

A Comparative Study on Intensifiers in Opinion Articles on Rudaw Portal

Nahlah N. Khorsheed ¹, Hisham Dzakiria ² & Manvender Kaur Sarjit Singh ³

¹ Department of English Language, College of Education and Languages, Lebanese French University, Kurdistan Region, Iraq

² Awang Had Salleh Graduate School, College of Arts, University of Utara Malaysia, Kedah, Malaysia

³ Department of English Language, School of Language, Civilisation, and Philosophy, College of Arts, University of Utara Malaysia, Kedah, Malaysia

ABSTRACT

Semantically, intensifiers are concerned with the degree that scales the element to which the intensifiers applied to a point either higher than the norm or lower. Thus, the writers' involvement with or detachment from a statement can be reflected through the use of intensifiers. This paper explores the use of intensifiers by Kurdish authors in comparison to non-Kurdish authors who write opinion articles on Rudaw portal. The aim of the study is to demonstrate how these two groups of authors differ in their preference for the use of intensifiers. To this end, two corpora were compiled: Kurdish authors (COKA) and non-Kurdish authors (CONKA). The online interface of UCREL Semantic Analysis System (USAS) in Wmatrix was employed to identify the semantic categories of intensifiers. The results showed that boosters had the highest frequency (140 in COKA and 280 in CONKA). However, the use of all categories was higher by the non-Kurdish authors and with wider range of lexicons than the Kurdish authors. This study contributes to literature of the use of automated semantic tagger (USAS) for identifying intensifiers; it is a mechanism that can be fruitful for investigating other lexicogrammatical items for a better understanding of the link between language and socio-cultural factors.

KEY WORDS: Kurdish Authors, Non-Kurdish Authors, Rudaw Opinion Articles, USAS, Wmatrix

1. INTRODUCTION:

Intensifiers play an important role in fostering interaction in spoken and written discourse (Lorenz, 1998). As intensifiers are concerned with degree, they are also called adverbs of degree or degree adverbs because they indicate the degree of quality that ascribed to the item being modified. They are used to either increase or reduce the force of a statement (Nordquist, 2020). Thus, they comprise both amplifiers and downtoners. Amplifiers are used to show the certainty and involvement in the statement while downtoners are used to hedge or turn around to lessen the force of a statement. Accordingly, intensifiers modify the

illocutionary persuasive impact on the hearers or readers (Reisigl and Wodak, 2001).

Scholars have named and classified this lexicogrammatical items differently. That is to say, Bolinger (1972) uses the term *intensifier* to refer to "any devise that scales a quality, whether up or down or somewhat between the two" (p. 17). Bolinger (1972), roughly, classifies intensifiers into four categories: Boosters, Compromisers, Diminishers, and Minimisers. Quirk et al. (1985) use the term intensifier and distinguish two main categories: amplifiers which "scale upwards from an assumed norm, and downtoners have a lowering effect, usually scaling downwards from an assumed norm" (p. 590).

Biber et al., (1999) classify degree adverbs into two types: amplifiers/intensifiers "that increase intensity" and diminishers/downtoners "which scale down the effect of the modified item" (pp. 554-555). Carter and McCarthy (2006) define degree verbs as item that "refers to how much, to what degree something happens" (p. 456) and make a list of degree adverbs in which they put them all together without distinguishing between amplifiers and downtoners. Whereas Pullum and Huddleston (2017) reject the use of intensifier

Koya University Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences (KUJHSS), Volume 5, Issue 1, 2022.

Received 09 Apr 2022; Accepted 26 May 2022,

Regular research paper: Published 30 Jun 2022

Corresponding author's e-mail: nahla@lfu.edu.krd

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interchangeably with degree adverb arguing that the term *intensifier* should only be used for those degree adverbs that indicate high degree because “it is semantically inappropriate to apply the term ‘*intensifier*’ to the modifiers in phrases like *moderately cool, slightly unusual, barely noticeable, etc.*” (p. 585).

This study follows the classification of the UCREL semantic analysis system (USAS) which is based on the Longman Lexicon of contemporary English (McArthur, 1981, cited in Archer, Wilson, and Rayson (2002) and Piao et al., 2004). Additionally, the user-friendly Wmartyx (Rayson, 2008), a corpus software which has an online interface of USAS (Rayson, 2015), was employed to assign a semantic tagger to each item in the corpus. Thus, in USAS, the tag (A13) is assigned for degree which encompasses seven subdivisions; Non-specific, Maximisers, Boosters, Approximators, Compromisers, Diminishers, Minimisers (see table 2).

A number of studies done on the use of different types of adverbs most of them involve academic contexts in different disciplines. Su (2016) examines three corpora to compare the use of four intensifiers such as *rather, fairly, quiet, and pretty* between English learners and native speakers. The results show the difference between Chinese native learners of English and English native learners concerning their acquisition of the use of these four intensifiers and their use preference. Similarly, Ahmada and Mehrjooseresht (2012) conducted a study in academic context to investigate the use of stance adverbs in the abstracts of dissertation in the field of Engineering. The study uncovers that the writers of these abstracts use the three types of stance adverbial: epistemic, attitudinal and style to show certainty of the reliability of the presented information. Moreover, these adverbials enable the writers to “present themselves as competent members of their community” (p. 35).

In a cross-cultural study, Abdollahzadeh (2019) examines hedging in discussion section of master thesis in applied linguistics written by Iranian graduate students, native English graduate students and discussion section of articles written by professionals in the field of applied linguistics. The study includes epistemic adverbials as hedging devices. Overall, both Iranian and English master students use less epistemic adverbials than the professional writers. However, the three groups share some aspects such as using adverbs like *possibly, extent, perhaps, likely, generally, level, some and degree* more than other adverbs.

Likewise, Yu’s (2019) two dimensional study investigates both cross-cultural and cross linguistic similarities and differences in the use of stance markers between English and Korean academic research in applied linguistics. In his study, Yu (2019) compares two corpora: one for English research and the other for Korean research. He concludes that there is no statistical

significance between the two corpora in the use of hedges, whereas there is significant differences between the two corpora in the use of booster as the English researchers incline to employ more boosters in their writing than Korean researchers.

However, fewer studies can be found on intensifiers in contexts other than scientific or academic, for example, Kuha (2005) explores the use of the intensifier *so* in English native speakers’ spontaneous interaction. The main findings of her research are that *so* mostly follows auxiliary *be* and young females use *so* more frequently. In media context, Tagliamonte and Roberts (2005) use television series friends as data for their study. They examine the linguistic innovation in the use of intensifiers and whether or not data from TV reflects real world data. The diachronic investigation reveals that the use of *so* as a modifier of adjective usurps the use of other intensifiers such as *really*; it also confirms that *so* is more frequent with female. Furthermore, their findings show that *friend* like long-running show can provide reliable resources for sociolinguistic studies as the results from their study align with the results of traditional studies.

Generally, adverbs are one of the key elements of adding clarity to a statement through making it look vivid and colourful (Lorenz, 1998). Additionally, Tagliamonte and Roberts (2005) claim that to capture audience interest, one should add colour and versatility to her/his statements through the use of adverbs. On the other hand, intensifiers reflect writers’ involvement and detachment which increase the interactivity in written texts (Hyland, 2005).

Although persuasion is important in every field, and especially in media, studies on the use of degree adverbs in media discourse are very scarce. Persuasive writing is a key skill for the media writers to convince their readers of their point of view. (Roberts, 1984). Namely, readers are persuaded better when an argument have been laid down clearly. This can be done by several ways lexically, syntactically, and lexico-grammatically such as degree adverbs which Bolinger (1972) plainly puts it as “the chief means of emphasis for speakers” (p. 18). Thus, through emphasis, the writers show a strong commitment to their statements.

Intensifiers, in the sense of Quirk *et al.*'s (1985) classification which comprise both amplifiers and downtoners, are involved in various metadiscourse markers such as hedges and boosters. Undoubtedly, hedges and boosters are important in producing an interactive writing (Hyland, 2005) as they present the writers commitment to their statements. Thus, they reflect the involvement of writers in discourse. Hedging is writers’ recourse when presenting what opposes the norm so that they mitigate the force of their statement

(Hyland, 1998). Accordingly, hedges are rhetorical means for making the proposition acceptable (ibid).

Consequently, due to their importance in media discourse, intensifiers require a meticulous analysis; Fairclough (1996), in this respect, puts forward that in mass media the discourse producers can never anticipate who their audience will be; therefore, for acceptability matter discourse producers should go around reduce the force of statement on their audience. Further, media contribute to forming opinions and “setting agendas regarding the importance of certain topics” (Baker *et al.*, 2013, p. 2).

Culture is important for our understanding why writers write the way they write. The reason for this is that language is amalgamated with culture. This interlacement is twofold. First, it is through language we communicate our cultural value. Second, culture provides conventions for our communication (Hyland, 2006). Thus, the writers bring these things altogether into their writing.

It was proved that culture influences academic discourse. According to Yakhontova (2002, 2006), cultural differences influence not only the generic features of the text but also the ‘interestingness’. He maintains that in the marketing society of the West, the trend is toward promotional style, while Slavic academic culture requires more intellectual style discerning the credibility of the study (ibid, p. 156).

Studies on cross cultural effect on academic texts reveal that the non-native English writers tend to be impersonal, demonstrating more the content and showing convergences and divergences with previous study rather than the novelty of the study, and shyly marketing as to show the importance of the study (Al-Shorman, and Singh, 2019; Cakir, 2016; Breivega Dahl, and Flottum, 2002; Yakhontova, 2002).

The aim of this study is to investigate culture-based impacts on the use of degree adverbs by comparing the use of intensifiers in the opinion articles on Rudaw digital portal written by Kurdish authors and non-Kurdish authors. To realise this objective, the current study endeavours to answer the following questions:

1. To what extent does the use of adverbs of degree differ between the Kurdish authors and non-Kurdish authors of opinion articles on Rudaw digital portal?
2. What preference differences are there in term of lexical choice between the two groups of writers?

2. CORPORA AND METHOD

Data were collected from opinion articles written by Kurdish and non-Kurdish authors on Rudaw digital portal (<https://www.rudaw.net/english/opinion>) during the time span from 2014 to 2019. Two corpora were compiled: the corpus of Kurdish authors (COKA),

and the corpus of non-Kurdish authors (CONKA). Table 1 illustrates the structures of the corpora. They were encoded with the modest XML (Hardie, 2014) so that they can be understood by various corpora software.

Table 1
The Structure of The Corpora

Corpora	Number of texts	Number of tokens
COKA	69	48280
CONKA	56	44535

Because there is difference in the size of two corpora, for comparability, relative frequency (RF) of the linguistic variables under investigation was used. The relative frequency is attained by normalising the absolute frequency (AF) of these items through the following formula.

$$RF = \frac{AF}{Total\ tokens} \times 1000 \quad (1)$$

3. USAS SEMANTIC ANALYSIS SYSTEM

For annotation, the online interface of USAS in Wmatrix was employed to assign a semantic domain for each item in the corpus (Rayson, 2019). The accuracy of USAS is 91% (Piao *et al.*, 2003; Piao *et al.*, 2004). The scheme of USAS consists of 21 main discourse fields based on Longman Lexicon of Contemporary English (McArthur, 1981 cited in Rayson, and Wilson1996). These major fields were expanded into 232 categories. The tags contain letters and numbers; the letters indicate the major semantic domains, and the numbers stand for the subdivisions (Rayson *et al.*, 2004). This study is concerned with the semantic tag A13 for *Degree* which is subdivided into seven categories as shown in table (2).

Table 2
Semantic Tags and Their Domains

Tag	Semantic domain subdivisions	Explanation
A13	Degree	
A13.1	Degree: Non-specific	such as <i>even, by any means, however</i> , etc.
A13.2	Degree: Maximisers	Intensifiers that amplify to the upper extreme e.g., <i>all, largely, completely</i> .
A13.3	Degree: Boosters	Intensifiers that amplify to a high degree (but not the upper extreme) e.g., <i>amply, enormously, acutely</i> .
A13.4	Degree: Approximators	Downtoners that express an approximation e.g., <i>around, almost, nearly</i> .
A13.5	Degree: Compromisers	Downtoners that express an assumed norm e.g., <i>rather, some, sufficiently</i> .
A13.6	Degree: Diminishers	Downtoner that imply that the force of X is limited in some way e.g., <i>but, slightly, under</i> .
A13.7	Degree: Minimisers	Downtoner that that imply that the force f X is limited in a maximal way e.g., <i>scarcely, least, barely</i> .

Adopted from Archer, Wilson, and Rayson (2002, p. 8).

4. DATA ANALYSIS

Wmatrix software provides frequency profiles for the semantic taggers of adverbs of degree in the two corpora. To test if there are differences between the two frequency profiles, Cohen's d measure of effect size was used (Cohen, 1988). Consulting effect size is crucial because it is not enough to depend on the statistical significance which tells us that there are differences in the frequencies of the items in two corpora, but it should be combined with calculating how important is the effect of the differences (Hardie, 2014; Gabrielatos, 2018). For statistical test, Lancaster Stats Tool online (Brezina, 2018) was employed for Cohen's d measure which is based on the formula below.

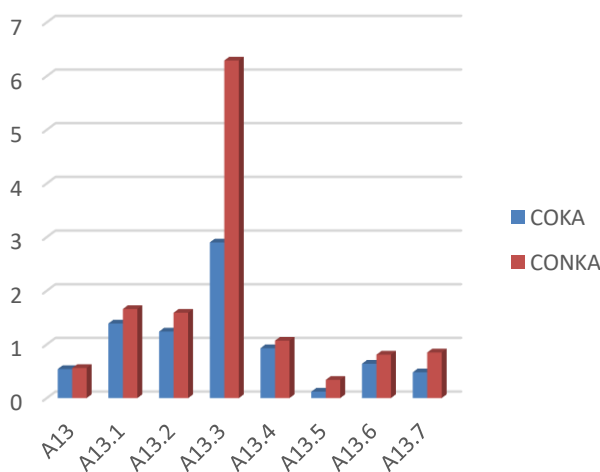
$$Cohen's\ d = \frac{\text{mean of group 1} - \text{mean of group 2}}{\text{Pooled SD}}$$

The value of effect size is the degree of departure from the null hypothesis which states that there is no difference in the use of degree adverbs between the Kurdish authors and non-Kurdish authors which assumes the value of effect size to be 0.

5. RESULTS

The result of the analysis of the two corpora disclosed some similarities and differences in the use of degree adverbs between Kurdish and non-Kurdish authors. This difference is not only related to the amount of the degree adverbs both groups used but also in the range of lexicons they selected. Figure 1 shows the number of each category of degree adverbs used in both corpora.

Figure 1
The Relative Frequencies of Subcategories of Intensifiers in The Corpora.

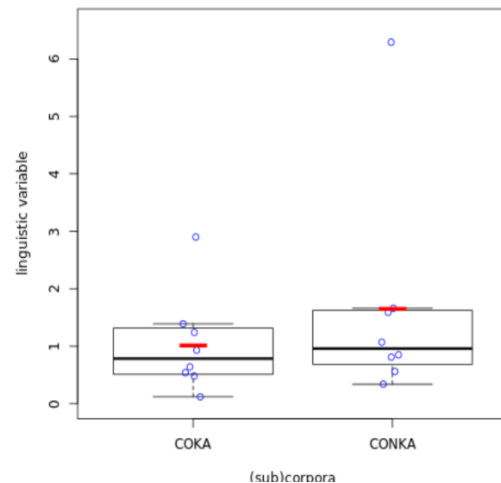


The bar chart illustrates that the main trend in the use of the degree adverbs in COKA and CONKA which is almost the same. In both, A13.3 (*Boosters*) is used more

frequently than the other categories, and the least frequent is A13.5 (*Compromisers*). What the two corpora differ in is the number of intensifiers used of each category. Overall, the non-Kurdish authors use degree adverbs extensively in their writing, especially, boosters which are double the number of the boosters used by Kurdish authors. However, it is only in the use of the first semantic tag A13, which stands for the semantic domain of *Degree* that its use by Kurdish authors comes close to that by the non-Kurdish.

For demonstrating statistical evidence of the discrepancy, the Lancaster Stats Tool online provided a boxplot as shown in figure 2. The boxplot delineates the position of each linguistic variable under investigation in the corpora. The distribution of the linguistic variables in each corpus demonstrates the differences between the corpora.

Figure 2
The Boxplot of the Distribution of Intensifiers in COKA and CONKA.

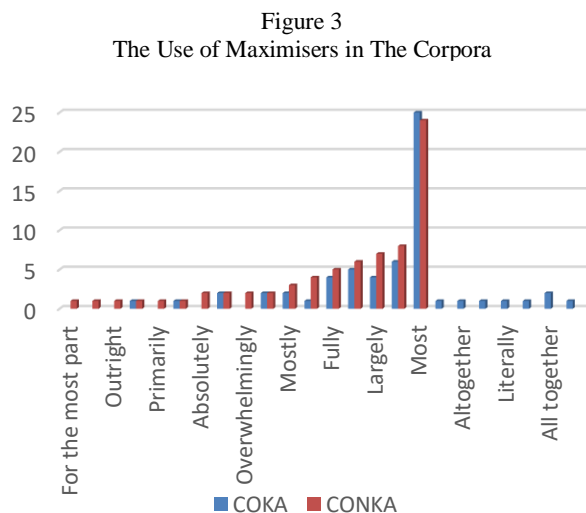


Each point in the boxplot represents a linguistic variable. The boxes contain the interquartile range (50% of value). The thick bold black line inside each box indicates the median value (the middle value of the variables in ascending order (Brezina, 2018)). The maximum and minimum points are represented by the Whiskers above and under the boxes of each corpus. Their mean is represented by the short red lines which show that the mean of the linguistic variables in COKA is close to the median value. By contrast, the mean in CONKA has the same value as the maximum point. Both corpora have outliers (extreme point that stand far from the others) which indicate the linguistic variable that stands for *Boosters*. The relative frequency of the outlier of CONKA is above 6 whereas the outlier of COKA is almost 3.

To present statistical evidence whether the effect of the difference between the two corpora is important or not, we calculate Cohen's d of effect size, and its value is

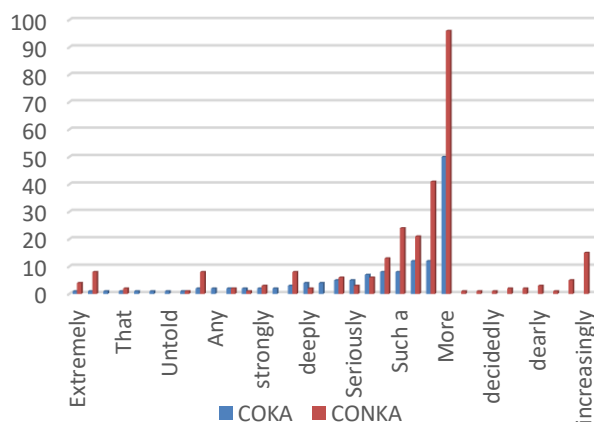
-0.41, 95% CI [-1.5, 0.67]. This shows that the size of the effect of the differences is medium. Lancaster Stats Tool online automatically provides 95% coefficient interval (CI) which shows that the probable range in the population is from -1.5 to 0.67 which indicates that the value of effect size from our sample is within this range.

Concerning the lexicon differences, namely, what words of intensifiers are used by these two groups, the data analysis is visualised to best present the findings. For space and time considerations, only the prominent features are displayed. Figure 3 displays the use of maximisers.



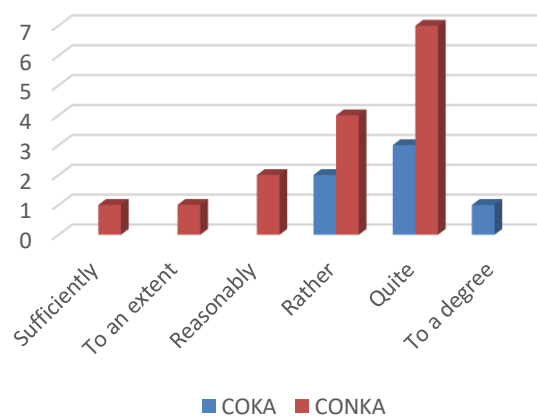
It is obvious that both groups used variety words of maximisers, and the most frequent is *most* which is more used by the Kurdish authors. Admittedly, there are some maximisers that are only used by non-Kurdish like *for the most part*, *most of all*, *outright*, *primely*, *overwhelmingly*, and *absolutely*. Nevertheless, there are others that are specified to Kurdish authors such as *above all*, *altogether*, *by and large*, *literary*, *whole*, *all together*, and *wholly*.

Figure 4
The Use of Boosters in The Corpora



Boosters are the most used intensifiers in both corpora with wide range of words. As it is illustrated in figure 4, the use of *more* outstands the others with absolute frequency of 96 in CONKA and 50 in COKA. The other boosters that were used amply are *very*, *such a*, and *so* especially in CONKA. Similar to maximisers, it seems that each group of authors have different word selection for boosters as well. Albeit, the range of words selected by the non-Kurdish group are slightly wider.

Figure 5
The Use of Compromisers



The least category of degree adverbs used in the two corpora was compromisers. Figure 5 shows the distribution of the lexicons in this category as used in the corpora. The Kurdish authors depend on the very narrow range of compromisers. Besides, very small number of each was used in COKA. Conversely, CONKA presents fairly use of the adverb within this category and with considerably wider range of lexicons.

6. DISCUSSION

The results uncovered that there are differences in the use of degree adverbs between the Kurdish and non-Kurdish writers. In response to the first question, it is statistically proved that the effect of the differences is important, and the null hypothesis was refuted. Boosters were the most frequent in the two corpora. Whereas compromisers were the least frequent in both corpora.

In response to the second question, Kurdish authors, apart from compromisers, showed competence in the use of a wide range of intensifiers. The Kurdish authors, especially with maximisers and boosters, demonstrate a wide range of lexical choice. However, this reflects that their English is rather the English of books. Namely, they are very formal in their writing, and they do not mix what is known to be used in spoken language into their writing. This is obvious in their minimum use of maximisers such as *really* and *a lot of* (Conrad and Biber, 2001) while *real* was untouched by the Kurdish authors. The findings of the study show compatibility with other

previous studies which reveal that non-native English writers mostly used familiar intensifiers such as *almost*, *very*, *quiet*, *more*, and *most* which are closed class (Hyland 2005) more than using open class like *extremely*, *absolutely*, *increasingly*, and *considerably*.

Elaborating on Tannen's (1982) work on the influence of cultural difference on "interpersonal involvement in discourse", Petch-Tyson (1998) argues that it is the oral tradition versus the literate tradition that affect the degree of involvement. However, here, by no means we are arguing that the Kurdish authors have more literate tradition than non-Kurdish; it is only that in terms of their English as they are more familiar with written English than spoken English. It could also be that the Kurdish authors still inclined to old fashion style in writing as to preserve objectivity through making the written products more impersonal and faceless (Hyland, 2005).

Both groups used a wide range of words in most of the categories. Yet, in some categories such as compromisers, the Kurdish authors fell quite behind the other group of authors in the variety of words used. For instance, those authors were confined to the use, comparatively, of less number like *quite*, *rather* and *to a degree* for compromisers than the non-Kurdish group. In the use of compromisers such as *quite* and *rather*, this study is in line with (Su, 2016) in terms of using *quite* more frequently than *rather* by non-native English though these have the same semantic meaning and syntactical function as they modify variety of adjectives and adverbs.

The results show that the Kurdish authors avoid some of the intensifiers which have restrictions in their use such as *dearly* which mostly modifies verbs (Partington, 1993). Likewise, they also do not show familiarity with intensifiers that have gone through delexicalization process as they become more neutral and even collocating with some positive adjectives. For example, *highly*, *heavily* and *thoroughly* are what Partington (1993) calls 'spatio-physical' words which change its function as physical description into purely intensifier viz., *highly* and *heavily* have the same meaning as *a lot of* while *thoroughly* has the meaning of *completely* (Partington, 1993, pp. 185-186).

To sum up, the study presents statistical evidence that the effect of the differences in the use of degree adverbs between Kurdish and non-Kurdish authors is significantly important. This finding is in line with Cakir (2016) comparing native and non-native authors. Concerning the lexical variety of intensifiers, the results display that in some categories such as maximisers and boosters, the Kurdish writers used, to some extent, a reasonable variety range of intensifiers-though fairly different from that used by non-Kurdish authors. However, in other categories such as compromisers and

diminishers, the range of the used intensifiers were very narrow.

7. CONCLUSION

Intensifiers are important persuasion devices in writing which make mastering its use very crucial in media discourse. Their importance is stemmed from what the available literature shows that they enhance writing interactivity, reflect writers' commitment to what is said, and through downtoners the writers increase the acceptability to their statements. The findings of this study demonstrate differences in the use of degree adverbs between the Kurdish writers and non-Kurdish writers in terms of the number of intensifiers used as well as choice of intensifiers.

This study avers that the semantic tagger (USAS) is an appropriate annotating device for intensifiers. However, as the accuracy of USAS is 91%, (Rayson *et al.*, 2004) this means that some manual checking is necessary for complex linguistic features. Although the finding succeeded in responding to the questions addressed here, there is limitation as it is purely quantitative research, it does not have a deeper look through the concordance to know the real reason behind these differences. More studies are required to identify why these differences in the use of intensifiers occurred between the two groups of authors.

Despite its limitation, this study was able to shed light on this crucial aspect of English language which definitely has a great role in improving the persuasive aspect of writing skill. Thus, it can help the non-native English writers to pay more attention to the use of intensifiers so that they can present their point of view in a way that shows their certainty and confidence about their statements and at the same time maintains their humility for gaining readers' solidarity.

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