

megageil, mega geil, and voll mega: Intensification in YouTube comments

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Abstract

This paper analyses intensification in German digitally-mediated communication (DMC) using a corpus of YouTube comments written by young people (the *NottDeuYTSch* corpus). Research on intensification in written language has traditionally focused on two grammatical aspects: syntactic intensification, i.e. the use of particles and other lexical items and morphological intensification, i.e. the use of compounding. Using a wide variety of examples from the corpus, the paper identifies novel ways that have been used for intensification in DMC, and suggests a new taxonomy of classification for future analysis of intensification.

Keywords: intensification, semiotics, computer-mediated communication, youth language, corpus linguistics, pragmatics, interaction

1. Introduction

Digitally-mediated communication (DMC) has often been described as containing a higher concentration and broader variety of “expressive markers” than other written language (Hilte, Vandekerckhove, & Daelemans 2019), and similar has been said of youth language (Tagliamonte 2016), in particular, the use of intensifiers.¹ Intensification has traditionally been defined as a grammatical process referring to the modification (both amplifying or reducing) of the quality of an element in a sentence by another element (an intensifier) (Bolinger 1972; Quirk et al. 1985). For example, the adverb *sehr* (‘very’) modifies an adjective to increase its quality, e.g. *sehr geil* (‘very awesome’), or the prefix *semi* reduces the quality of the adjective to which it is attached, e.g. *semigeil* (‘semi-awesome’). This paper adopts the above definition of intensification with one proviso: the element used to intensify does not need to be a word or part of a word, rather it can be any digital sign or process.

The paper first examines existing approaches to intensification before analysing how young people intensify in DMC, using a corpus of YouTube comments written by young people between 2008 and 2018, the

NottDeuYTSch corpus (Cotgrove 2018), as the basis for the investigation. The examples used in the analysis all come from the corpus. The article also uses the variety of intensification in youth DMC to suggest a potential framework of analysis for the classification of intensifiers according to their grammatical and visual characteristics.

2. Approaches to intensification

Research on intensification has focused on several different thematic areas, such as sociolinguistic aspects, i.e. which intensifiers are used by a particular social group (e.g. Macaulay 2006; Tagliamonte 2008; Reichelt & Durham 2017), or how intensification is used with a particular word class, most popularly adjectives (e.g. Kirschbaum 2002; Claudi 2006; Reichelt & Durham 2017). However, the focus of this paper is on the forms that intensifiers can take, and earlier research on written German identified three means of intensification: the two grammatical forms of intensification: morphological and syntactic intensification (see Kirschbaum 2002), and a stylistic-based means, referred to as expressive intensification (see Aitchison 1994: 19-20).

- (1) [...] das Video ist einfach so urgeil!!!!
[...] the video is simply so utterly awesome!!!!

Morphological intensification is the use of compounding, where the base lexeme is intensified, most frequently with

¹ A list of alternative terms for intensifier can be found in Stratton (2020: 188), such as ‘degree word’, ‘Gradierer’, and ‘Intensitätspartikel’, however, in this article, the term ‘intensifier’ is used.

the pattern **prefix + adjective**, e.g. *urgeil* in Example 1, although many other combinations are valid, e.g. *affengeil* (noun + adjective).

- (2) so so geil wie sau XD
so so awesome as hell XD
- (3) [...] tanzt bei Party Rock aber geil o.o
Wow [...] dances to Party Rock awesomely o.o
- (4) Haha, ja, die Augenbrauen waren etwas strange.
Haha, yes, the eyebrows were somewhat strange.

Syntactic intensification is the use of “various grammatical categories” to modify the quality of a word or phrase. These include adverbs (e.g. *so* in Examples 1 and 2), phrases (e.g. *wie Sau* in Example 2), particles (e.g. *aber* in Example 3), and indefinite pronouns (e.g. *etwas* in Example 4).

- (5) geil geil geil einfach geil
awesome awesome awesome simply awesome

Expressive intensification is the use of self-repetition of lexical items, e.g. *geil* in Example 5 (which also contains syntactic intensification). It is commonly seen as a rhetorical device in poetry and has multiple functions, such as anaphora and epistrophe, such as to create rhythm and movement in the text, or to link ideas, but it can also be used to intensify emotions or feelings (Attridge 1994).

Gutzmann (2011) and Schmidt (2022) argued that lexical choice could also provide an intensifying effect, citing the indexical differences between the use of *dog* and *cur* in the sentence “This dog/cur howled the whole night” - the two are near synonymous, but *cur* has a more negative connotation, which they argue demonstrates intensification. While the indexical aspects of lexical choice can affect the strength or meaning of a message (Silverstein 2003), this does not fit within the definition of intensification used in this paper and as such is not investigated further in youth DMC, as *dog* is replaced entirely, rather than having a quality scaled.

Although mainstream research in the German language focused on morphological and syntactic intensification (Stratton 2020: 186), research in DMC additionally

identified a number of grapheme-based ways of intensification, such as the repetition of individual letters, e.g. *geeeiiiilll*, the use of capital letters (shouting capitals), e.g. *GEIL*, or indeed, a combination of the two, e.g. *GEEEEEEEEEEIL* (Runkehl, Schlobinski, & Siever 1998; Androutopoulos 2000). Despite the long-standing DMC-focused literature on graphemic intensification, it has only recently begun to be legitimised and analysed alongside other forms intensification. Philipp et al. (forthcoming: 2), for example, suggested that graphemic, syntactic and morphological intensification should be incorporated into a more general model, which also would include the repetition of intensifiers, e.g. *sehr sehr cool*. However, this paper shows that intensification in youth DMC in fact goes beyond the model suggested by Philipp et al. (forthcoming), and Section 4 analyses examples from the *NottDeuYTSch* corpus, demonstrating the extent to which features of DMC can be used to convey intensification.

3. Intensification in youth DMC

An analysis of YouTube comments in the *NottDeuYTSch* corpus reveals that intensification in youth DMC contain methods to intensify that have not been previously covered in existing research in the field. These include new ways of intensifying that would be classified within existing categories, as well as ways of intensifying that require an additional category.

- (6) Dass du so oft geklickt wurdest ist doch gar kein Wunder. Du bist einfach geilomatico!!!!
It is no wonder at all that you get so many views.
You are simply awesomesauce!!!!
- (7) einfach nur Geilheit
just simply awesomeness

Example 6 demonstrates morphological intensification through the use of suffixation (*omatico*), and Example 7 also demonstrates intensification through suffixation (*-heit*) as well as derivation, changing the word class from an adjective to a noun. These processes have not been considered as within the existing definition of morphological intensification. However, in youth DMC, such constructions are relatively common and productive, for example we find *geilo*, *geili*, and *geilonachstman* in

the *NottDeuYTSch* corpus (not including graphemic variations, e.g. *geilooo*). I would argue that the definition of morphological intensification be expanded to accommodate all kinds of affixation and derivation.

- (8) Ich finds mega geil xDDDD
I find it mega awesome xDDDD
- (9) ich finde es megageil! :D
I find it mega-awesome! :D

While, syntactic intensification in the *NottDeuYTSch* corpus does not demonstrate the need for an expansion of the definition, it is important to note that there can be a blurring of the distinction between syntactic and morphological intensification in DMC due to the orthographic creativity afforded to the medium, as demonstrated in Examples 8 and 9. Here *mega* functions as both a morphological and syntactical intensifier but is not clear what the differences are, if any, between the two, or if the commenter has accidentally used or forgotten a space between *mega* and *geil*. While there might be phonological differences, if the comments were spoken aloud (see Cosentino 2017), YouTube comments are (at time of writing), a written medium.

- (10) hater is the BeSt!!!
- (11) Das Video is M Ü L L
The video is R U B B I S H
- (12) DIGGA.....DU HAST DIE PUNCLINES
GEFLOWT!!!!!!!!!!!! DAS WAR —>FRESH<—
BRO.....YOU FLOWED THE
PUNCLINES!!!!!!!!!!!! THAT WAS —
>FRESH<—

The range of ways in which youth DMC in YouTube comments uses graphemic intensification has also expanded. While shouting capitals and graphemic repetition still feature heavily, occurring over 54,000 and 56,000 times per million comments, other methods such as alternating letter case (as in Example 10), creative use of spacing (as in Example 11), and deictic devices (e.g. the arrows in Example 12) demonstrate a development in how intensification is communicated. This article argues for an expansion of the definition of graphemic intensification to include any manipulation of

the visual space occupied by the word or phrase through the use of characters [see @cotgrove2022: 260-266].

- (13) 12:09 Dieser Blick, *unbezahlbar*
12:09 This look, *priceless*
- (14) **LEGENDÄR...**
LEGENDARY ...

There is also an additional category of intensification that has not been covered by previous research in the field, namely typographical intensification, i.e. altering the font selection, size, weight, style, and general visual design of a word or phrase so that it differs from the surrounding text. This operates similarly to graphemic intensification, as it alters the “spatio-visual demarcation” of the text (Wyss & Hug 2016), and influences the interpretation of the message, in this case intensifying the selected word or phrase. While YouTube only offers basic alterations to the text, such as italic or bold, as in Examples 13 and 14 respectively, this is likely to change as bandwidth, processing power, and multimodal communication increase, as such, we can expect typographical intensification to become more commonplace over the next few years.

- (15) DANKE [...] SOOOOO
GEEIIIILLLLLL!!!!!!!!!!!!
THANKS [...] SOOOOO
AWWEEESSOOOMMMMEEE!!!!!!!!!!!!
- (16) Einhornpupsiglitzerstickerdonutgeiles 🍷 video
[...]
Unicorn-fart-glitter-sticker-donut- awesome 🍷
video [...]

Within each of the four categories of intensification, the intensifiers themselves can be intensified, which I refer to as recursive intensification, e.g. *SOOOOO GEEIIIILLLLLL* (Example 15). Furthermore, intensifiers can be stacked (see Scheffler, Richter, & Van Hout 2023), i.e. multiple intensifiers of the same kind can be used in series, e.g. *Einhornpupsiglitzerstickerdonutgeil* (Example 16), or indeed the same intensifier can be repeated, a subset of stacking, e.g. *so so geil* (Example 2).

Graphicons (emoji, emoticons, kaomoji, emotes and the like) have not been classified as a kind of intensification,

as ubiquitous as they are within DMC. While graphicons can undoubtedly influence the reception and tone of a message, I would argue that they have a different function, i.e. they do not directly intensify a word or phrase but provide illocutionary force (or other metacommunicative function) to the message (Cotgrove 2022: 242-244).

4. Conclusion and Future Research

Through the examination of YouTube comments in the *NottDeuYTSch* corpus, this paper has demonstrated the wide variety of ways in which young people intensify in DMC. The innovation and creativity in the examples, identified through a corpus-based approach, have shown the need to expand the current understanding of what digital features can be used to intensify and how they can be categorised. The paper has shown that the definitions of existing categories of intensification need to be expanded, i.e. morphological, syntactic, and graphemic, and that it is necessary to introduce a new category of intensification, typographical, that will help researchers more fully understand the variety of ways in which it is possible to intensify in DMC.

The paper also serves as the basis for the potential development of a new general framework or taxonomy for intensification, hopefully serving as a base for future research in the field. This could include the incorporation of phonological intensification, i.e. the use of intonation or emphasis, to help analyse multimodal DMC or phonological differences between syntactic and morphological intensification, or examine the differences in intensity between different types and combinations of intensification. Such a framework could also help analyse whether typographical and graphemic means of intensifying are gradually replacing morphological and syntactical ways of intensifying.

5. References

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