

**UNIVERSITY OF TARTU  
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH STUDIES**

**EXTREME ADJECTIVE INTENSIFICATION AMONG  
ESTONIAN SPEAKERS OF ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN  
LANGUAGE**

**BA thesis**

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## ABSTRACT

Intensifiers as adjective modifiers are used to add emphasis or express emotion and are thus inherently subjective. This subjectivity may cause differences in perception, which may influence the effectiveness of communication. Therefore, researching adjective intensification by speakers of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) can improve understanding of their communicative effectiveness in English-speaking contexts, which may prove useful in teaching English to EFL learners. Thus, to contribute to this area of research, this thesis aims to map the tendencies and justifications of English adjective intensification among Estonian EFL speakers, focusing on extreme adjectives and some of the more common amplifiers, *very* in particular, to determine any differences between L1 English speakers and Estonian EFL speakers in terms of adjective intensification in spoken discourse.

To this end, an online survey was conducted, which included a grammar task in two parts, imitating spoken discourse. Part A, recording frequency patterns in the use of intensifiers, required quantitative analysis, whereas Part B, recording explanations for certain intensification choices, was analysed qualitatively. 81 people participated in the survey, 69 of whom were L1 Estonian speakers, and 12 were L1 English speakers functioning as the control group. This thesis consists of two main sections. Section One reviews the relevant literature, defines key concepts, and introduces the implications for the present study. Section Two focuses on the empirical analysis, providing a detailed description of the methodology and reporting the results. Section Two concludes with a discussion of the findings.

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## **LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS**

EFL – English as a Foreign Language

L1 – first language

EA – extreme adjective

GA – gradable adjective

NGA – non-gradable adjective

## INTRODUCTION

Adjectives and intensifiers are an integral part of communication. As description words, adjectives serve to provide objective information as well as give subjective judgements about the world around us, whereas intensifiers are used to modify the degree of an adjective to add emphasis or express emotion and are therefore inherently subjective. In communicative situations, the subjectivity of intensifiers can influence the effectiveness of information exchange by conditioning different perceptions of the same construct in different people, which is especially relevant regarding native vs. foreign speakers of a language. Adjective intensification by speakers of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) is, therefore, a promising research area, as it could eventually provide a better understanding of how effectively EFL speakers communicate and are understood by native speakers in English-speaking contexts. This thesis aims to contribute to this area of research. In order to discuss adjective intensification, it is first required to identify the types of adjectives that exist.

Although several classifications of adjectives have been proposed by different authors, a consensual classification is still lacking. While most authors agree that adjectives fall into two categories based on gradability – gradable and non-gradable adjectives – a further division into subcategories is subject to discussion. However, according to Paradis's (1997: 49) distinction, gradable adjectives form three subcategories: scalar, extreme, and limit adjectives.

Extreme adjectives, which will be the focus of this thesis, implicitly express the superlativeness of a certain feature (Cruse 1986: 216ff; Paradis 1997: 54). However, Morzycki (2012: 570) argues that while extreme adjectives do denote the extremity of a feature, it would be too bold a statement to say that they express its maximal degree. He illustrates this by noting that “gorgeous” and “prettiest” are not semantically equivalent.

Evidently, the definition of extreme adjectives is, to this day, inconsistent across relevant literature. This thesis has settled on the conceptualisation of extreme adjectives as denoting a high degree of a feature.

Likewise, there is no consistent definition for adjective intensification in relevant literature. This thesis relies on Quirk et al.'s (1985: 445) definition by which intensification refers to linguistic scaling of an adjective in an upward or downward direction. The meaning of an adjective can be enhanced, diminished, or emphasised, typically using adverbs or adverbial phrases to reflect the degree of a feature (e.g., smartness: cf. *very smart*, *not at all smart*). The present study will not discuss adverbial phrases and so, henceforth, the term “intensifier” will refer to intensifying adverbs. While English adjective intensification by EFL speakers from various first language (L1) backgrounds has been researched extensively, the process by EFL speakers whose first language is Estonian is understudied.

To fill the research gap, this thesis investigates English adjective intensification and its justification by L1 Estonian speakers, aiming to provide insight into the tendencies of extreme adjective intensification and the reasons for particular intensification choices. The findings could be applied in teaching English grammar to EFL speakers in Estonia or provide useful knowledge for further research. The thesis addresses the following research questions:

- (1) How do L1 Estonian speakers intensify English adjectives in spoken discourse compared to L1 English speakers?
  - (1.1) Do L1 Estonian speakers tend to intensify extreme adjectives with the word *very*? If so, then
  - (1.2) does the overuse of the word *very* correlate with their level of English?
- (2) How do L1 Estonian speakers rationalise their intensification choices?

In order to answer these questions, an online survey was conducted using the survey tool UT LimeSurvey. The survey was structured into two sections, the first involving the

reporting of demographic and linguistic background information and the second featuring a grammar task in two parts. The latter was presented as 48 (24 and 24) multiple-choice gap-fill questions complemented by dialogue illustrations, requiring the participant either to pre-modify the given adjective with all possible intensifiers or to mark the intensifiers in their opinion unsuitable for the pre-modification of the adjective. Data were obtained from 69 native Estonian speakers and 12 native English speakers, the latter of whom will function as the control group. The collected data will be analysed against theoretical underpinnings of English adjective intensification.

This thesis is divided into two main sections. Section One reviews the relevant literature, providing a theoretical background for the classification of adjectives and adjective intensification in English and Estonian, as well as representative findings of this area of research. Section Two reports the methodology, analysis, and results of the present study, concluding with a discussion.

# 1 ADJECTIVE INTENSIFICATION

This section gives an overview of the classification and intensification of English adjectives, followed by an overview of the classification of Estonian adjectives and intensifiers. Previous studies on English adjective intensification are reviewed, providing the implications for the present study. Terms and concepts relevant for this thesis are defined.

## 1.1 Classification of adjectives

An adjective is a lexical word used to refer to a property or quality of its referent (Rießler 2016:6). Broadly, adjectives can be divided into two categories based on gradability: gradable and non-gradable adjectives. The property of gradability has different operational definitions within the field of research pertaining to adjective intensification. For instance, Leffel et al. (2017:1) consider gradability in relation to scalarity, defining a gradable adjective (GA) as one expressing the quality of a scalar attribute. For example, the scale of the attribute *size* may include adjectives such as *tiny*, *small*, *big*, *enormous*, which would be considered gradable in such case. On the other hand, grammatically, a GA is conceptualised as an adjective that can be used in comparative or superlative constructions (Leffel et al. 2017:2).

Paradis (2001:4) has proposed a more specific definition and distinction of adjectives based on gradability, reasoning that an adjective is gradable if it combines with degree modifiers and has an opposite, whereas a non-gradable adjective (NGA) is of the categorising type and thus resists degree modifiers (e.g., *daily*, *classical*, *wooden*). In her distinction, GAs fall into three subcategories:

- 1) scalar adjectives: *good*, *bad*, *fast*, *slow*, *short*, *long*;
- 2) extreme adjectives: *excellent*, *huge*, *minute*, *brilliant*, *gorgeous*, *terrible*;
- 3) limit adjectives: *true*, *sober*, *dead*, *identical*, *possible*,

where scalar adjectives represent a range on a scale and are fully gradable, occurring in comparative and superlative constructions and exhibiting all typical features of antonyms; extreme adjectives (EAs) are likewise antonymic and they represent the ultimate point of a scale, but whether or not they work in the comparative and the superlative is up for debate; and limit adjectives are complementaries, meaning if one is false, the opposite must be true, but they do not occur in the comparative and superlative constructions and are not associated with a scale (Paradis 2001:5–6).

While most studies on the topic accord with Paradis’s classification of GAs and NGAs, there has been a prescriptive tradition of classifying extreme and limit adjectives as non-gradable (see for reference Huddleston and Pullum 2002). As limit adjectives are not the focus of this thesis, they will not be discussed henceforth. However, the discrepancy of classifying EAs as either gradable or non-gradable becomes eminent in the grammatical definition of gradable adjectives of occurring in the superlative and the comparative, for EAs can be used in superlative structures, but they resist certain comparative structures (Cruse 1986; Paradis 2001:5; Morzycki 2012: 586). For instance, EAs function well in equatives (Example 1), but sound odd in *more*-constructions and are, therefore, often degraded (Example 2):

- 1)
  - a. *Godzilla is as gigantic as Mothra.*
  - b. *San Francisco is as marvellous as New York.* (Morzycki 2012: 589)
- 2)
  - a. *?A is more excellent than B.*<sup>1</sup>
  - b. *A is better than B.* (Paradis 1997)
  - c. *?The salsa is more terrible than the guacamole.*
  - d. *The salsa is worse than the guacamole.* (Portner & Rubinstein 2016:21)

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<sup>1</sup> The question mark in front of a sentence or a word indicates that the construction is questionable or marginal in terms of grammaticality.

The resistance of EAs to *more*-constructions may be due to the semantics of extreme adjectives. Cruse (1986: 216ff) has termed EAs “implicit superlatives”, suggesting that their meaning denotes the maximality of a quality, making it logically unable for something to be even more of that quality.

Thus, the functional vs. lexical discord of EAs becomes clear: on the one hand, EAs possess the properties of gradable adjectives, suggesting that they can be graded upward as well as downward; on the other hand, however, the semantics of an EA imply the logical impossibility of upward gradability, whether in comparative structures or in isolation.

## 1.2 Intensifiers

The use of intensifiers in English has been a subject of considerable linguistic discussion and analysis (Stoffel 1901; Bolinger 1972; Paradis 1997; Lorenz 2002; Nevalainen & Rissanen 2002; Ito & Tagliamonte 2003; Tagliamonte & Roberts 2005; Xiao & Tao 2007; Méndez-Naya 2008; Fuchs 2017). Regardless, the term “intensifier” still lacks consensus regarding its definition in the relevant literature. This thesis relies on Quirk et al.’s (1985) classification of intensifiers, for it is one of the more comprehensive ones.

Quirk et al. (1985: 445) operationalised intensifiers as linguistic scaling devices used to modify the meaning of a property in an upward as well as downward direction. Based on Quirk et al.’s (1985) framework, intensifiers can be semantically divided into two subtypes: amplifiers (e.g., *very*, *completely*, *extremely*), which enhance the degree of a quality, and downtoners (e.g., *almost*, *somewhat*, *rather*), which reduce it. Amplifiers are furthermore divided into two subtypes of which boosters “denote a high degree, a high point on the scale” and maximisers “denote the upper extreme of the scale” (Quirk et al. 1985: 590).

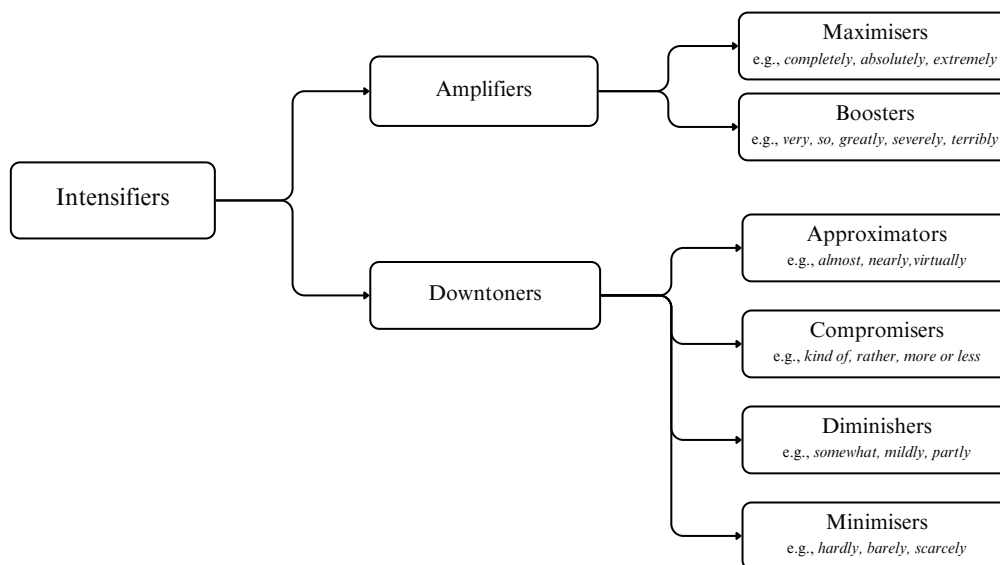


Figure 1. Subtypes of intensifiers (adapted from Quirk et al. 1985: 567)

However, such a conceptualisation raises the question of whether all adjectives (such as EAs that denote a high degree of a feature) can be intensified. According to Van der Wouden and Foolen (2017: 82), intensification presupposes that an adjective is gradable. Regardless of whether extreme adjectives are classified as gradable or non-gradable, they can be intensified (e.g., *absolutely amazing*, *really awful*), but usually only by certain intensifiers. Altenberg (1991), who treats extreme adjectives as non-gradable, suggests that, of the amplifier subclass, some maximisers (e.g., *absolutely*) may intensify EAs, whereas boosters are reserved for gradable (i.e., scalar) adjectives.

This notion renders booster and EA combinations redundant (*?very gorgeous*, *?extremely gigantic*, *?awfully terrible*), for the boostedness of a quality is already implied by the meaning of the EA (*gorgeous* = *very beautiful*), an idea supported by Morzycki (2012: 605), according to whom the booster *very* is systematically incompatible with EAs.

### 1.3 Estonian adjective classification and intensification

Similarly to the classification of English adjectives, Erelt (2017: 406–407) has divided Estonian adjectives into relative and absolute based on gradability, relative referring to scalar adjectives. Unlike in English, however, Estonian absolutes are generally considered non-gradable, comprising both limit and categorising adjectives (see Erelt 2017: 407). Moreover, an equivalent to the class of extreme adjectives is formally absent, although adjectives that are inherently extreme do exist (e.g., *kohutav* [awful], *võrratu* [wonderful]). Additionally, the extreme degree of a quality can be expressed by adding an intensifying prefixoid to a scalar adjective (e.g., *ime-/ilus* [gorgeous (wonderfully beautiful)], *üli-/suur* [huge (extremely big)]) (Erelt et al. 2020: 369).

Intensifiers themselves are divided into adverbs of intensity and adverbs of totality, of which the former modify relative as well as some absolute adjectives and the latter modify some absolute adjectives (Erelt 2017: 408–409). Adverbs of intensity are further divided into three categories: adverbs of 1) high intensity (equivalent of boosters, e.g., *väga* [very], *kohutavalt* [awfully]), 2) medium intensity (equivalent of compromisers, e.g., *küllaltki* [quite]), and 3) low intensity (equivalent of diminishers, e.g., *natukene* [a little], *kergelt* [slightly]), whereas adverbs of totality include both maximisers and approximators (e.g., *absoluutselt* [absolutely], *täiesti* [completely], *peaaegu* [almost]).

### 1.4 Previous research on adjective intensification

The use of intensifiers in English is commonly studied with a corpus-based approach (Lorenz 1999; Lee 2006; Xiao and Tao 2007; Koo 2018). For instance, Xiao and Tao (2007) conducted a corpus-based study to explore the variations in the use of amplifiers in British English in terms of sociolinguistic variables. One notable tendency that emerged from the study is that amplifiers are more commonly used in speech than in writing.

Nguyen and Lee (2021) investigated the use of intensifiers and hedges in the argumentative essays of Vietnamese EFL learners and native English speakers, finding that native English speakers and advanced Vietnamese EFL learners tended to use more hedges and fewer intensifiers than intermediate Vietnamese EFL learners, thus concluding that the frequency of intensifiers correlates negatively with language proficiency.

In her corpus-based study, Lee (2006) examined the use of amplifier-adjective collocations among undergraduate Korean EFL learners. The study revealed that Korean learners of English tended to use amplifiers significantly less often than native English speakers. Additionally, Korean EFL learners' repertoire of amplifiers was found to be limited. Particularly, Koreans tend to overuse two specific amplifiers, namely *really* and *very*. These findings are in accordance with Lorenz's (1999) assertion that native speakers are likely to use more varied intensifiers and to use them more frequently than non-native speakers who appear to favour well-established intensifiers such as *really* and *very*. Lorenz (1999) also suggests that non-native speakers tend to use intensifiers in less appropriate ways.

Hamid (2022) approached the use of intensifiers from the aspect of problems and difficulties encountered by Iraqi EFL learners, hypothesising that language proficiency does not predict appropriate use of intensifiers. The results indicated that Iraqi EFL learners indeed tend to use intensifiers unconventionally or inappropriately, confirming the hypothesis. However, as the study draws conclusions from the data rather liberally, the reliability of the study and its findings is in question.

Still, while previous research has mostly indicated that non-native English speakers use amplifying collocations differently from native English speakers (Granger 1998; Kennedy 2003; Lee 2006; Lorenz 1999; Nguyen and Lee 2021), contradictory findings also exist. Schweinberger (2020) examined the use of *very* with different types of adjectives,

comparing the ways of native English speakers to those of learners of English with diverse L1 backgrounds. The results showed no significant differences between the native speakers and the learners of English in the use of *very*. The study was based on the International Corpus of Learner English (ICLE) and the Louvain Corpus of Native English Essays (LOCNESS), which are both text corpora. Relying on the knowledge that amplifiers are more frequently used in spoken than in written discourse (Xiao and Tao 2007; Zhiber and Korotina 2019) and writing is more time-consuming than speaking, enabling one to construct their sentences more carefully, it is possible that the lack of difference in the study was due to the use of text corpora, while more prominent differences might appear from spoken corpora.

In Estonia, the research done on adjective intensification in English is limited to Savchenko's (2022) study in which he examined the use of intensifiers (including *very*) by Estonian advanced learners of English in comparison with that of native English speakers. The study was based on the Estonian component of the Louvain International Database of Spoken English Interlanguage (LINDSEI-EST) and the Louvain Corpus of Native English Conversation (LOCNEC), both spoken corpora. Nonetheless, the differences observed were statistically insignificant, suggesting that advanced learners of English do not differ from native English speakers in the use of more common amplifiers.

### **1.5 Implications for the present study**

Evidently, adjective intensification in English, including the use of *very* with extreme adjectives, is understudied in Estonia. Internationally, previous research has been primarily corpus-based and focused mainly on written discourse (see, for example, Granger 1998, Lorenz 1999), whereas spoken discourse might reveal more significant results. Savchenko's (2022) study contradicts this idea, but considering that he focused on advanced learners of English, this was somewhat expected. As the language proficiency of EFL learners has been

shown to correlate with the use of intensifiers in that advanced learners tend to use fewer intensifiers in general (Nguyen and Lee 2021), reducing the probability of overusing them or deviating otherwise from the norms of native English speakers, it is worth investigating the use of intensifiers by intermediate and upper-intermediate EFL speakers. Moreover, to the author's knowledge, adjective intensification rationale provided by EFL speakers has not been studied. Consequently, to fill these research gaps, this thesis aims to map the use of common intensifiers in adjective intensification, more specifically the use of *very* with extreme adjectives, by Estonian intermediate and upper-intermediate speakers of English in spoken discourse and record the rationale behind their intensification choices.

## **2 ANALYSIS OF THE ADJECTIVE INTENSIFICATION OF ESTONIAN EFL SPEAKERS**

This section provides a detailed description of the methodology used to answer the research questions, presents the results of the data analysis, and discusses their implications. The section concludes with the limitations of the study.

### **2.1 Methodology**

In order to gain insight into the English adjective intensification tendencies and justifications of Estonian EFL speakers, and more specifically, to study the tendencies of extreme adjective intensification with the booster *very*, an online survey was conducted using the tool UT LimeSurvey ([www.survey.ut.ee](http://www.survey.ut.ee)). The survey comprised two distinct sections, the first designated for the collection of demographic and linguistic background (first language, level of English, and use of English in their daily lives) information and the second involving a grammar task, likewise structured into two parts: Part A and Part B.

Participants were informed of the anonymity of the survey beforehand, relevant terms (i.e., “intensifier” and “pre-modification”) were explained to them, and they were asked to refrain from seeking assistance during the survey. The participants were unaware of the specific purpose of the study, knowing only that it served to map the tendencies of English adjective intensification. The distinction of adjectives as scalar or extreme and the main intensifier of interest remained unknown to the participants. The survey was piloted on a convenience sample of two people with C2 English proficiency. The piloting occurred on two consecutive days (5 March – 6 March 2024).

#### **2.1.1 Survey distribution**

The survey was available over a period of 26 days, from 14 March to 8 April 2024. Cluster sampling was used to gather participants. The invitation to participate in the survey was sent to the faculties of social sciences, arts and humanities, and science and technology

of the University of Tartu and Tallinn University, as well as selected public secondary schools and language schools in hopes to gather more participants with an intermediate or upper-intermediate English proficiency.

Of higher education institutions, the distribution was limited to the two universities in question to avoid gathering more data than could be qualitatively analysed in the allotted time. The University of Tartu was selected as the largest and oldest institution of higher education in Estonia. In order for the sample to be more representative, the selection was expanded to include the Tallinn region of which Tallinn University was selected as the oldest institution of higher education.

### 2.1.2 Participants

Table 1. Comparative statistics of the participants by test group

	L1 Estonian speakers	L1 English speakers	Results of the statistical test	<i>p</i> -value
n	69	12		
Gender distribution	63.8% female 27.5% male 1.5% non-binary 7.2% prefer not to answer	58.(3)% female 33.(3)% male 8.(3)% prefer not to answer	$\chi^2(3) = .36$	.95
Age	$M = 23.41$ ( $SD = 8.68$ )	$M = 19.42$ ( $SD = 3.20$ )	$t(45) = -2.86$	.006
First language	100% Estonian 4.4% Russian 2.9% English 1.5% German	100% English	$\chi^2(3) = 72.6$	<.001
Level of English	24.6% Proficient (C2) 43.5% Advanced (C1) 26.1% Upper-intermediate (B2) 4.4% Intermediate (B1) 1.4% Elementary (A2)	100% Proficient (C2)	$\chi^2(4) = 25.26$	<.001

81 people participated in the study (63% female, 28% male, 9% other) with an average age of  $M = 22.81$  years ( $SD = 8.22$ , age range 15–62). Table 1 presents the

comparative statistics of the participants' demographic data. As seen from Table 1, the participants with Estonian as one of their first languages did not differ significantly by gender from the participants with English as their sole first language. However, a statistically significant difference in the means of age was detected (mean difference = 4 years), which may have implications for the results of the study.

27 participants (33.3%) were students of philology or linguistics, out of whom 63% specialised in English philology. The participants' use of English is presented in Figure 2.

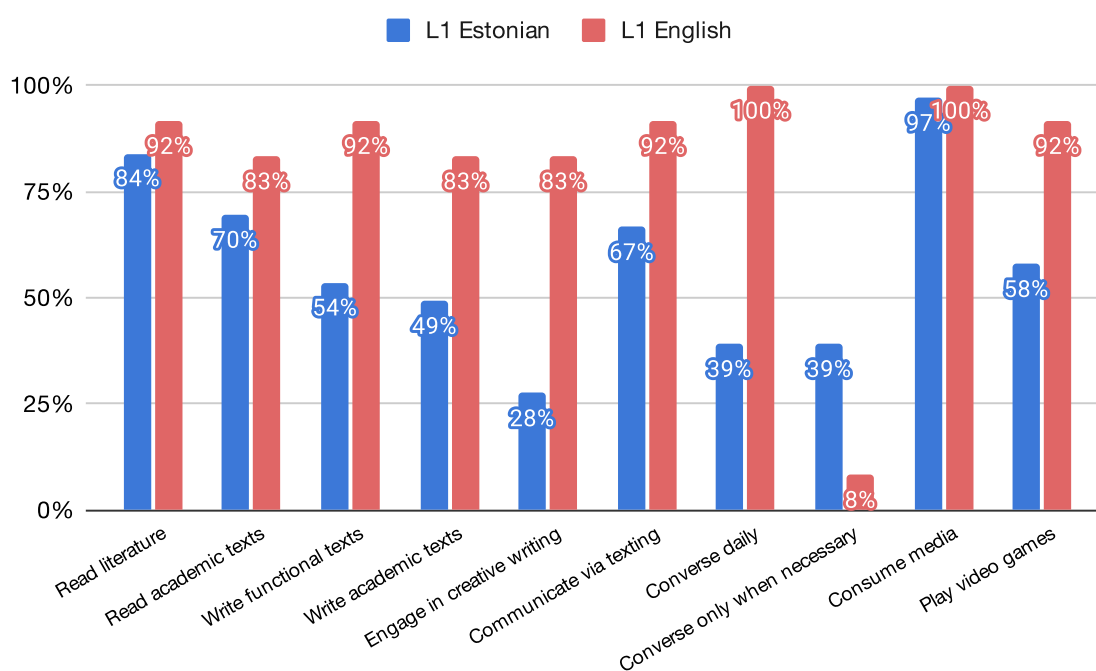


Figure 2. The participants' use of English

### 2.1.3 Grammar task

The main part of the survey was the grammar task designed to collect data about the adjective intensification process. 24 adjectives were chosen for the grammar task for intensification, of which 13 were extreme and 11 were scalar (see *Appendix 1*). The adjectives were chosen by relative frequency based on The Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) and The British National Corpus (BNC), with the more frequent scalar adjectives and their extreme counterparts being favoured. The final selection was

determined by the collocation frequencies of *very* with extreme adjectives, less frequent collocations being favoured, for they suggested the incompatibility of *very* with extreme adjectives. The two corpora in question were chosen to get an overview of potential differences in American vs. British varieties regarding *very* in adjective collocations. Furthermore, they provided information about written as well as spoken discourse, which enabled controlling potential differences between the two discourses in adjective intensification.

In order to prevent habitual selection of specific intensifiers, which may occur when several adjectives of the same type (scalar vs. extreme) appear in consecutive questions, the order of the questions was set with no more than two adjectives of the same type appearing consecutively.

To simulate the conversational nature of spoken discourse, the 24 adjectives were constructed into a dialogue, for written dialogue tends to generate the illusion of proximity to spoken discourse (Cohen and Green 2019: 130). To strengthen the illusion furthermore, illustrations were added to the dialogues to create unique scenarios of oral conversation, one scenario accounting for one question in the grammar task. The illustrations were created using Canva Pro<sup>2</sup>, an online graphic design tool.

The scenarios were presented as multiple-choice gap-fill questions, the same 24 appearing in both Part A and Part B in the same order. However, whereas in Part A, the task was to select all the intensifiers that could be used to pre-modify the given adjective (see *Appendix 2*), in Part B, the participants were instructed to select the intensifiers they would not use for that purpose (see *Appendix 3*). The selection included 7 intensifiers, 4 of which were maximisers (*absolutely, completely, totally, extremely*), and 3 were boosters (*very, really, so*). There was also the option of leaving the gap empty if the adjective could stand

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<sup>2</sup> [www.canva.com/pro/](http://www.canva.com/pro/)

alone just as well. The order of the options was randomised for all questions so as to eliminate the possible effect of the position of *very* on the participant's decision. The randomisation was performed in Python 3.6.4.

In further contrast to Part A, Part B included an open-ended question after each scenario, asking the participant to explain the rationale behind their selection (see *Appendix 3*). The primary purpose of Part B was to determine the thought processes that guide Estonian EFL speakers' lexical choices in adjective intensification.

The division of the grammar task into two separate parts was justified by the expected effect of the open-ended question in Part A: if the participants were asked to select the suitable intensifiers, meaning the task was given in the affirmative, then based on the cognitive miser theory<sup>3</sup> (Fiske and Taylor 1984), they would likely explain their selection through a process of elimination (e.g., *I selected these options because the others were unsuitable*). There was reason to suspect such an outcome because explaining why certain words are suitable either requires the knowledge of a specific rule that confirms the suitability or is more easily done by means of logical deduction that the selected options must be right, for the unselected options are certainly wrong. The latter is cognitively less demanding and, hence, the more frequently preferred method of reasoning. Therefore, Part B was required to prevent the explanations from being limited to the process of elimination in hopes to receive more informative answers.

#### **2.1.4 Data analysis**

Following the inactivation of the survey, responses were downloaded from UT LimeSurvey to a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. RStudio 4.2.3 was used for descriptive statistics of the participants' demographics (independent t-test and Pearson's chi-squared

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<sup>3</sup> Cognitive miser theory posits that, due to their limited information processing capacity, people adopt strategies that make problem solving easier and faster, even though these strategies may not always be logically correct or produce correct results (Fiske and Taylor 2021: 15).

test (see above: 2.1.2 *Participants*)) and the quantitative analysis of Part A. An analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to compare L1 Estonian group's responses to those of the control group.

Responses to the open-ended questions (i.e., explanations to their selection) of Part B were extracted from the data and analysed qualitatively to detect repeating patterns. 10 categories emerged from the explanations: intuition, context, scalarity, intensity, logicity, collocation, prescription, tone, better alternatives, and inability to explain.

An explanation was categorised under "intuition" if it contained signal phrases implying intuitive choice (e.g., *intuition, feel, seem, sound, I think, the vibes are off man*). The category of context assumed that the choice was based on contextual markers, such as an indefinite article or overall sentence structure, or the topic of the dialogue scenario, and included signal phrases such as *context, this sentence, here, would not convey the meaning as effectively, in this case, talking about*, and so on. The category of scalarity refers to explanations that recognised that some adjectives are "weaker" than others or can be graded but not completed, referring to the function of *completely*. The category of intensity emerged from explanations relying on the implicit superlativeness or extremeness of an adjective (e.g., *already a superlative/an extreme, intense enough, strong, already means VERY, they [selected intensifiers] don't hit hard enough*). The category of logicity refers to choices made based on how an intensifier would alter the meaning of an adjective or the quality it describes instead of relying on linguistic reasoning (e.g., *If one were completely tired, they would most likely be dead, in my opinion or does not make sense, nonsensical*). The "collocations" category contains references to not having heard the particular intensifier and the following adjective used together or the combination sounding unnatural, signal phrases including words such as *collocate, go with/together, each other, word combination*. The "prescription" category suggests the ungrammaticality of certain combinations (signals:

*incorrect, cannot be used, tradition, etc.*). Explanations for resisting certain intensifiers due to the accompanying tone being inappropriate in a given context fell under the category of tone (e.g., *Valley Girl, overdramatic, informal, sarcastic, rude*). “Better alternatives” suggested that other intensifiers in the list were better suited for the pre-modification of a given adjective. “Inability to explain” incorporated answers such as *I don’t know, idk, can’t tell/explain/answer, not sure*. Answers that could not be made sense of were categorised as N/A (e.g., *why should I, just no, because, don’t fit the criteria, just don’t like these options, -*).

## 2.2 Results

### 2.2.1 Part A

To assess whether L1 Estonian and L1 English speakers differed in their use of intensifiers with English adjectives, a one-way ANOVA was conducted. The model showed no significant difference between L1 Estonian and L1 English speakers use of intensifiers with both scalar and extreme adjectives taken together ( $F(1, 382) = 2.68, p = .10$ ). However, separating the two adjective classes, a tendency towards a main effect appeared with extreme adjectives ( $F(1, 206) = 2.83, p = .09$ ), L1 Estonian group showing slightly lower scores than the control group. With scalar adjectives, the difference remained statistically insignificant ( $F(1, 174) = .51, p = .47$ ). The preliminary model was then run on the data from L1 Estonian speakers with a B1–B2 level of English and L1 English speakers regarding all adjectives, showing a very strong main effect ( $F(1, 382) = 13.86, p = <.001$ ). Compared to the control group, the L1 Estonian group had an average of 13% lower scores. Separating the two adjective classes, the main effect remained significant and very strong regarding extreme adjectives ( $F(1, 206) = 12.09, p = <.001$ ), but bordered on significance regarding scalar adjectives ( $F(1, 174) = 3.72, p = .055$ ). The most notable difference appeared with the

extreme adjective *enormous*, the L1 Estonian group using *very* 30.3% less frequently than the control group.

To check whether native Estonian speakers had a tendency of overusing *very* for extreme adjective intensification, an ANOVA was again performed. The model showed no significant difference between native Estonian and native English speakers' use of *very* with extreme adjectives ( $F(1, 24) = .64, p = .43$ ). Likewise, there was no significant difference between the two groups regarding the use of *very* with scalar adjectives ( $F(1, 20) = .06, p = .81$ ). Limiting the analysis to L1 Estonian speakers with a B1–B2 level of English and L1 English speakers, the difference in the use of *very* with extreme adjectives was still insignificant ( $F(1, 24) = .39, p = .54$ ). However, a strong main effect appeared with scalar adjectives ( $F(1, 20) = 11.66, p = <.01$ ), where the control group showed an average of 12% more frequent use of *very* as a pre-modifier. The most notable difference appeared with the scalar adjective *tired*, in which case the L1 Estonian group used *very* 32.6% less frequently than the control group.

### 2.2.2 Part B

1270 answers were received from native Estonian speakers. The most popular category was “intuition”, represented in nearly half (48%) of the answers (see Figure 3). More than two times less frequent was the category of context, appearing in 17% of the answers. “Scalarity” followed at 14%, “intensity” at 11%, and “logicality” at 10%. “Collocations” and “prescription” were represented equally at 9%.

120 answers were received from the control condition, in which four categories dominated: “logicality” at 27%, both “scalarity” and “context” at 26%, and “intuition” at 25%. 15% of the explanations relied on prescriptive conventions, 6% relied on intensity, and 4% on collocations. A novel category, at 0.16% virtually absent from L1 Estonian speakers' explanations, was “better alternatives”, appearing in 8% of the answers of L1 English

speakers. “Inability to explain” did not occur in the answers of L1 English speakers, whereas the category was represented in 6% of the L1 Estonian speakers’ answers. The category of tone appeared in similar proportions in both groups (3% in L1 Estonian, 2% in L1 English).

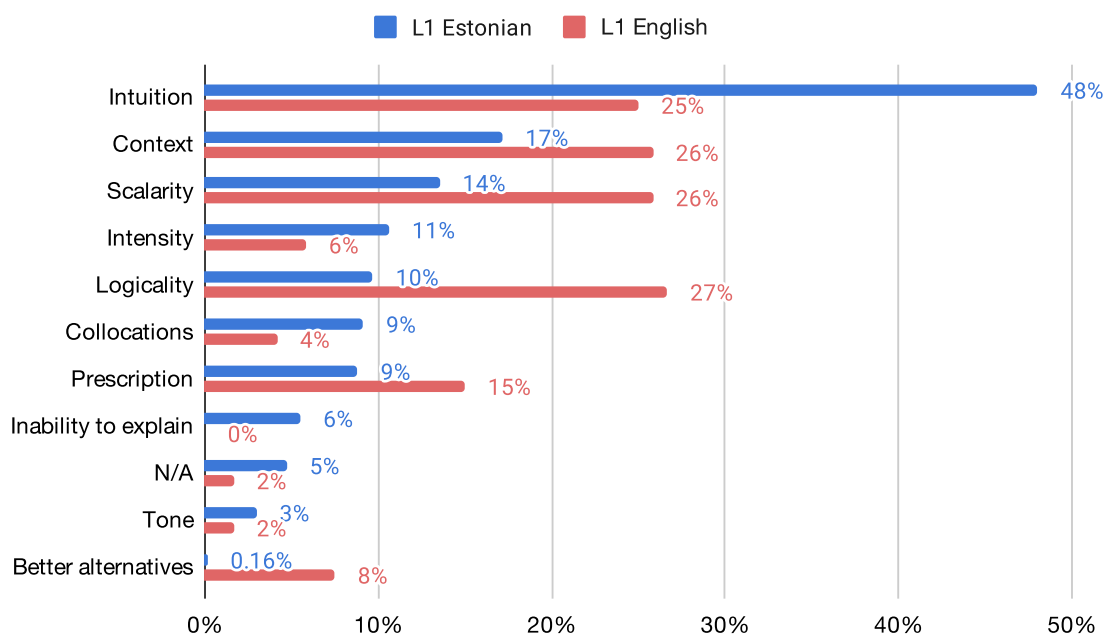


Figure 3. Distribution of Part B explanations into categories

### 2.3 Discussion

The results of the quantitative analysis of Part A showed that, in terms of English adjective intensification, L1 Estonian speakers use intensifiers similarly to L1 English speakers. No significant difference was detected between the scores of the two groups neither with extreme nor with scalar adjectives. Considering the fact that most of the L1 Estonian participants (68%) had an English level of C1 or C2, such a result was unsurprising. Moreover, it is in accord with Savchenko’s (2022) findings suggesting that the use of the most frequent amplifiers does not differ between advanced learners of English and L1 English speakers.

However, L1 Estonian speakers with a B1–B2 level of English tended to use intensifiers much less frequently than L1 English speakers, a result most evident in the pre-modification of extreme adjectives. This result contrasts Nguyen and Lee’s (2021) findings

indicating that the higher the language proficiency, the less frequently are intensifiers used, a conflict that may be due to the two studies being based on different discourses. Nguyen and Lee (2021) based their study on written discourse, investigating academic essays, whereas the present study attempted to simulate spoken discourse. Nevertheless, the results of the present study agree with Lee's (2006) findings suggesting that learners of English use intensifiers less frequently than native English speakers, and their study was also based on written discourse, which counteracts this explanation. However, looking into the free responses of Part B in parallel to the results of Part A and considering that the effect was most evident for extreme adjectives, another potential explanation appears. In such cases where the L1 Estonian group was able to identify extreme adjectives as implicitly superlative, a recurring rationale emerged implying that an EA is intense enough not to need intensification, not even by maximisers (e.g., "*Gorgeous*" is strong enough that it doesn't need an intensifier. / "*I'm starving*" is an intensified form of "*i'm hungry*" and therefore really intense pre-modifiers don't go along with the already intensified form.) Therefore, it is possible that the tendency of B1–B2-level English speakers to use fewer intensifiers is linked to their differing conceptualisation of extreme adjectives.

Narrowing the analysis to the use of *very* with extreme as well as scalar adjectives, the L1 Estonian and L1 English groups, once again, did not differ, implying an equally frequent use of *very* as a pre-modifier. Conversely, L1 Estonians with a B1–B2 level of English tended to use *very* less frequently with scalar adjectives than the control group, whereas with extreme adjectives, such a tendency did not appear. In the course of the qualitative analysis of the L1 Estonians' explanations to their intensification choices, a pattern emerged implying that Estonians do not always conceptualise scalar adjectives as having anything to do with a scale but rather as limit adjectives, whereby a quality either is or is not, and its degree is indeterminable (e.g., *It implies you can be half-way funny but you*

*either are funny or not*). Such a pattern may explain the less frequent use of *very* with scalar adjectives, for if the latter are not considered degree words, then expressing their degree with a booster becomes illogical.

The lack of difference in the use of *very* with extreme adjectives seems to refer to the fact that B1–B2-level EFL speakers sense extreme adjectives in terms of gradability similarly to L1 English speakers, which may be due to inherently extreme adjectives in Estonian also resisting booster and EA combinations (e.g., *?väga surmnäljane* ~ *?very starving*); however, further research is required to confirm or reject this idea.

To summarise the findings of Part A, L1 Estonian speakers with a higher level of English tended to use intensifiers similarly to native English speakers, whereas significant differences occurred in participants with lower levels of English, leading to the implication that language proficiency correlates positively with how similarly Estonian EFL speakers intensify adjectives to native English speakers. As Estonian learners of English are expected to have acquired a B2 level by the end of secondary school, intermediate and upper-intermediate levels of English are associated primarily with secondary education, in which light, as one interpretation, the findings suggest that deviation from the norms of native English speakers in terms of adjective intensification could be linked to how the process is taught in secondary schools.

Continuing with the discussion of the qualitative analysis of Part B, the most prominent result was that Estonians predominantly relied on their intuition for adjective intensification. On the one hand, it may be a natural occurrence in speakers of a foreign language not to be able to refer to a specific convention for a certain linguistic choice or note with certainty that something is right, but instead feel that it sounds right. On the other hand, the result may support the main implication of Part A findings by referring to how English adjective intensification is taught in Estonia: intuitive choice refers to less certainty in

knowing or not knowing at all, posing the question of whether adjective intensification is taught at all.

The opposition of “intuition” and “prescription” in adjective intensification was also telling, suggesting that L1 Estonian speakers rely on their intuition much more than L1 English speakers, who in turn rely more on prescriptive conventions than Estonians. This was somewhat unexpected, for learning English as a foreign language is rather a conscious process largely based on rules and narratives about the conventions of the language, whereas native speakers acquire language subconsciously or intuitively, growing up in the language environment. However, the result may simply refer to the fact that native speakers know with more certainty what is grammatical in their language, and most EFL speakers nowadays have learned the language, among other means, by consuming English media (also an intuitive process), which 97% of the L1 Estonian participants reported doing.

The fact that “context” was the second most popular category and, therefore, the basis of a large part of the intensification choices came as no surprise since, according to Grice (1975: 49), it is characteristic of conversational discourse that not all that is meant is said. Hence, conversation prompts contextual inference. Moreover, 7 of 24 dialogue scenarios included an indefinite article before the gap, rendering, for example, the intensifier *so* incompatible with the sentence structure and thus producing many of the context-based explanations.

“Scalarity” as the third most frequent category owes its popularity mainly to the intensifier *completely*, which is incompatible with both scalar and most extreme adjectives. Thus, the category of scalarity included not only the explanations about the intensification of scalar adjectives but also extreme adjectives, implying that the latter belong on a scale too.

The dramatic difference in the frequency of the “logicality” category, which was the most popular category in the control group, could be explained by the intuitive acquisition of a first language. No grammar book prescribes the internal logic of a language. It is instead learned intuitively by interacting with the language environment over a long period of time. Hence, it seems likely that L1 English speakers would, in the first order, sense the conflicts in meaning dynamics. In contrast, EFL speakers may subconsciously rely on their own first language for acceptable meaning dynamics and thus not even acknowledge that the word combination may be illogical (cf. *täiesti kohutav* ~ ?*completely awful*).

At this point, it is crucial to identify the limitations of this study. While the survey design enabled answering the research questions, it was not very economical. Inclusion of the intensifier *completely* as one of the options in the grammar task conditioned many of the free responses to focus on the incompatibility of *completely* with the given adjective. As the focus of this thesis lies elsewhere, it would have been more practical to substitute *completely* with a booster to receive more relevant explanations.

Moreover, the division of the grammar task into two parts made the survey notably more time-consuming, which may have been one of the reasons for not participating in or completing the survey. The effect of this manifested negatively in the control group which was ultimately very small (n = 12). Because of this, the accuracy of the inferential statistics of Part A in terms of L1 English speakers may be in question. It is also important to consider that the control group was significantly younger than the L1 Estonian group, the effect of which on the results is undetermined.

Based on the points discussed, possibilities for further research are revealed and improvements recommended. Following the determination of recurring patterns in the rationalisations, it would be productive to explore how, if at all, adjective intensification is taught in Estonian secondary education. Additionally, the investigation of first language

influence on English adjective intensification could provide further insight into the trends observed in this thesis. However, it is crucial to ensure sufficient data for the control group and little variation in the demographics of the groups for them to be comparable.

## CONCLUSION

Adjectives are description words whose function is to provide more information about the world we live in. Adjective intensification is thus topical when talking about communication, especially between native speakers of English and speakers of English as a foreign language (EFL) since differences in adjective intensification may have implications for the effectiveness of information exchange. Consequently, adjective intensification by EFL speakers is a productive area of research, for it can provide insights into how effectively they communicate in English-speaking contexts. Research in this area can identify potential challenges EFL speakers face in effectively expressing themselves and being understood by native speakers, which can, in turn, guide the refinement of teaching English in Estonia.

Research on adjective intensification by Estonian EFL speakers is limited to Savchenko's (2022) corpus-based study in which advanced learners of English were compared to native English speakers, showing no difference in the use of the most frequent amplifiers. EFL speakers of lower English proficiency have not been studied in Estonia in this respect, nor have the thought processes guiding the intensification process been recorded. Thus, to fill the research gap, the present study intended to provide insight into how and why intermediate and upper-intermediate EFL speakers of L1 Estonian background use some of the more common intensifiers in adjective intensification.

To this end, the following research questions were proposed: (1) how do L1 Estonian speakers intensify English adjectives in spoken discourse compared to L1 English speakers; more specifically, (1.1) do L1 Estonian speakers tend to intensify extreme adjectives with the word *very*, and if so, then (1.2) does the overuse of the word *very* correlate with their level of English; additionally, (2) how do L1 Estonian speakers rationalise their intensification choices. To answer these questions, an online survey was conducted.

The main part of the survey featured a grammar task, which recorded the participants' use of intensifiers (Part A) as well as their explanations for particular intensification choices (Part B). Data were obtained from L1 Estonian speakers and, for control condition purposes, a small group of L1 English speakers. The data from Part A were analysed quantitatively using a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) to compare the differences between the two groups (L1 Estonian vs. L1 English). Part B required a qualitative analysis: responses were categorised based on patterns that emerged.

Even though the design of the survey enabled answering the research questions, it introduced some limitations due to its low economic efficiency. The inclusion of *completely* as one of the options in the grammar task conditioned less relevant explanations for this thesis. Furthermore, the survey was time-consuming, which may have caused the low participation of L1 English speakers. In turn, the control group was small, which may have influenced the accuracy of Part A inferential statistics. Notwithstanding, the research questions were answered.

The results showed that overall, L1 Estonian speakers did not differ from L1 English speakers in the use of more frequent intensifiers. Likewise, L1 Estonian speakers did not modify extreme adjectives with *very* more so than L1 English speakers. Evidently, overuse of *very* was not recorded on any level of English. However, L1 Estonian speakers with a B1–B2 level of English used intensifiers much less frequently than L1 English speakers, especially with extreme adjectives, whereas underuse of *very* was apparent with scalar adjectives. Such findings lead to the conclusion that language proficiency correlates with how similarly Estonian EFL speakers intensify adjectives to native English speakers, higher proficiency expectedly suggesting higher similarity. As learners are expected to acquire a B2 level by the end of year 12, the findings about intermediate and upper-intermediate levels of English may mirror how adjective intensification is taught in secondary education.

The fact that Estonian EFL speakers relied most on their intuition for intensification further supports this connection since intuitive choice refers to little to no certainty in the response, raising the question of whether adjective intensification is taught at all in secondary education. In addition to intuition, Estonian EFL speakers also relied on context, scalarity, intensity of the adjective, logicality, collocations, prescriptions, and tone. These findings point to and hopefully provide a useful basis for further research possibilities, for instance, investigating to what extent and with which focus is adjective intensification part of EFL learning in Estonia.

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix 1

#### Scalar adjectives and their extreme counterparts used in the grammar task

bad	terrible
	awful
big	huge
	enormous
funny	hilarious
hungry	starving
pretty	gorgeous
cold	freezing
cute	adorable
tasty	delicious
tired	exhausted
smart	brilliant
old	ancient

## Appendix 2

### Example of a Part A question

TARTU ÜLIKOOL

Part A

How do you like the dress I got you?

.....

\* It's \_\_\_ pretty - I love it!


☑ Which of the following intensifiers can you use to pre-modify the adjective? If the adjective can be used without an intensifier just as well, select the option "-" among others.

☑ Check all that apply


- really
- completely
- extremely
- totally
- absolutely
- very
- so
-

## Appendix 3

### Example of a Part B question

 TARTU ÜLIKOOL

Part B



\* That is a(n) \_\_\_ terrible idea.

Ⓔ Which of the following intensifiers wouldn't you use to pre-modify the adjective?  
Ⓘ Check all that apply

really  
 completely  
 extremely  
 totally  
 absolutely  
 very  
 so  
 All of the above seem all right to use.

\* In your own words, please explain why you wouldn't use the selected intensifier(s) to pre-modify the adjective.

## RESÜMEE

TARTU ÜLIKOOL  
ANGLISTIKA OSAKOND

**Reena Roos**

**Extreme adjective intensification among Estonian speakers of English as a foreign language. Tugevate omadussõnade intensiivistamine inglise keelt võõrkeelena kõnelevate eestlaste seas.**

bakalaureusetöö

2024

Lehekülgede arv: 39

Annotatsioon:

Käesolev bakalaureusetöö uurib inglise keelt võõrkeelena kõnelevate eestlaste tendentse ingliskeelsete omadussõnade intensiivistamises. Töö eesmärgiks oli kaardistada mustreid sagedasemate skalaarsete ja iseäranis tugevate omadussõnade intensiivistamises (ennekõike sõnaga *very* 'väga') ning saada aimu, millest eestlased omadussõnade intensiivistamisel juhinduvad.

Selleks viidi läbi internetipõhine küsitlus, mis hõlmas suulist diskursust imiteerivat kaheosalist grammatikaülesannet. A osa registreeris sagedusmustreid intensiivistajate kasutamises ning neid andmeid analüüsiti kvantitatiivselt, B osa aga registreeris põhjendusi konkreetsete intensiivistajate kasuks või kahjuks otsustamisele, mida analüüsiti kvalitatiivselt. Küsitluses osales 81 inimest, kellest 69 olid eesti keelt emakeelena kõnelevad ja 12 inglise keelt emakeelena kõnelevad isikud, viimased neist täitsid uurimuses kontrollgrupi eesmärgi.

Uurimusest ei nähtunud olulist erinevust inglise keelt võõrkeelena kõnelevate eestlaste ja inglise keelt emakeelena kõnelevate intensiivistajate kasutuses. Kuna suur osa valimist hõlmas C1–C2-tasemel inglise keele kõnelejaid, järeldub sellest, et edasijõudnud inglise keele kõnelejad kasutavad intensiivistajaid küllaltki sarnaselt inglise emakeelsetele. B1–B2-tasemel inglise keelt kõnelevad eestlased kasutasid aga oluliselt vähem intensiivistajaid kui inglise emakeelsed kõnelejad, seda eriti just tugevate omadussõnadega. Sealjuures aga kasutasid eestlased sõna *very* märgatavalt vähem skalaarsete omadussõnade täiendamiseks, samas kui tugevate omadussõnade puhul gruppide keelekasutus ei erinenud. Enim toetusid eestlased intensiivistamisvalikutes oma sisetundele. Tulemused võivad viidata seostele sellega, kuidas ja mil määral keskhariduses omadussõnade intensiivistamist õpetatakse, mida olekski edaspidi kasulik uurida.

Käesolev töö koosneb kahest põhipeatükist. Esimene peatükk annab ülevaate teemakohasest kirjandusest ja varasematest uurimustest, defineerib põhimõisted ning toob esile selle töö lähtekohad. Teine peatükk kirjeldab põhjalikult uurimuses kasutatud meetodikat ja saadud tulemusi, millele järgneb arutelu.

Märksõnad:

Inglise keel, omadussõnad, intensiivistajad

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