

# English Intensifiers as Devices of Emotional Enhancement

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## Abstract

Intensifiers are adverbials or adverbial phrases that are used to enhance the meanings of certain constructions. The study aims to investigate English intensifiers and their functions as devices of emotional enhancement. Moreover; they identify students with this grammatical item. The significance of the research is that intensifiers function as linguistic devices to maximize the meaning or, in a certain sense, intensify the emotional tone of words and expressions. Some commonly used intensifiers include *very, too, at all, absolutely, extremely, really, wh-words* or *expressions*, etc. e.g. *what on earth* are you doing? In terms of their semantic classes, intensifiers can be divided into *Amplifiers, Emphasizers* and *Downtoners*. The problem of this research is that the students find it difficult to comprehend the functions of English intensifiers. In terms of the method used in this research, the researcher tries to give a detailed analysis of the most common English intensifiers. An exercise relevant to the topic is adopted to enhance the research. The analysis of the results reveals that the third-year Iraqi college students succeed in operating intensifiers in a way that shows their ability to handle this grammatical item.

**Keywords:** English intensifiers, emotional enhancement, *emphasizers, amplifiers, downtoners, maximizers, boosters, compromizers, diminishers.*

## مكتشفات اللغة الإنجليزية بوصفها وسيلة للتعزيز العاطفي

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### الملخص

المكتشفات هي عبارات ظرفية أو عبارات ظرفية تُستخدم لتعزيز معاني بعض التركيبات. تهدف الدراسة للتعرف على مكتشفات اللغة الإنجليزية ووظائفها كوسيلة للتعزيز العاطفي ، بالإضافة إلى تعرف الطلاب لهذه المسألة النحوية. تكمن أهمية البحث في أن المكتشفات تعمل كوسائل لغوية لتعظيم المعنى أو ، بمعنى معين ، تكثيف النغمة العاطفية للكلمات والتعبيرات . تتضمن بعض المكتشفات شائعة الاستخدام كلمات أو تعابير مثل *شديدة جدًا ، جدًا ، على الإطلاق ، تمامًا ، حقًا ، كلمات استفهامية أو تعابير ، إلخ. مثلًا : ماذا تفعل بحق الأرض؟. ومن حيث الفئات الدلالية التي تخص هذه المكتشفات ، فيمكن تقسيم المكتشفات إلى مؤكدات ومضخمتات ومخفضات. فيما يخص مشكلة هذا البحث فإن الطلاب يجدون صعوبة في فهم وظائف مكتشفات اللغة الإنجليزية. يحاول الباحث تقديم تحليل مفصل لأكثر مكتشفات اللغة الإنجليزية شيوعًا في طريقته المستخدمة في هذا البحث. تم اعتماد تمرين ذي صلة بالموضوع لتعزيز البحث. يكشف تحليل النتائج أن الطلاب العراقيين في السنة الثالثة في الكلية ينجحون في استخدام المكتشفات بطريقة تظهر قدرتهم على التعامل مع هذه المسألة النحوية.*

الكلمات المفتاحية : مكتشفات اللغة الإنجليزية ، التعزيز العاطفي ، المؤكدات ، المضخمتات ، المخفضات ، المعززات ، المساومات ، المقلدات.

## 1. Introduction

Being a tool of communication, language is used to communicate feelings, thoughts and emotions. In doing so, language has certain linguistic elements which are used as devices to enhance emotional expressions. These devices are linguistically termed as degree words or intensifiers. Such words are typically adverbials like *very*, *scarcely*, *quite*, *extremely*, *intensely*, *absolutely*, etc. They mainly function as maximizers of meaning. According to Ito and Tagliamonte (2003 :258) intensifiers are “adverbs that maximize or boost meaning.”

English intensifiers have been given different names by different linguists. Bolinger (1972:18) referred to English Intensifiers as degree adverbs. Furthermore, Bolinger divided them into *boosters*, such as '*terribly*', compromisers like '*fairly*', *diminishers* like '*little*' and *minimizers* like '*a bit*'. Furthermore, Quirk et al. (1985: 590-591) used the term intensifiers to describe English degree words. Besides, the term '*amplifiers*' is used to describe what Bolinger (1972:17) called '*boosters*' and classified them into *maximizers* like '*absolutely*' and '*totally*' and *boosters* like '*intensely*' and '*deeply*'. He referred to diminishers as '*downtoners*' which include approximators like '*almost*' and '*practically*', compromisers like '*rather*', diminishers like '*slightly*' and minimizers like '*scarcely*'. Biber et al. (1999:554-555) used the terms degree adverbs and degree adjuncts to define English intensifiers. They classified them into amplifiers/intensifiers like '*more*', '*very*', '*extremely*', etc. and diminishers/downtoners like '*less*', '*slight*', '*quite*', etc. Likewise, Huddleston and Pullum (2002 :365-366) used the terms degree adverbs and degree adjuncts. Moreover, they classified English intensifiers into maximals like '*absolutely*', '*entirely*', '*perfectly*', etc., multals like '*badly*', '*immensely*', '*strongly*', etc., moderates like '*rather*', '*partially*', '*moderately*', etc., paucals like '*slightly*', '*a little*', '*abit*', etc., minimals like '*scarcely*', '*barely*', '*hardly*', etc., approximators like '*nearly*', '*kind of*', '*sort of*', etc , and entities like '*more*', '*less*', '*enough*', etc.

## 2. Aims of the study

- 1- To investigate English intensifiers and their function as devices of emotional enhancement.
- 2 - To identify students with this grammatical item as far as the third year students are concerned.

## 3. Questions of the Study

- 1 Do English Intensifiers function as emotional enhancement devices?
- 2- What are the semantic functions of English intensifiers?

## 4. Hypotheses

It is hypothesised that:

- 1- English intensifiers function as devices of emotional enhancement.
- 2- There are different semantic functions of English intensifiers

## 5. Methodology

The researcher follows the inductive method due to its appropriateness for this type of research. Starting with making general and specific observations on the use of

English intensifiers as devices of emotional enhancement, the researcher moves further to give a detailed analysis of the most common English intensifiers, the semantic classification of English intensifiers and the common use of certain intensifiers as devices to enhance the emotional expression. Since the research is concerned with a linguistic phenomenon, represented in the use of English intensifiers as devices of emotional enhancement, its data are a set of the most common English intensifiers which are employed as examples to answer the research questions and prove the research hypotheses. Moreover, I will conduct an exercise relevant to my subject.

## **6. Scope of the Study**

This study is delimited to examining the use of English intensifiers as devices to enhance the emotional expression. It is an attempt to explore the most common English intensifiers. Moreover, it sheds light on the semantic classification of English intensifiers.

## **7. Significance of the Study**

English language is rich with intensifiers. Such intensifiers act as linguistic devices that maximize the meaning, or in a sense, add emotional tone to words and expressions. Moreover, English intensifiers have different semantic functions. By highlighting the most common English intensifiers, their semantic classification and the role they play as devices of emotional enhancement, this study generates an understanding of English intensifiers and their semantic functions. It provides information for other researchers, as well as learners of English, about the emotional function of English intensifiers.

## **8. Background and Problem Statement**

English intensifiers, which are known as degree words, represent an important aspect of expression. Their role is basically that they add something to the meaning, or in a sense, enhance the meaning of the word they modify. They mainly “work as modifiers of certain adjectives or adverbs. Moreover, they reflect the level or the degree to which the quality is present” (Méndez-Naya, 2003: 372). In this connection, Romero (2012: 5), while discussing English intensifiers, rightly pointed out that “The word 'degree' is often applied in relation to this linguistic phenomenon...”. It should be noted that adjectives “are considered as the most commonly intensified parts of speech” (Bäcklund 1973: 279).

Truly, the word intensify is very close to the word emphasize. In this context, intensifiers are emphasizees of meaning and their function is “to strengthen or emphasize other words” (Stardy, 2019: 160). Moreover, intensifiers work as maximizers of emotions in the sense that they enhance the emotional expression of the word they modify. In this respect, intensifiers maximize the degree of emotional expression. They typically “raise degrees of emotivity and evaluation”(Techacharoenrungrueang, 2019). This point implies a sense that emotional maximization is the intensifiers’ primary function, “intensifiers reflect a speaker’s feeling, or in a sense, his or her attitude towards someone or something”

(Jing-Schmidt, 2005: 219; Caffi& Janney, 1994: 325-373; Labov, 1984:43; Techacharoenrungrueang, 2019: 38).

Despite the fact that researches on English intensifiers started in the twentieth century, the function and semantic classification of English intensifiers is still a significant research field due to the complexity of using such words. Moreover, the use of intensifiers as devices of emotional enhancement, as far as the researcher is concerned, is a new topic in the sense that the existing bulk of knowledge on English intensifiers has not given importance to the emotional function of intensifiers. Rather, it has embodied a general analysis of the function of such words, particularly their function as maximizers of meaning. Therefore, it needs further investigation if it were to gain a full understanding of their function, “a full conception of how degree modifiers work as well as develop would ultimately require a broad investigation, focusing on certain structural as well as functional perspectives and considerations including processing and sociolinguistic selection” (Buchstaller & Traugott, 2006: 345-70).

### **9. Intensifiers as semantically functioning items**

English intensifiers are typically adverbs (Méndez-Naya 2008: 213-219). All English adverbs that reflect the degree, or in a sense, the exact level of certain quality are referred to, for the sake of argument, as intensifiers. Adverbs like *very*, *too*, *rather*, *highly*, *at all*, *absolutely*, *extremely*, *really*, etc., are good examples of English adverbs that semantically function as intensifiers. Referring to the general rule that defines intensifiers as degree adverbs, one can rightly argue that adjectives can, in many cases, fulfill the same function. That is, there are many English adjectives that semantically function as intensifiers. These include the adjectives *utter*, *sheer*, *huge*...etc. More examples of intensifying adverbs and intensifying adjectives are given in Table (1) below. Semantically, it denotes strengthening or emphasizing the quality or the meaning of the words or expressions which they modify. Cognitive theorists prefer to use the words “intensification as well as intensifiers instead of degree modification or degree modifier...” (Cacchiani: 2017). The process of intensification is generally known in linguistics as “a process that ultimately upwards or downwards a particular force of a specific utterance” (Quirk et 1985: 590; Bolinger 1972:17).

Therefore, the linguistic definition of intensification embodies the concept of enhancement which, in the context of the present research, denotes a sense of putting emotions on scale. In this respect, intensification is mainly used to enhance emotional expressions and show the exact degrees of our emotions.

### **10. English Intensifiers and Emotional Enhancement**

Apart from being devices of meaning maximization, many English intensifiers function as devices of emotional enhancement. That is, they are used to enhance the expression of human feelings and emotions. The use of words like *extremely*, *severe*, *very*, *intensely*, *really*, *absolutely*, etc., increases, or in a sense, emphasizes and intensifies the emotions we attempt to highlight. Therefore, such

intensifiers enhance the power of emotional expressions and enable us to communicate the exact degree of our emotions.

**Table (1): Examples of intensifying adverbs and intensifying adjectives**

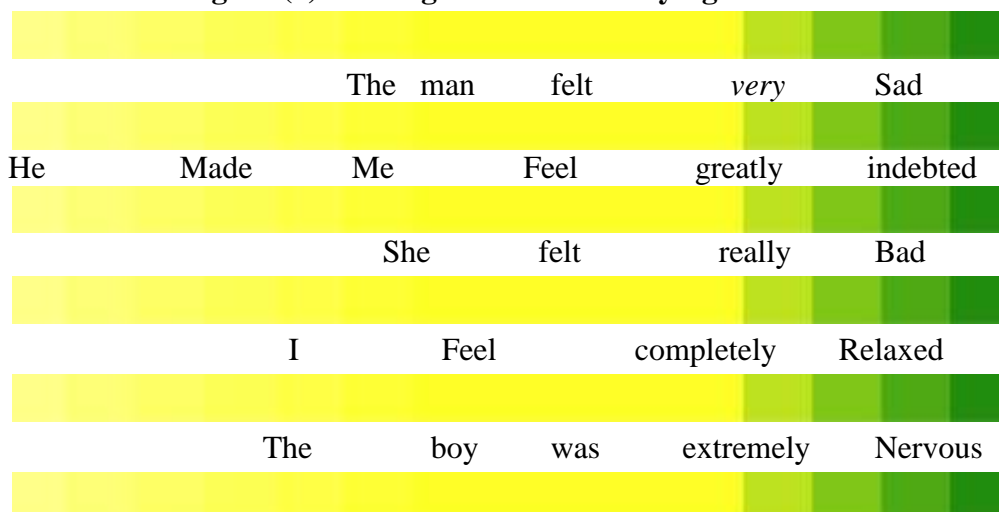
Intensifying Adverbs	Intensifying Adjectives
Very	Utter
Greatly	Severe
Really	Intense
Completely	Awful
Extremely	Deep
Absolutely	Great
Too	Firm
Highly	Terrible

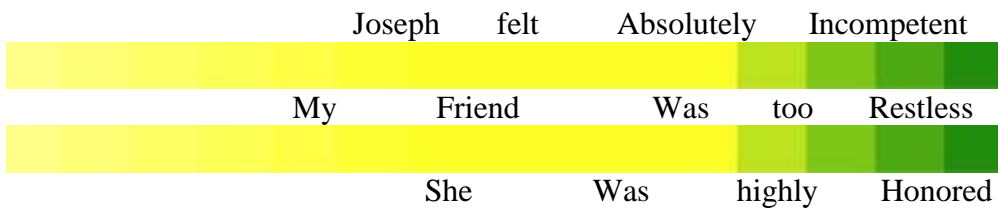
The above table contains a number of the most frequent intensifying adverbs and intensifying adjectives in English. The adverb *very* can be used to intensify the feeling of sadness in the sentence ‘The man felt *very* sad’. Moreover, the adverb *greatly* is used to intensify the feeling of indebtedness in the sentence ‘I am greatly *indebted* to you’. Likewise, the adverbs *really*, *completely*, *extremely*, *absolutely*, *too* and *highly* are used to intensify the adjectives they modify in the following sentences:

- She felt *really* bad.
- I feel *completely* relaxed.
- The boy was *extremely* nervous.
- Joseph felt *absolutely* incompetent.
- My friend was *too* restless.
- She was *highly* honored

The above sentences embody a number of the most frequent intensifying adverbs in English. They can be scaled as in Figure (1) below.

**Figure (1): Scaling of some intensifying adverbs**





- Source: Designed by the researcher.

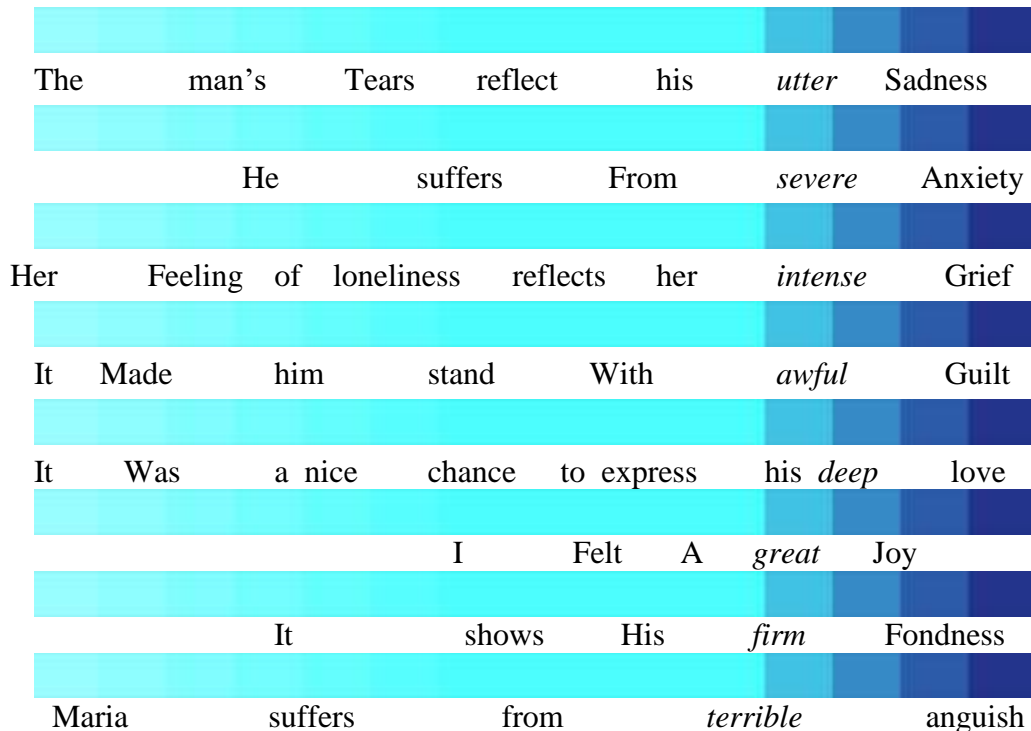
- Note: The intensity of color to the right indicates the intensity of emotion.

On the other hand, the adjective *utter* can be used to intensify the feeling of sadness in the sentence ‘The man’s tears reflect his *utter* sadness’. Moreover, the word *severe* is used to intensify the feeling of anxiety in the sentence ‘He suffers from *severe* anxiety’. Likewise, the words *intense*, *awful*, *deep*, *great*, *firm* and *terrible* are used to intensify the adjectives they modify in the following sentences:

- Her feeling of loneliness reflects her *intense* grief.
- It made him stand with *awful* guilt.
- It was a nice chance to express his *deep* love.
- I felt a *great* joy.
- It shows his *firm* fondness.
- Maria suffers from *terrible* anguish.

The above sentences embody a number of the most frequent intensifying adjectives in English. They can be scaled as in Figure (2) below.

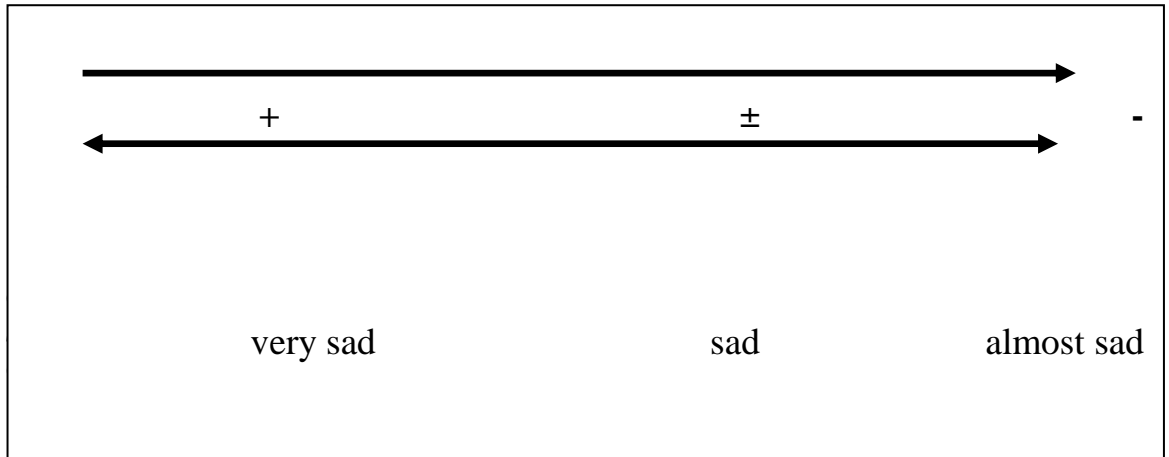
**Figure (2) Scaling of some intensifying adjectives**



- Source: Designed by the researcher.
- Note: The intensity of color to the right indicates the intensity of emotion.

In English, lexemes that are used to express emotions can be downgraded or upgraded by using certain intensifiers. The following figure gives a nice example of using intensifiers to enhance the emotional expression.

**Figure (3): An example of intensification by adverbial subjuncts**



In order to clarify the intensification process of emotions, the researcher has designed the following scale on the basis of the writings of Quirk et al. (1985).

**Figure (4): An intensification scale of the adjective *happy* following the writings of Quirk et al. (1985)**

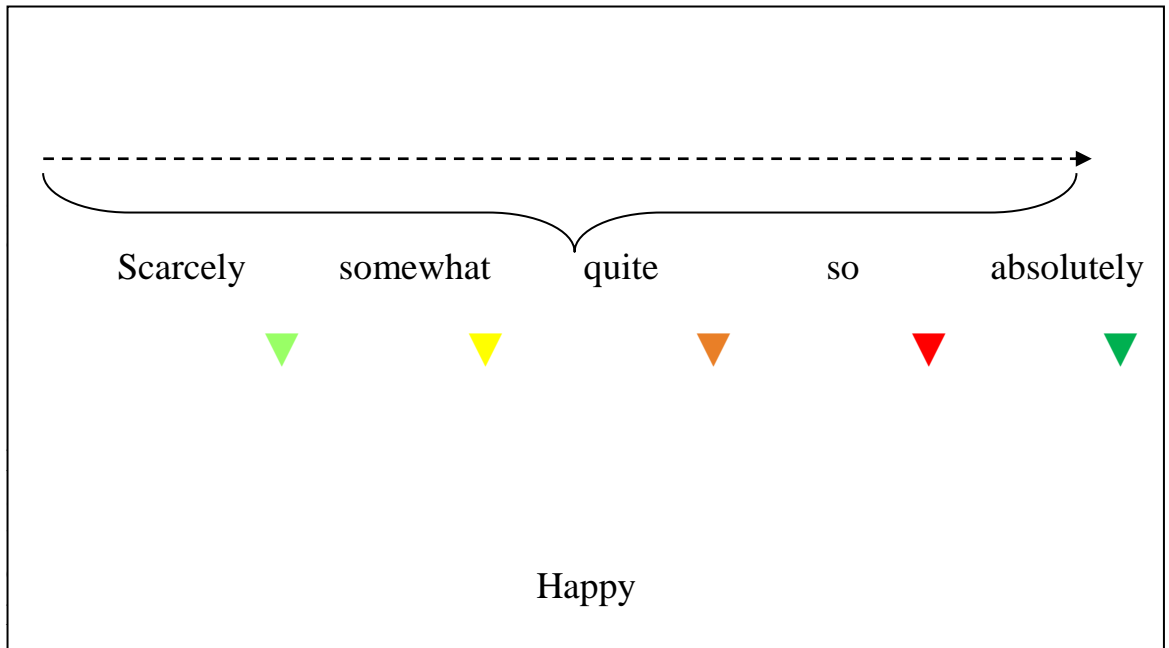
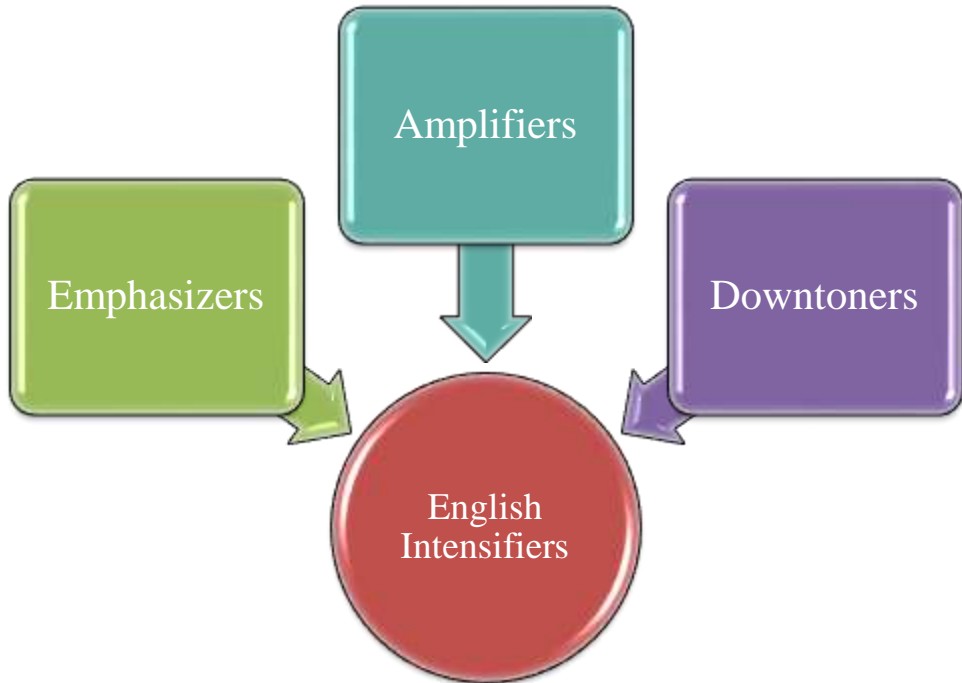


Figure (5): Semantic Classification of English Intensifiers



-Source: Designed by the researcher, following Quirk et al., (1973).

**11.1. Amplifiers**

Amplifiers are adverbs like *very, so, too, really, absolutely*, etc. They are frequently used in spoken and written English. The word *amplifier* is derived from the verb *amplify* that means 'to make something stronger'. In this respect, amplifiers strengthen the meaning of the word they modify, e.g. 'I felt very sad'. Here, the feeling of sadness is intensified by the adverb *very*.

It should be noted that amplifiers are the most frequent English intensifiers. The following table, which has been adapted from (Biber et al., 1999: 564-69), supports this argument.

**Table (2): Frequency of amplifiers in BrE and AmE**

	<i>BrE Conversation</i> (~ 3.9 million words)	<i>AmE Conversation</i> (~ 2.5 million words)
<i>very</i>	.....	.....
<i>so</i>	.....	.....
<i>really</i>	.....	.....
<i>too</i>	.....	.....
<i>real</i>	•	.....
<i>completely</i>	•	•
<i>absolutely</i>	••	•
<i>totally</i>	•	••
<i>damn</i>	•	•
<i>bloody</i>	••	



something. We say, for instance, ‘The film was *really* interesting’, ‘The car was very cheap *indeed*’ and ‘It is *just* great’.

### 11.3. Downtoners

Downtoners are adverbs like *less*, *slight*, *quite*, etc. They are frequently used to degrade certain quality, meaning or emotion. The word downtoner is derived from the verb *downtone* which means to degrade the quality of something or the intensity of some emotion. We say, for instance, ‘It is *less* important’, ‘Her face reflected a sense of *slight* joy’ and ‘She was *quite* happy’.

### Practical Procedure

A specimen of 50 third year students at English Department of Al-Mansour University College who are given an exercise containing ten intensifiers to fill in the gaps. Ten sentences are given to be filled, each with the right intensifier. I have dealt with one exercise taken from a reliable source to show through my linguistic analysis what finally supports my conclusion. The selected sentences are from an exercise, at page 70, in Close, R.A. 1974: *A University Grammar of English: Workbook*.

The exercise to be done is as follows:

Use one of the following intensifiers to fill the gaps below:

actually	exceedingly
fully	entirely
extremely	absolutely
deeply	violently
completely	definitely

- 1- It was really \_\_\_\_\_ kind of you to help me.
- 2- I am \_\_\_\_\_ grateful to you.
- 3- Did you \_\_\_\_\_ hear him threaten the girl?
- 4- I am \_\_\_\_\_ amazed to hear you say that.
- 5- We are all \_\_\_\_\_ moved by his story.
- 6- The results of the elections is now \_\_\_\_\_ confirmed.
- 7- The situation has \_\_\_\_\_ changed.
- 8- We are not \_\_\_\_\_ satisfied with the result.
- 9- We \_\_\_\_\_ agree with your proposal.
- 10- All the guests were \_\_\_\_\_ ill that night.

The correct response should be as follows:

- |               |              |
|---------------|--------------|
| 1-extremely   | 6-definitely |
| 2-exceedingly | 7-completely |
| 3-actually    | 8- entirely  |
| 4-absolutely  | 9-fully      |
| 5-deeply      | 10-violently |

## Analysis of the Results

It is quite clear that forty one students have fully succeeded in responding successfully to all the items of the test. Five students have successfully responded to seven sentences out of ten. Four of the specimens have responded to only three sentences of the given test. Accordingly, they have failed. In terms of percentage, the results are as follows:

$$41/50 * 100 = 82\%$$

$$5/50 * 100 = 10\%$$

$$4/50 * 100 = 8\%$$

This only means that 82% of the specimen have fully and successfully responded to the items of the test. 10% of the specimen have moderately passed the test. 8% of the specimen have failed.

## Conclusion

To recapture things, it has been shown that intensifiers are adverbs or adverbial phrases that are used to strengthen the meaning of other expressions and also to show emphasis. Thus, besides words that stand as intensifiers, we also have phrases that operate as intensifiers such as *on earth*, *at all*, etc. Through the analysis of the most frequent English intensifiers, it has been obviously noticed that an important aspect of intensification is the enhancement of the emotional expression. Besides, the researcher has observed that English intensifiers help us put our emotions on scales and communicate their exact degrees.

The purpose of this study has been to investigate English intensifiers and their function as devices of emotional enhancement and whether Iraqi students can operate intensifiers successfully. The test provided has practically demonstrated that third-year Iraqi students are not only aware of the syntactic importance of intensifiers but that they can operate them, in a quite satisfactory way.

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