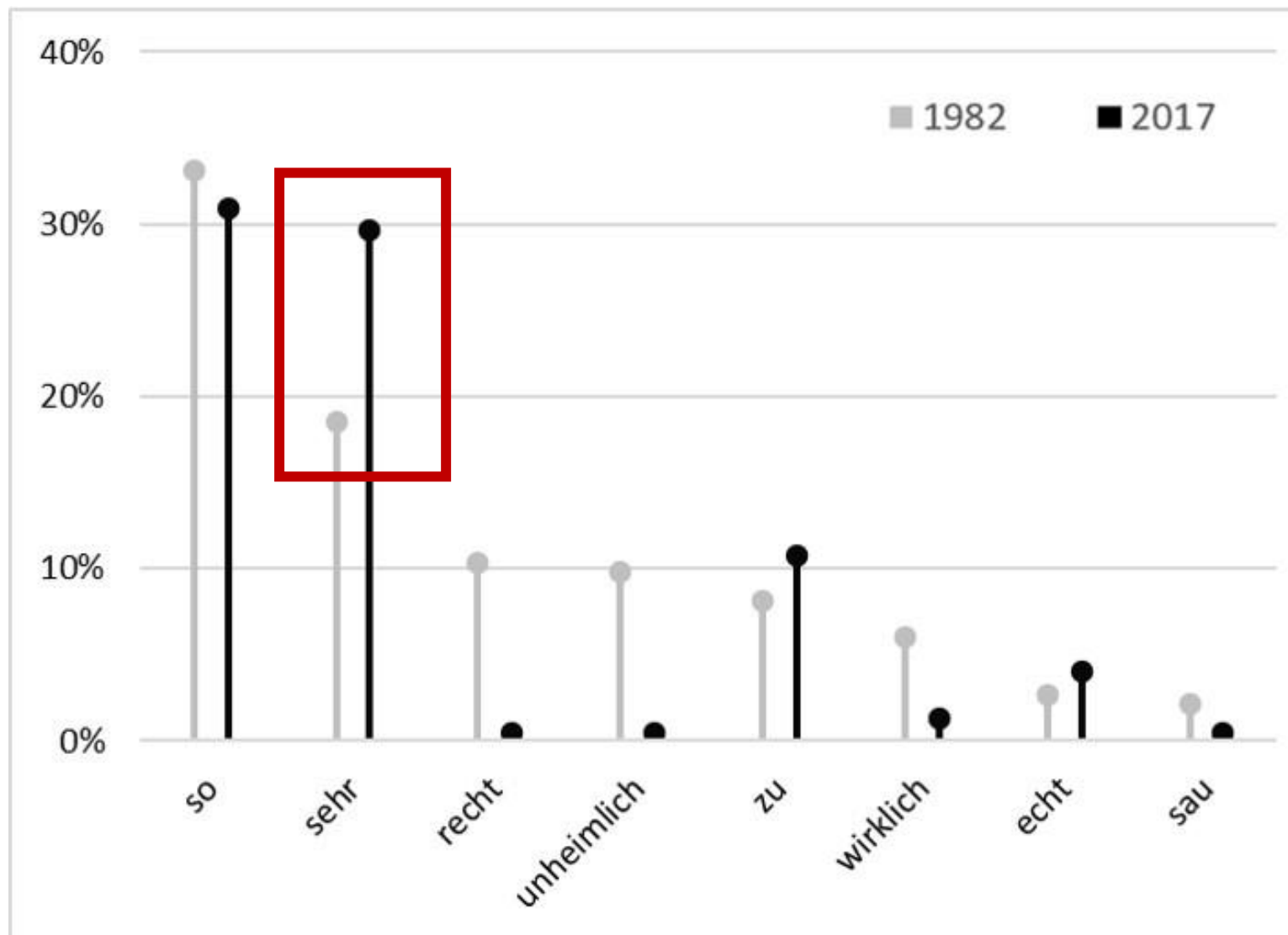
*da find i e bissle komisch* ‘a bit odd’ (Herbert, 1982)

*Examples are drawn from the Swabian German corpus of sociolinguistic interviews*

# Specific intensifiers

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# Changes in intensifier choices over time



# *Sehr* ‘very’

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- Used by all **Swabian speakers**
- However, its use **increased** significantly **over time**
  - 1982 (9%  $n = 34$ ) vs. 2017 (15%,  $n = 67$ )
- The **encroachment of standard German** on dialect
- Was used **more** in **Stuttgart** (31%,  $n = 186$ ) than Gmünd (20%,  $n = 220$ )

# *Sau-* ‘very’ [lit. ‘pig’]

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Example:

*der Film isch e saugueder Film*  
‘the movie is a really good movie’

- Used only by speakers with **low mobility** and **high Swabian orientation**
  - 1982 (9%  $n = 34$ ) vs. 2017 (15%,  $n = 67$ )

# Discussion

# 1. Women used intensifiers more than men

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- Specifically, **women** favored **amplifiers** and **men** favored **downtoners**
- Men and women may use intensifiers for different purposes
- **Women** may use **amplifiers** to project **positivity**, **enthusiasm**, and **cooperation**, traits that Western societies seemingly reinforce in women
- younger **men** may use **downtoners** to project **masculinity**, **nonchalance**, **toughness**, and **indifference**, characteristics that are reinforced in Western societies



# 1. Women used intensifiers more than men

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- However, **men change** the ratio, using **fewer downtoners** over time
- Perhaps with age, **men no longer** feel the **need** to exert identities of **masculinity**, **toughness**, and **nonchalance**, conveyed by using downtoners

## 2. Speech community

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- Speakers in **Stuttgart** used more **amplifiers**
- Speakers in **Gmünd** used more **downtoners**
- This difference may suggest that speakers resort to **different intensification strategies** in **different environments**
- Perhaps the demands of **city life** require frequent use of linguistic devices that scale up qualities to **impress** and **persuade** interlocuters, strategies that are not as necessary in less densely populated spaces

# 3. Mobility, Identity, Education

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- They **influenced intensifier choices**
- Less mobile, less educated, and more “Swabian” speakers used more **dialectal** (e.g., *fei* ‘very’) and **informal** intensifiers (e.g., *unheimlich* ‘uncannily’)
- Dialectologically marked intensifiers (e.g., *fei – fei schee* ‘very nice’) remained in the intensifier system of speakers who feel strongly about the preservation of their dialect, albeit at low frequencies

### 3. Mobility, Identity, Education

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- Less speakers typically have **narrower** and **smaller sets of contacts**
- Therefore, they may have **less need** to **impress** or **persuade** others by using more intensifiers
- It is, perhaps, not surprising therefore that they **intensify less often**

# Summary and Conclusions

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- Swabian intensifiers provide **insight** into **how speakers change** their **language** as their **environment** and **lifestyle** change
- The study corroborates previous work on the effect of **gender**, with new findings emerging due to the lifespan data
- Other **social influences** (e.g., identity, mobility) are at play too

# Summary and Conclusions

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- (Semi-)**rural-urban** division is observed, showing how **landscape** interacts with **language use**
- As studies of other Swabian variables have shown (Beaman, 2024), the **urban-rural distinction in Swabia** continues to exert a **strong influence** on language use

*Many thanks!*

*Vielen Dank!*

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**Extra Slides – Not Used**

# Speaker Mobility Index (SMI)

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An index calculated based on the number of times a speaker moved across this lifetime and the distance moved (in kilometers) from their birthplace, weighted by the number of years spent in each location, is coded on a scale from 0-100.

# Intensification defined

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*“funktional-semantische Kategorie der Verstärkung und der  
Abschwächung intensivierbarer sprachlicher Ausdrücke”*

(Van Os 1989:2)

‘functional semantic category of **strengthening** and **weakening** of  
intensifiable linguistic expressions’

(our translation)

# Amplifier Types

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Quirk et al. (1985: 590) subdivide **amplifiers** further depending on their **semantic function**:

**Boosters:** “a high point on the scale”

*isch sehr heiß* ‘it’s very hot’

**Maximizers:** “upper extreme point on the scale”

*das war völllich utopisch* ‘that was completely utopian’

Note: Examples are drawn from the Swabian German corpus of sociolinguistic interviews

# Panel Speaker Demographics

Community	Pseudonym	Sex	HigherEd	Age		SOI		SMI	
				1982	2017	1982	2017	1982	2017
Gmünd	Alfried	M	yes	23	59	4.5	4.2	15	37
Gmünd	Angela	W	yes	18	53	4.5	4.4	0	84
Gmünd	Anneliese	W	yes	22	57	3.5	3.8	44	73
Gmünd	Berdine	W	yes	21	57	3.9	3.5	17	83
Stuttgart	Bertha	W	no	19	54	3.6	3.6	16	45
Stuttgart	Egbert	M	yes	24	59	4.0	3.7	25	23
Gmünd	Elke	W	no	22	57	4.2	4.4	0	0
Stuttgart	Ema	W	no	49	83	4.2	4.4	7	5
Stuttgart	Helmut	M	yes	22	57	3.3	2.1	18	57
Gmünd	Herbert	M	no	51	85	4.2	4.4	14	9
Gmünd	Jurgen	M	yes	20	55	3.8	3.8	0	75
Gmünd	Louise	W	no	54	88	4.3	3.8	0	0
Stuttgart	Manni	M	yes	24	59	3.7	2.7	27	17
Gmünd	Markus	M	yes	22	57	4.3	2.6	0	51
Stuttgart	Pepin	M	yes	26	60	3.4	3.8	31	46
Gmünd	Rachael	W	no	48	83	4.4	4.1	0	0
Stuttgart	Ricarda	W	yes	18	53	3.5	2.0	15	67
Gmünd	Rupert	M	yes	24	58	4.0	2.4	39	52
Gmünd	Siegfried	M	yes	22	57	4.2	4.8	0	0
Gmünd	Theo	M	yes	18	54	4.0	3.6	0	33

# Previous Literature: German

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- *Gradadverbien* ‘degree adverbs’ (König et al., 1990)
- *Steigerungspartikeln* ‘heightening particles’ (Helbig, 1988)
- *Intensivpartikeln* ‘intensive particles’ (Androutsopoulos, 1998)
- *Intensitätspartikeln* ‘intensifying particles’ (Breindl, 2009)
- *Intensitätsadverbien* ‘intensity adverbs’ (Weinrich, 1993)
- *Gradpartikel* ‘scalar particle’ (Altmann, 1976)
- *Intensifikator* ‘intensifier’ (Helbig, 1988; van Os, 1989)
- *graduativer Zusatz* ‘gradable adjunct’ (von Polenz, 1988)

# The label “intensifier”

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Stratton (2020) differentiates two types of intensifiers

## **Syntactic intensification**

es ist *sehr* alt ‘it is very old’

## **Morphological intensification**

es ist *uralt* ‘it is very old’



# Syntactic intensifiers in Germanic languages

- (a) English: it was **very** good
- (b) German: es war **sehr** gut
- (c) Dutch: het was **heel** goed
- (d) Frisian: it is **hiel** goed
- (e) Afrikaans: dit was **baie** goed
- (e) Norwegian: det var **veldig** bra
- (f) Swedish: det var **mycket** bra
- (g) Danish: det var **meget** godt
- (h) Icelandic: það var **mjög** gott
- (i) Faroese: tað var **sera** gott

# Morphological intensifiers in Germanic languages

- |                |                                   |                      |
|----------------|-----------------------------------|----------------------|
| (a) English:   | <b>icecold</b>                    |                      |
| (b) German:    | <b>arschkalt</b> ‘really cold’    | (lit. ‘ass-cold’)    |
| (c) Dutch:     | <b>ijzersterk</b> ‘really strong’ | (lit. ‘iron strong’) |
| (d) Frisian:   | <b>stienkâld</b> ‘very cold’      | (lit. ‘stone cold’)  |
| (e) Afrikaans: | <b>yskoud</b> ‘very cold’         | (lit. ‘ice cold’)    |
| (f) Norwegian: | <b>drittkald</b> ‘very cold’      | (lit. ‘shit cold’)   |
| (g) Swedish:   | <b>skitkall</b> ‘very cold’       | (lit. ‘shit cold’)   |
| (h) Danish:    | <b>røvkold</b> ‘very cold’        | (lit. ‘ass-cold’)    |
| (i) Icelandic: | <b>bálreiður</b> ‘very angry’     | (lit. ‘fire-angry’)  |
| (j) Faroese:   | <b>ísakaldur</b> ‘very cold’      | (lit. ‘ice cold’)    |

# Change in intensifiers over time

Intensifier		1982 ( <i>n</i> =372)		2017 ( <i>n</i> =460)		+/-	X <sup>2</sup> test
		<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%		
<i>ganz</i>	‘totally’	76	20%	105	23%	stable	n.s.
<i>so</i>	‘so’	62	17%	61	13%	stable	n.s.
<i>sehr</i>	‘very’	34	9%	67	15%	+	<i>p</i> < .05
<i>ziemlich</i>	‘quite’	34	9%	12	3%	-	<i>p</i> < .001
<i>ein bisschen</i>	‘a little’	31	8%	37	8%	stable	n.s.
<i>unheimlich</i>	‘uncanny’	19	5%	3	1%	-	<i>p</i> < .001
<i>relativ</i>	‘relatively’	7	2%	14	3%	stable	n.s.
<i>echt</i>	‘real’	6	2%	9	2%	stable	n.s.
<i>wirklich</i>	‘really’	11	3%	10	2%	stable	n.s.
<i>recht</i>	‘right’	19	5%	4	1%	-	<i>p</i> < .001

# Stratton (2020)

Intensifier	Gloss	N	%
<i>so</i>	'so'	179	19%
<i>ganz</i>	'quite'	163	18%
<i>sehr</i>	'very'	125	14%
<i>echt</i>	'real'	52	6%
<i>total</i>	'totally'	42	5%
<i>voll</i>	'really'	42	5%
<i>ein bisschen</i>	'a bit'	38	4%
<i>richtig</i>	'really/right'	34	4%
<i>wirklich</i>	'really'	29	3%
<i>ziemlich</i>	'quite'	24	3%
<i>zu</i>	'too'	24	3%
<i>relativ</i>	'relatively'	21	2%
<i>schön</i>	'very/nicely'	16	2%
<i>super</i>	'super'	12	1%
<i>völlig</i>	'completely'	11	1%
<i>recht</i>	'right'	9	1%
<i>absolut</i>	'absolutely'	7	.8%
<i>extrem</i>	'extremely'	5	.5%
<i>vollkommen</i>	'completely'	5	.5%
<i>others</i> <sup>20</sup>		43	7%
TOTAL		919	100%

# Multivariate Analyses

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- A **binary mixed effects logistic regression** run in *glmer* (Bates et al., 2015) and *Rbrul* (Johnson, 2009)
- Eight social factors (e.g., gender, age, education, identity)
- One linguistic factor (syntactic position)
- Two random intercepts (speaker, adjective lemma)

# Factors influencing intensification vs. no intensification

	GLMER		RBRUL	FREQUENCY	
	Estimate	Sig. Level	Factor Weight	%	<i>n</i>
<b><u>Syntactic Position:</u></b>					
Attributive			.31	6.1	1088
Predicative	1.775	$p < .001$	.69	23.7	1664
<i>Range</i>			38		
<b><u>Gender:</u></b>					
Men			.41	12.4	1585
Women	0.756	$p < .001$	.59	22.6	1167
<i>Range</i>			18		
<b><u>Community:</u></b>					
Schwäbisch Gmünd			.44	14.3	1747
Stuttgart	0.579	$p < .001$	.57	20.9	1005
<i>Range</i>			9		

# What is Swabian German?

- Upper German dialect (Alemannic)
- Spoken by approximately 800,000 people (Ethnologue, 2015)
- Unlike other Alemannic dialects, Swabian has nasalization of /a/, /e/, /o/ before /n/ and /m/
  - man' [mã]
  - Hunt [hõ]
- There are three regional varieties of Swabian German (west, central, east). This study deals with Central