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Old English Intensifiers: A Quantitative Analysis of the Old English Intensifier System

While many studies have employed variationist methods to examine longitudinal changes in the English intensifier system (e.g., Ito & Tagliamonte 2003; Tagliamonte 2008; D'Arcy 2015), to date, no variationist studies have tackled the intensifier system of Old English. Previous studies have been monographic in nature, that is, they have focused on the development of specific intensifiers, such as *swiðe* 'very' (Méndez-Naya 2003), as opposed to their role as active participants within a multidimensional internally and externally constrained system (Peltola 1971; Mitchell 1976; Ingersoll 1978; Méndez-Naya 2003). The present study is the first of its kind to provide a critical view of the Old English intensifier system using variationist methods.

Two research questions were posited. First, using variationist quantitative methods, what is the distribution of amplifier variants in the Old English intensifier system? Second, are any internal or external constraints found operating on this system? To address these questions, the Old English component of the Helsinki Corpus of English Texts (Rissanen et al. 1991), containing four subperiods was used: O1 [-850], O2 [850-950], O3 [950-1050], O4 [1050-1150].

Following modern variationist work (e.g., Ito & Tagliamonte 2003; Tagliamonte 2008; D'Arcy 2015), the variable context was circumscribed to intensifiable adjectives, where negative, comparative, and superlative tokens were not included in the envelope of variation. The presence or absence of a preceding intensifier was coded respectively (Examples in [1]). Both internal (syntactic function, semantic type) and external factors (time, text type, text origin) were included in the analysis, and two mixed effects logistic regression models were run in Rbrul (Johnson 2009).

Results from the distributional analysis indicated that the number one variant was *swiðe* 'very' (57%), followed by *ful* 'very' (11%), and *swa* 'so' (7%). As for the multivariate analysis, the first logistic regression found both internal and external factors to constrain intensifier variability in Old English. Predicative adjectives favored intensification over attributive adjectives, prose texts had higher intensification rates than verse texts, and the intensification rate increased throughout time. The second regression model was run with the use or absence of *swiðe* as the application value. Syntactic position and text type were identified as statistically significant factors, with *swiðe* favored in predicative position, where it occurred more frequently in prose texts than in verse texts.

All in all, the present study shows that both linguistic and external factors conditioned intensifier variability in Old English. Although social factors, such as sex and age, which are known to condition intensifier variability in Modern English (e.g., Ito & Tagliamonte 2003; Tagliamonte 2008) could not be included in the analysis due to the lack of sociolinguistic metadata, other external factors such as register, and text origin were found operating on this system. This study therefore adds to the long tradition of research on English intensifiers, it provides new quantitative insight into its earlier system, while also contributing to modern variationist work on Old English variation and change.

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Examples [1]

    a) *Ða ða þæt folc þæt gehirde, hi wæron **Ø bliðe** gewordene*

        'Then when the people that heard, they were happy become'

        'Then when the people heard that, they were happy' [Not Intensified]

    b) *Hie þa **swa bliþe** on morgenne wæron*

        'They then so happy in morning were'

        'They were then so happy in the morning' [Intensified]

    c) *...ða wæs ic **swiðe bliþe***

        'then was I very happy'

        'Then I was very happy' [Intensified]

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