

Variations in Intensifier Usage based on Gender in Kurdish EFL Learners' Spoken Language

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ABSTRACT

The ways men and women utilize language have historically attracted much attention. To date, a lot of research has been done on the existence of contrasts between males and females. Hence, this study explores the intersection of gender and intensifier, examining the differential usage of intensifiers in the speech of Kurdish male and female university students at Koya University through using record interview "one-on-one interviews." The method of this research is quantitative, for analyzing the collected data from the students' recordings, the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences SPSS was used based on "The Shapiro-Wilk test." To achieve the objectives of the study, interviewing forty-four 2nd grade students (males and females), two groups of students in the same proportion were interviewed: female university students between the ages of 19 and 21 years and male university students at an identical age between 19 and 21 years. Then 1020 sentences with amplifiers were retrieved and used as data. Results show that males and females use the booster amplifier "very" more than the other sorts but generally, women tend to use more intensifiers than males. There is a significant difference between males and females, because males and females have significantly different levels of use *Too*, *Utterly*, *extremely* as the findings showed that intensifiers like "too" and "extremely" were utilized by females more in their spoken language. In contrast males use "utterly" more statistically. These results offer insight into the intersection of language, gender, and power in modern society.

KEYWORDS: Intensifiers, Usage of Intensifiers, Gender Differences, Kurdish EFL Learners, Spoken Language.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 An Overview

Intensifiers are adverbs that add emphasis or intensify to adjectives or other adverbs. In the last ten years a lot of researches have done on the existence of contrasts between male and female. The extent to which male and female utilize language differently has been one of the common questions. Males and females are different in certain ways so these differences are not caused by genetics only but also by socialization, as clarified by Lakoff (1975), men and women use and teach language differently in various numbers of ways for instance male use more active voice in their speech whereas females speak more frequently in passive voice.

In addition, Tannen (1994) clarifies the impact of culture on female's or male's use of language, as American men and women of some cultures and geographical backgrounds are similar in speech style; they tend to use indirect speech more frequently than indirect style. It can be noted that most studies on language and gender have explored differences between males and females in conversational styles which were basically based on the sociolinguistic aspect.

Moreover, regarding to the question of why men and women use language in different ways for example Xia (2013) observes that the distinction consists of the different intonation, pronunciation, vocabulary, syntax, and even attitude toward the language, the difference in choosing topic, the different psychology, cultural background and social status, as social variables could be responsible for some of the inequalities, as well as for various physical ones. For example, due to the distinct responsibilities that women play in society. In reality, men typically have to bear greater strain than women and the disparities in the methods used to raise them may account for a significant portion of the inequalities in work abilities. When discussing language, one cannot

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help but wonder if speakers of a certain language men or women use it differently.

1.2. Research objectives

The research objectives for studying gender variations in the use of intensifiers in Kurdish EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners' spoken language could be as follows:

1. To explore and analyze the gender-based variations in the frequency, type, and context of intensifier usage by Kurdish EFL learners:

This objective would aim to analyze the different categories of intensifiers (e.g., degree, frequency, quantity) used by both male and female learners in spoken English.

2. To compare the frequency of intensifier usage between male and female Kurdish EFL learners:

This would involve examining if there is a statistically significant difference in the frequency with which male and female learners use intensifiers in conversation.

1.3. Research questions

Consequently, the questions that followed served as a guide for gathering information to help solve the problems:

(1) Do males or females use intensifiers more in their spoken English?

(2) which intensifier is the most frequently used by men and women?

(3) Do Kurdish learners use intensifiers more than English learners do?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Humans utilize communication to express their ideas and emotions. It has become an indispensable component of human life. Humans utilize language to initiate communication. Language sign systems might be in the form of words or sounds. Because of their meaning, these symbols can be used to transmit ideas, concepts, or thoughts. A language must have components that change dynamically. Phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, and pragmatics are among the components. Every component of speech, including nouns, adjectives, verbs, and adverbs, has a meaning, usage, and function in morphology. The sentence's part of speech is a significant component that influences both the syntactic and semantic elements (Rabiah, 2018:4).

For language learners, English adverb placement rules, as clarified by Oyedepo (1987), can frequently be confusing. Since they alter verbs, adjectives, or other adverbs to bring additional context or detail to a sentence. Gaining an understanding of adverb placement principles might help one write and speak English more clearly and correctly overall. Adverb placement in

English is governed by several fundamental rules. Adverbs often appear after the verb they are modifying, according to the most widely accepted rule (Oyedepo, 1987:65). Degree adverbs, such as "very," "too," and "enough," according to Ridha (2012), must be placed specifically in a phrase to accurately convey their intended meaning. These adverbs are normally placed before the adjective or adverb they modify, such as "she speaks very slow today" or "he drives too fast." Students may misplace or delete these adverbs, leading to errors such as "It's hot very today".

Additionally, intensifications are an essential component for communication since they can convey praise, impress, insult, persuade, and influence the listener's perception of the message (Partington, 1993). Mendez-Naya (2008) defines intensifiers as words or modifiers that indicate the level of quality of an item. In the same vein, Quirk et al. (1985) add that the term *degree adverb* is used to refer to adverbs that function as modifiers of other words by boosting or maximizing their meaning as they are modifying adjectives. Moreover, Stoffel (1901) calls them "intensive adverbs", Bolinger (1972) refers to them as 'degree words' without separating them from 'downtoners' whereas, according to Su (2017), the phrases *intensifiers*, *degree adverbs* or *degree modifiers* are frequently used in exchanges the degree or exact value of the quality indicated by the object.

Different scholars tend to provide different classification of degree words, according to Bolinger (1972:17), an intensifier is any device that scales a quality up, down, or somewhere in between. He classifies intensifiers into four types: boosters, compromisers, diminishers, and minimizers. While on contrast, Quirk et al. (1985:590) classify intensifiers into two groups: 'amplifiers', which scale higher from an assumed norm and 'downtoner's, which scale downwards. Amplifiers are classified into two subclasses: (i) Maximizers (e.g. absolutely, completely, totally, utterly, too, etc) are commonly used in English to indicate great intensity and (ii) boosters (e.g., very, extremely, really, so, highly, rather, etc.) that express a high degree without going to the extreme end of the scale. For going deeper, Claridge et al. (2024:43) illuminate that intensifiers are devices that indicate degree; they are to be separated from items that indicate notions like quantification, emphasis, focus, and modality, which are related and somewhat overlapped with varying semantic properties and consequences, they are further divided into two categories: 'downtoners' (moderators, diminishers, minimizers) and 'amplifiers' that are used for increasing the strength of the item modified (maximizers, boosters) and formally, they can only be one-word adverbs, with or without the suffix -ly. In addition, Biber et al. (1999) divide degree adverbs into two types as well: amplifiers/intensifiers, which raise

intensity, and diminishers/downtoners, which reduce the effect of the modified item (p. 554-555).

The ways people use language inside a speech community, as clarified by Riissanen (2016:62), is very seldom homogeneous, but different social factors intervene to produce variation from speaker to speaker. People's gender, age, religion or social class can function as social barriers creating distance which prevents the diffusion of linguistic features, such as intensifiers; through the speech community much like actual geographical barriers would. Additionally, Ito and Tagliamonte (2003, 274) investigate that extralinguistic elements are frequently recognized as being a more essential factor contributing to intensifier use than internal factors and the most commonly mentioned criteria associated with intensifier use are speaker age and gender, while the use of certain items may also indicate in-group membership or depend on speakers' educational backgrounds.

There is a relationship between age and gender with speaking skill as clarified by Romero (2012: 20), the effect of speaking is significantly evident on our ages. People of different ages like to speak differently, especially when teenagers are more visible. Older people like to speak as a way of protecting speech, till increasing age; it will increase the protection of speaking. This explains why young people use slang and swear language in their speech., it's no surprise that age has a role in the use of intensifiers. Linguists have addressed intensification from multiple perspectives, with two specific areas drawing the bulk of researcher's interest: semantics of intensifiers, and intensifiers usage in the social landscape. Bernaisch (2021:60) clarifies the impact of age on the amount of using intensifiers as he clarifies that even in private talks in British English, youthful speakers use slightly more intensifiers than older speakers.

Regarding gender differences in using language, Ali (2016:82) shows that how language is used differently across genders in the classroom and he discovered that women tend to use more formal, polite language, which they linked to traits like shyness, compassion, and self-assurance. Additionally, they noted variations in the use of language in spoken and written forms, with the majority of teachers observing these disparities. These findings provide insight into the fundamental causes of the variations in language use between male and female students. Teachers that looked into how language is used differently across genders in the classroom discovered that women tend to use more formal, polite language, which they linked to traits like shyness, compassion, and self-assurance. As for gender differences in using intensifier specifically, Romero investigates that intensifiers have been associated with feminine language since the mid-first century. The word 'greatly', for example, was used to characterize fine ladies as "hugely

obliged, vastly outraged, vastly glad, or vastly sorry' as a result of the above-mentioned DE lexicalization process. A woman had described a little box to chesterfield as "hugely lovely since it was so vastly little. Romero establishes a direct link between women and intensifiers, noting that "women's love for hyperbole will very often lead the fashion in terms of adverbs of intensity. Romero who states that is so common, particularly in feminine discourse, and is distinctive of women since "ladies are notoriously fond of hyperbole." "I am very delighted you came!" and "the bonnet is so wonderful!" are examples of "extremely distinctive of women "usage" (Romero, 2012:21).

Previous studies on gender differences in using intensifiers have explored how men and women employ these linguistic devices differently in various contexts, such as in written and spoken communication, across cultures, and in relation to sociolinguistic variables like power, politeness, and emotion. As in Lakoff's 1975 research reveals that women use more emotional and expressive language, including intensifiers like really, so and very due to a perception of their language being less authoritative and reliant on hedging and intensification. For showing sociolinguistic perspectives on gender and intensifiers, studies had done by Holmes (1995) and Coates (1996), expanded on Lakoff's idea, arguing that women and men use intensifiers for different social functions. Recent studies of language use in social media platform, such as those by Tagliamonte and Denis (2008) and Fattah (2024), arguing that gender differences in the use of intensifiers are still present in modern communication. Tagliamonte and Denis (2008) found that women are still found to use more intensifiers, particularly in contexts where personal emotion, excitement, or connection is being expressed, such as online forums, tweets, and blogs but whereas men tend to reserve the use of intensifiers for situations of strong emphasis or to enhance the impact of particular statements. Fattah (2025) investigated the role of gender in the use of language in Kurdish online interactions by Kurdish interlocutors that is known as (virtual or online community). The study demonstrates that gender differences influence language in online interactions, with women tending to use more hedging devices, intensifiers, empty adjectives, and euphemistic language, while men are more likely to employ humor and sarcasm.

The present study seeks to address this gap by examining gender differences in intensifier usage in face-to-face communication in Kurdish society. It highlights how gender influences language use in a unique cultural environment and provides insights for language teaching in Kurdish EFL classrooms.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 participants

In this quantitative research, the data collected through making one-on-one interviews by interviewing forty-four students (males and females) in the *Department of English Language-Faculty of Education at Koya University*. The researcher interviewed twenty-two males and twenty-two females in equal numbers face to face, and each interview was recorded. The ages of females varied from 19 to 22 in which there were six of them at age nineteen, seven at twenty, and nine at twenty-one. Likewise, the age of males is between 19 to 21, as there were three of them at age nineteen, ten at twenty, and nine at twenty-one. the researcher confirmed that the same variables were applied to both genders in the study.

3.2 procedures

Every participant received seven cues, and they had 10 minutes to respond to any or all of them. They were asked to answer these questions: (i) *Tell me a bit about your family*, (ii) *How do you typically spend your weekends?* (iii) *which classes are you most excited about and why?* (iv) *what are some positive ways to make friends in college?* (v) *if you could live in any country for a year, where would you go and why?* Before the recording began, they were each given the prompts and given some time to consider the questions so that they could respond without pausing. When the individuals indicated that they were ready to record, the process began. The researcher attentively listened to each recording after all of the interviews were completed, noting each occurrence of the intensifiers *so, very, totally, rather, very, highly, too, utterly, definitely, completely, exceedingly, and at all*. The researcher then listened to each audio again to ensure that each participant's intensifier count was right. The results were recorded on different sheets, one for males and another for females, to make data processing easier. The transcripts of 44 face- to- face conversations were analyzed to investigate the usage of intensifiers.

3.3 Model of Analysis

To analyze the collected data from the students' recording, the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS version 28) was used. As well as, the normality test was conducted for further investigation. The normality test is used to show whether the sample of data comes from normal distribution or not and SPSS test is based on Shapiro-wilk test. The Shapiro-Wilk test, according to González-Estrada and Cosmes (2019:1), is fundamentally a goodness-of-fit assessment. That is, it determines how well the sample data follows a normal distribution. The Shapiro-Wilk Test is more appropriate for small sample sizes (< 50 samples), but can also handle sample sizes as large as 2000. For this reason, the researcher uses the Shapiro-Wilk test as the numerical means of assessing

normality. This test is performed by arranging and establishing the sample. Standardization is the process of turning data into a distribution with a mean of $\mu = 0$ and a normal deviation of $\sigma = 1$ as well as the results of the test should be ≥ 0.05 .

4. Data Analysis and Results

This section presents the results of the quantitative analysis of the data based on "Shapiro-Wilk" test for testing data normal distribution. After collecting the data, the researcher analyzed the data by SPSS as it can be seen below in table (1), (Sig=0.547>0.05), therefore data distribution is normal. By so doing, it answers the research questions and shows the most frequent use of degree adverbs by both genders.

Table 1
Data distribution

Statistic	df	Sig.
0.978	44	0.547

To understand the students' level of use of intensifiers and to realize which type of intensifier is the most frequent one in male and female's interaction; the researcher analyzes the results separately based on the level of all degree adverbs used by students, use of degree adverbs by females only, use of degree adverbs by males only and gender differences in using degree adverbs.

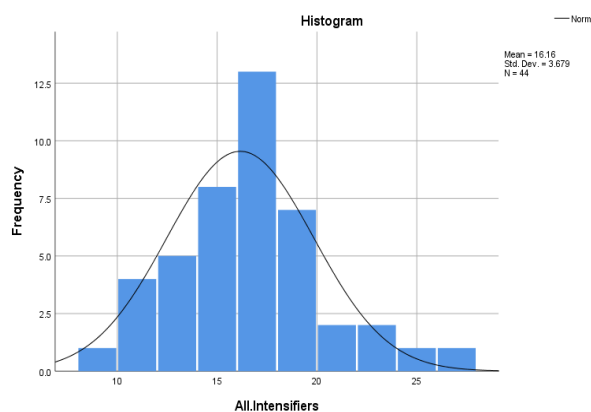


Figure 1 The results of the use of all intensifiers

As evident from Table 2, the means achieved for the degree adverb "very" and "really" were 2.52 and 1.98, respectively. It means that the participants (males and females) had a high degree of using the degree adverbs "very and really" in their spoken language. Additionally, in the use of the degree adverbs, i.e. "So, Absolutely, Totally, Completely, Too and Rather", however, the participants achieved the average means; 1.93 for the degree adverb 'so', 1.50 for 'Absolutely', 1.45 for both 'Totally and Completely', 1.20 for the degree adverb 'Too' and 1.18 for the degree adverb 'Rather'. Ultimately, it can be seen that the means achieved for the degree adverbs 'highly, at all and utterly' were 0.91, 0.48 and 0.36 which

indicates that these degree adverbs are the less frequent one among all. It can be concluded that the obtained mean score for using all degree adverbs by both genders are 16.16 which demonstrates a high status of using degree adverbs among Kurdish EFL learners' spoken language.

Table 2

Descriptive statistics for using all degree adverbs				
Degree adverbs	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard Division
All degree adverbs	9	26	16.16	3.679
Very	0	6	2.52	1.210
so	0	4	1.93	1.301
Totally	0	4	1.45	1.044
Rather	0	3	1.18	0.971
Really	0	6	1.98	1.110
Highly	0	3	0.91	0.884
too	0	5	1.20	1.286
Utterly	0	2	0.36	0.532
Absolutely	0	4	1.50	1.171
completely	0	4	1.45	1.066
extremely	0	3	1.18	0.896
At All	0	2	0.48	0.590

Regarding the use of degree adverbs by males as demonstrated in the table (3), the highest mean (2.64), belonged to the use of degree adverb "very" and the lowest mean (0.45), belonged to the use of degree adverb "at all" and the mean (1.91) belonged to an adverb of degree "really" which has the second- highest score among the other degree adverbs used by male students. Afterwards, male students also use adverb of degrees like "so, absolutely, completely, totally and rather" in order in their interaction as well. In other words, all the forms of intensifiers are used by males but "very" is the most frequent one rather than the other types of intensifiers, "utterly" is the one that is used more by males rather than females and the less frequent one that is used by male students are "too, utterly, extremely and at all".

Table 3

Descriptive statistics of using degree adverbs by male learners				
Degree adverbs	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard Division
All degree adverbs	9	19	15.27	2.529
Very	1	6	2.64	1.136
so	0	4	1.73	1.352
Totally	0	3	1.27	0.935
Rather	0	3	1.14	0.889
Really	0	4	1.91	0.921
Highly	0	3	0.91	0.868
too	0	2	0.68	0.568
Utterly	0	2	0.59	0.590
Absolutely	0	4	1.64	1.217
completely	0	4	1.41	1.098
extremely	0	2	0.91	0.684
At All	0	2	0.45	0.596

Concerning the use of intensifiers by females as demonstrated in table (4), the highest mean is (2.41),

belonging to the degree adverb 'very'. As opposed to males, the lowest mean (0.14), belonged to the degree adverb 'utterly' which indicates that female learners at Koya university might not be familiar with using "utterly" in their spoken language. as for the other degree adverbs like "so, really, too and totally", however, the participants achieved average means; 2.14 and 2.05 for the boosters so and really, the achieved mean for the maximizers too and totally were 1.73 for too and 1.64 for totally. It can be concluded that female learners perceived an average score for these four adverbs of degree. The less frequent degree adverbs among all that are used by female students are "highly, at all and utterly"

Table 4

Descriptive statistics of using degree adverbs by Female learners

Intensifiers	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard Division
All Intensifiers	10	26	17.05	4.434
Very	0	5	2.41	1.297
so	0	4	2.14	1.246
Totally	0	4	1.64	1.136
Rather	0	3	1.23	1.066
Really	0	6	2.05	1.290
Highly	0	3	0.91	0.921
too	0	5	1.73	1.579
Utterly	0	1	0.14	0.351
Absolutely	0	4	1.36	1.136
completely	0	3	1.50	1.058
extremely	0	3	1.45	1.011
At All	0	2	0.50	0.598

There is a significant difference between males and females, because (P-Value<0.05). As it can be seen in the table (5), female learners tend to use more intensifiers than male learners as they achieved a mean score of 17.5 and males had a mean of 15.27. the findings showed that the students used a variety of boosting devices with the intensifying (degree) adverbs as both booster types as *very* and *so* achieved a high score for both male and female learners in their oral communication. Additionally, the gender analysis revealed differences in the types and counts of boosters with the female students generally using significantly higher frequencies of boosters such as 'so, really, rather, extremely, highly and very' than the male students. Likewise, at the level of the use of (*Too, Utterly, Extremely*), there is a statistically significant difference between males and females, considering that (P-Value<0.05). Regarding '*Too and Extremely*', the difference is that females use these degree adverbs more, but with the maximizer '*Utterly*', males use them more statistically, which indicates that male students are significantly utilizing higher frequencies of maximizers than female students.

Table (5): difference between male and female in using intensifiers

Intensifiers	Gender	Mean	Standard division	T	P-Value
All Intensifiers	Male	15.27	2.529	1.629	0.111
	Female	17.05	4.434		
Very	Male	2.64	1.136	0.618	0.540
	Female	2.41	1.297		
so	Male	1.73	1.352	1.044	0.303
	Female	2.14	1.246		
Totally	Male	1.27	0.935	1.159	0.253
	Female	1.64	1.136		
Rather	Male	1.14	0.889	0.307	0.760
	Female	1.23	1.066		
Really	Male	1.91	0.921	0.403	0.689
	Female	2.05	1.290		
Highly	Male	0.91	0.868	0.000	1.000
	Female	0.91	0.921		
Too	Male	0.68	0.568	2.922	0.006
	Female	1.73	1.579		
Utterly	Male	0.59	0.590	3.104	0.003
	Female	0.14	0.351		
Absolutely	Male	1.64	1.217	0.769	0.446
	Female	1.36	1.136		
Completely	Male	1.41	1.098	0.280	0.781
	Female	1.50	1.058		
Extremely	Male	0.91	0.684	2.097	0.042
	Female	1.45	1.011		
At All	Male	0.45	0.596	0.253	0.802
	Female	0.50	0.598		

In sum, the results of this study, as demonstrates in figure 1, indicate that as it was expected females employed more degree adverbs in their utterances (%53) compared to males (%47). This fact is even more significant in the speech of college female students.

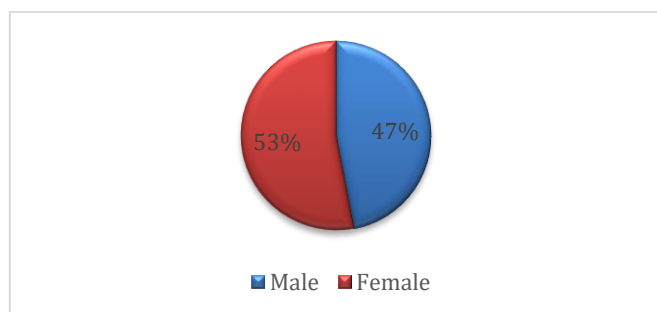


Figure1: total number of intensifiers

5. DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

This study tries to answer two research questions: Firstly, to answer the question: which type of intensifier is the most frequent one in male and female's oral communication?

The finding showed that the students used a variety of boosting devices within the intensifying as booster amplifiers 'very, so, and really' achieved a great result in both male and female learners' oral communication. The gender analysis further indicated notable disparities in the types and frequencies of boosters employed, with

female students generally exhibiting a significantly higher usage of boosters such as 'so, really, rather, extremely, and very' compared to their male counterparts. Similarly, a statistically significant difference was observed in the usage of the boosters 'Too, Utterly, and Extremely' between males and females. Specifically, while females tend to use the amplifiers 'Too' and 'Extremely' more frequently, males demonstrate a higher statistical usage of the maximizer 'Utterly', which is suggests that male students utilize maximizer amplifiers such as *Absolutely and utterly* at a significantly greater rate than female students.

Secondly, regarding to the question: Do males or females use intensifiers more in their spoken English?

The results indicated a significant association between gender and intensifiers. The findings show that females made significantly greater use of intensifiers (%53) in their utterance more than males (%47). Besides, it can be seen that female students tend to use booster amplifiers more than maximizer amplifiers. Any society prescribes different roles and positions for men and women. Different expectations, consequently, are made from each gender with respect to how they behave and how they talk. One of the key explanations lies in socialization. From a young age, girls are often encouraged to be more expressive and emotionally attuned. This socialization leads to the use of language that reflects and enhances emotions, such as the frequent use of intensifiers. These words help emphasize the intensity of feelings or experiences, making the speaker seem more engaged or empathetic. In contrast, boys are often socialized to be more reserved and less expressive, leading them to use intensifiers less frequently. Another explanation might relate to cultural background as it is important to note that gendered language use can vary significantly across different cultures. In some cultures, women might be expected to speak more softly and use more intensifiers, while in others, such speech patterns might not be as pronounced.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Intensifiers are valuable tools for adding emphasis and strength to communication. The use of intensifiers by females more than males is a complex intersection of societal norms, socialization, power dynamics, and the context of communication. The study found that males and females act differently in similar situations, but also share similar language aspects like both genders prefer the use of "very " as an intensifier. Understanding this difference provides insights into broader cultural expectations and can help to challenge traditional stereotypes surrounding language and gender. However, the small sample size and lack of research on the same age group should be considered. Further research could

include a male and female interviewer, and additional modifiers to understand female usage.

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