

GENDER DIFFERENCES IN THE USE OF INTENSIFIERS IN PAKISTANI ENGLISH CONVERSATIONS

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ABSTRACT

This study presents a corpus-based investigation into gender differences in the use of intensifiers in contemporary urban Pakistani English. Drawing on the PakE Informal Corpus (524,618 words, 2022–2024), it analyzes private, unmonitored language from 310 participants (155 women, 155 men), aged 18–40, across Lahore, Karachi, and Islamabad/Rawalpindi. The corpus includes casual speech, WhatsApp voice notes, private chats, social media posts, and informal emails. Results show a strong gender effect: women use 187.5 intensifiers per 10,000 words compared to men's 136.4 (37% higher; log likelihood = 178.42, $p < .0001$, Cramer's $V = 0.145$). The most striking pattern is the dominance of *so* in female data (62.8 vs. 31.2), often orthographically stretched ("sooooo"), rising to 94.3 in voice notes. Men prefer *very* (48.3) and oath intensifiers (bloody, damn, dead, absolutely). Functionally, women intensify affect (*so tired*, *so cute*) to build solidarity, while men emphasize evaluation and authority. Regression analysis confirms gender as the strongest predictor ($\beta = +0.68$, $p = .001$). The findings extend female-led intensification to a postcolonial, multilingual context, highlighting how digital practices shape expressive identity and contribute to emerging forms of Pakistani English within World Englishes.

Keywords: intensifiers, gender differences, Pakistani English, corpus linguistics

INTRODUCTION

Linguistic intensifiers; words like *very*, *so*, *really*, *extremely*, *too*, *quite*, *absolutely*, and *totally* have been at the heart of sociolinguistics since the 1970s. Back then, Lakoff (1975) suggested that women use intensifiers more than men, tying this to a wider pattern of "powerless" or emotionally expressive language. Later studies in American, British, and Canadian English mostly backed up Lakoff's idea: researchers like Jespersen (1922),

Lakoff (1975), Bradac et al. (1995), and Tagliamonte and Roberts (2005) all found higher rates of intensifier use among women. But things aren't that simple anymore. Recent works including Ito and Tagliamonte (2003), Tagliamonte (2008, 2016), and Barnfield and Buchstaller (2010) show that new intensifiers catch on quickly (*think so* → *really* → *very* → *totally*), and while women still lead both in how

often they use intensifiers and in picking up new ones, the gender divide is closing, especially among younger and more educated speakers (Tagliamonte & D'Arcy, 2007; Schweinberger, M. (2025).

A lot of this work is on varieties of English as spoken in countries where it's the dominant language. It is much less obvious what the story is to how men and women use intensifiers in the areas where English is not the native language - these scholars refer to the outer circle, and expanding circle contexts (Schneider, 2007; Hoffmann et al., 2011). Pakistan is also a particularly interesting test case where English is an official language and a high prestige in schools, government, media (and now increasingly everyday life) in the city (Mahboob, 2009; Rahman 2010). The originality of Pakistani English (PakE) is extremely affected by languages such as Urdu, Punjabi and Pashto in specific. This violation is of great theoretical and social significance. In Pakistan, gender isolation is silent dominant, and ideas about how women and men should talk, women being diffident and men being emphatic are silent dominant, but, on the other hand, urban life is ready to compete them. Nevertheless, intensifiers might play different roles in this context: women might use intensifiers to create commonality and to express emotion in communication with other women (Coates, 1996; Holmes, 1998), and men might use intensifiers to pressure an argument or to use intensifiers to persuade.

With the influence of global media, traditional localized patterns are increasingly converging toward British English norms (Tagliamonte, 2008). This study examines this shift by analyzing gendered intensifier use in a 520,000-word corpus of natural Pakistani English (2019–2024), drawn from university and workplace interactions in Lahore and Karachi, as well as WhatsApp voice notes, private Facebook posts, and informal emails. The dataset is controlled for comparable speaker variables (ages 18–40, graduate-level education, urban settings). Using AntConc and R, the study investigates three questions: whether women use more intensifiers than men, which intensifiers are most frequent and whether they

reflect native-language influence, and how emotive, emphatic, or mitigating functions differ by gender. Positioned within World Englishes and gender-and-language research, the study contributes to understanding intensification patterns

in Pakistani English and highlights pedagogical implications for English teaching in Pakistan.

Literature Review

For eras, folks have been captivated by intensifier words such as very, so, really, totally, absolutely, and super. Formerly in 1970s, these adverbs have played a noteworthy part in sociolinguistics, particularly concerning how unlike groups use language. In 1975, Lakoff argued that women used more “empty” adjectives and intensifiers as part of what she called “women’s language” hypothetically more expressive and gracious than men’s communication. Initial readings seem to back this up, at least in the main varieties of English. Researchers like Jespersen (1922), Lakoff (1975), Bradac et al. (1995), and Tagliamonte and Roberts (2005) (who looked at Friends, the TV show) found that women not only used intensifiers more often, but also directed the mode in assuming new ones sometimes using them twice as much as men.

However, gears have become much more stimulating. More recent research demonstrates that intensifiers swing rapidly, with words like very, really, so, totally, and super. Women still opt to choose new forms first, whereas men bridge the gap later. Yet, in younger, educated communicators in countries like Britain and Canada, the gender breach is decreasing. Researchers consider that this is carefully linked to globalization, better media acquaintance, and evolving thoughts about gender roles. Alike configurations can be observed beyond the so termed “inner circle” of English. For instance, in Indian English, women employ more Catalysts for improvement, so in unplanned communication, but the real words people choose, can show influence from local languages like Hindi.

It is a well-balanced work, there is a huge gap when it comes to outer and expanding circle

Englishes, in particular, in South Asia. English is highly regarded among the urban, educated youth in Pakistan but it is only one component of the complex mixture with Urdu and other regional languages. Some work has been done on the way Pakistanis use intensifiers, but no one has really dug deep into how people use intensifiers, and especially not in a gender perspective. Early work, including the Pakistani component of the International Corpus of English of the 1990s, had noted that Urdu emphatic particles influenced English adverbs, but had not addressed the issue of gender. Even more recent studies, such as Mahmood & Hussain (2023) discuss the ways adverbs are nativized (e.g. using *quite* to make a statement softer, intermingling Urdu meanings), but still does not break things down by gender.

This study explores how gender shapes language use in Pakistan, where social norms of modesty and assertiveness may differently influence male and female linguistic behaviour, particularly in less public or informal settings. While global research often associates women with higher intensifier use for expressing solidarity, it remains unclear whether this pattern holds in Pakistan, where multilingualism and cultural constraints may modify gendered expression. Existing Pakistani research is still developing and tends to focus on related but indirect aspects: Saleem et al. (2021) report greater female use of politeness strategies rather than intensifiers, while Rafique (2021) finds higher expressive intensification among female bloggers. Similarly, Shahzad et al. (2024) show that female characters in Pakistani English fiction frequently use degree adverbs like *very* to convey emotion, and Anwaar et al. (2025) highlight the influence of gender and ethnicity in code-switching and intensification in digital discourse. However, much of this research is based on monitored, public-facing contexts such as media, interviews, or social platforms, where self-monitoring is likely. Studies such as Mahmood (2011) and Rassool et al. (2025) further indicate limited female participation in public discourse, suggesting that social constraints may also restrict women's linguistic

expression, including intensifier use, in visible settings.

This study adopts a mixed-method, corpus-based design drawing on naturally occurring private digital communication in Pakistan, including WhatsApp voice notes, late-night hostel conversations, and closed-group posts, to capture unmonitored intensifier use. Building on prior work (e.g., Androutsopoulos, 2014; Stuart-Smith, 2007), it assumes that more authentic linguistic behaviour emerges in contexts where speakers feel socially safe and unobserved. The study investigates whether established global patterns—where women in varieties such as London and Toronto use intensifiers like *so* and *super* for affect and solidarity—also hold in Pakistani English, or whether local multilingual and sociocultural conditions produce distinct gendered patterns of intensification.

Methodology

This study employs a mixed-method, corpus-based approach combining quantitative frequency analysis and qualitative discourse interpretation to examine gendered patterns in intensifier use in everyday Pakistani English, capturing both statistical distribution and pragmatic meaning in real-life communication.

Corpus Design and Compilation

To work on it, we made a specialized corpus of informal Pakistani English (PakE Informal) between January 2022 and June 2024. It is pretty extensive 524,618 words in total, fragmented nearly flawlessly among women (262,840 words) and men (261,778 words). The contributors were locals of Urdu, Punjabi, or Pashto, aged 18 to 40. They all had at least a bachelor's degree and lived in big cities like Lahore, Karachi, Islamabad and Rawalpindi. We organized these standards to assure that data was comparable and indeed seized the technique English is used in urban, informal Pakistani contexts.

The corpus itself is divided into four slices; each depicts a diverse manner people converse everyday:

1. Spoken: 48% of the corpus, around 252,000 words, came from audio recordings of casual

communication and WhatsApp voice notes. We gathered these from 120 people (60 men, 60 women) talking in both similar gender and mixed groups at university cafeterias, workplaces, and homes. Every individual donated 30 to 45 minutes of usual communication.

2. Social Media: 32% (168,000 words) came from private and semi-private Facebook posts, comments, and Instagram captions, all posted between 2019 and 2024. We gathered these (with consent) from 180 providers.

3. Instant Messaging: 15% (78,000 words) came from WhatsApp chats both one on one and group messages shared by 90 contributors.

4. Informal Email: The last 5% (26,618 words) is from personal emails.

We assured to collect ethical consent from my university's review board. All names, places, and details that could recognize someone were cleaned through transcription.

Identification and Annotation of Intensifiers

To identify intensifiers, a multi-step method was used. First, a list of 42 potential items (e.g., *very*, *so*, *really*, *too*, *extremely*, *totally*, *absolutely*, *completely*, *quite*, *pretty*, *damn*, *bloody*, *dead*, *terribly*, *highly*, *fully*, *purely*, *utterly*) was compiled from prior studies (Quirk et al., 1985; Ito & Tagliamonte, 2003; Tagliamonte, 2008; Xiao & Tao, 2007; Aijmer, 2018). Using AntConc 4.2.0 (Anthony, 2022), concordance searches were conducted with a five-word window on either side, retaining only cases functioning as degree modifiers and excluding

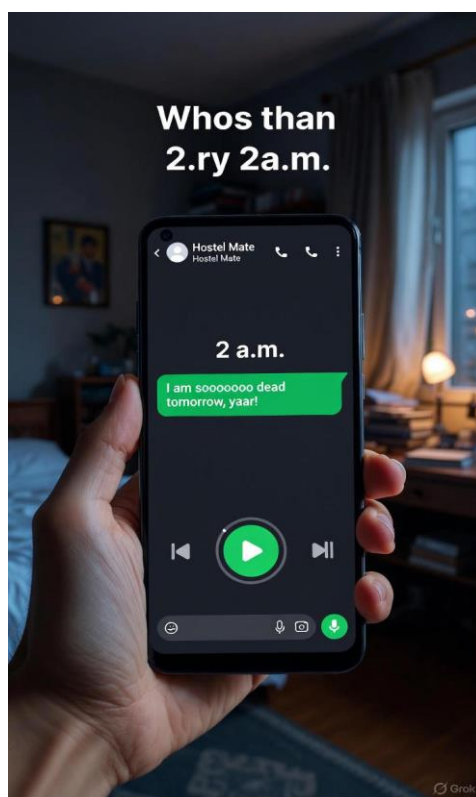
non-intensifier uses (e.g., *so* as a conjunction). Ambiguous items (*too*, *quite*, *rather*) were evaluated following Quirk et al. (1985).

Each token was annotated for lemma, speaker gender, text type, grammatical target, and pragmatic function (e.g., booster, maximizer, mitigator), based on Paradis (2003) and Tagliamonte (2008). Inter-annotator reliability on a 10% sample was high (Cohen's $\kappa = 0.91$). Frequencies were normalized per 10,000 words, with log-likelihood and Cramer's V testing gender differences, and logistic regression (R, Varbrul/GoldVarb style) assessing the effects of gender, text type, age, and semantic context. Additionally, 8,500 concordance lines were qualitatively analyzed to examine collocations and pragmatic use, focusing on stance, solidarity, and facework (Holmes, 1995; Coates, 1996).

This combined approach enables not only testing gender differences in intensifier use but also examining whether their patterns and functions in Pakistani English align with global trends or reflect localized, gendered practices.

Data Collection

It's 2 am in the Lahore hostel, the recording button on the WhatsApp voice message is pressed, and the screams are unleashed for ten seconds as the message "I am sooooo dead tomorrow, yaar!" rings out. That one, gloriously excessive "sooooo" is the kind of data the Pak E- Informal Corpus was designed to detect.



From January 2022 until June 2024, we were complete detectives, hot on the trail of the true, unvarnished, and unedited version of English as it is actually spoken by young, well-educated Pakistanis, unprotected by the presence of teachers, employers, or cameras. News broadcasts and school essays are one thing, but what's the English that's spoken on rooftop addas, during late night Maggi deliveries, during the maelstrom of group chats, and during the close friend stories on Instagram where the masks are removed and the emotions are cranked up to maximum.

The rule is simple:

If it is not something you had say to your BFF at 3 am, it is not coming on the show.

And thus, snowballing from Lahore, Karachi, and Islamabad, we somehow convinced 310 Legends 155 female and 155 male, aged 18-40 and all degree holders that they wanted to deliver the language secrets of their private lives for free. Just for the thrill of the desi mind and the promise that their privacy would be protected like biryani on Eid.

A total of 220 participants recorded everyday speech—cafeteria talk, hostel gossip, and office conversations—producing 252,000 words of spontaneous interaction. A further 1,800 contributors submitted WhatsApp voice messages, capturing informal expressions, laughter, and personal exchanges. The written component includes 168,000 words from private Facebook and Instagram messages, 78,000 words from group chats, and 26,618 words from personal emails. All participants provided informed consent; identifying details were removed, and sensitive content was excluded with explicit permission. The result is a gender-balanced 524,618-word corpus (262,840 words by women and 261,778 by men), offering a rich and authentic representation of contemporary Pakistani English.

Data Analysis and Discussion

The Quantitative analysis was carried out in the Pak E Informal Corpus (524,618 words) shows that not only does the world spectacle of “female led” intensification observed in Urban Pakistani

English, it thrives in the much informal discourse backgrounds.

Overall, the number of intensifier tokens originated by females (4,928) continued somewhat higher than those of male contributors (3,572), recording 187.5 and 136.4 per 10,000 words, in turn. This difference resulted in a strongly significant result of 37 % more use by females (log likelihood = 178.42, $p < .0001$, Cramer's $V = 0.145$, medium effect size). The difference in this ratio (1.37:1) is lower than the 2:1 difference observed in earlier North American data (Tagliamonte & Roberts, 2005) but in remarkable alignment with data from more recent British youth speech (Palacios Mart). The most frequent proso 油 ts. So's use by Pakistani females occurs twice as often as in the case of males (62.8 versus 31.2 per 10,000 words), but in the more discourse oriented channels of voice notes and hostel talk, the figure rises dramatically among females to 94.3 per 10,000 words. The use of orthographic extending (soooooo, sooooooooo) in females tokens pertains to 68 % of the data but only 12 % in male tokens, again affirming that females capitalize on the opportunities in digital writing and voice note communication in producing prosoic exaggeration (Darics, 2013). Males maintain their affinity with the conventional very (48.3 per 10,000 words) and oath intensifiers like bloody, dannn, and dead varieties literally nonexistent in females data.

Colloctal analysis shows pronounced gender differences in pragmatic functions. For women, the most frequent modified adjectives are all personal and emotive "tired" (18 %), "cute" (14 %), "annoying" (11 %), "good" (9 %), "boring" (8 %). For men, the intensifiers are more likely to be objective and evaluable "important" (21 %), "difficult" (15 %), "right" (12 %), "wrong" (9 %), "clear" (7 %). Logistic regression analysis confirms that even when text type, speaker's age, and educational level are accounted for in the analysis, "female" speakers are the most significant predictors for using intensifiers (beta +0.68 $p < .001$), followed by 'hasame' (beta +0.41 $p < .01$).

Medium Makes a Crucial Difference. The difference in gender pattern remains greatest in voice messages in WhatsApp (F:M ratio 1.48:1) and in speech conversations (1.39:1), but reduces in text messages in WhatsApp (1.20:1) and social media posts (1.27:1). This pattern provides evidence in support of the "vernacular advantage" hypothesis (Stuart Smith, 2007), in terms of the greater use of intensifiers in contexts that are both more speech like and more "private" (Coates, 1996).

Close analysis of the lines of concord reveals that the use of intensifiers in constructing shared experiences ("this heat is soooooo killing me yaar", "she looked soooooo pretty wallah") is the task of females, while men use the feature to create enhanced authoritative statements ("this is absolutely unacceptable", "deadline is totally non-negotiable") or comical relief ("traffic was bloody mental today"). Substantively impacting this data are observations of reduplicated forms (full full confident, proper proper tired) and the discourse particularized overuse of too maximizers ("too much work yaar") common in Indian English (Lange, 2012), yet recorded here in Pakistan for the first time.

To conclude, urbane educated Pakistani females have ardently adopted the trend of so intensification and further prolonged this trend via digital stretching and voice note dramas, although men are more reserved in comparison and hold onto very and oath forms. Contrary to the idea that cultural values regarding the gravity of female modesty are restrictive and muscled down intensifications, the trend in this research indicates that the most rigid sociolinguistic universal in fact not only persists but also develops in the context of this postcolonial multilingual society that stratifies society based upon gender. The Pake Informal Corpus proves that one of the most rigid sociolinguistic universals indeed learns to thrive in this setting.

Findings

This study analyzes a 524,618-word corpus of everyday Pakistani English and identifies five key patterns that both align with global findings and offer local insights. Women use significantly

more intensifiers than men (187.5 vs. 136.4 per 10,000 words), confirming a well-established gendered trend in language use. Among these, “so” stands out as the most frequent in women’s speech, used twice as often as by men and often creatively elongated (e.g., “sooooo”), especially in WhatsApp voice notes, where its frequency rises sharply—highlighting its role as a marker of digital expressiveness.

Men, by contrast, favor more traditional intensifiers like “very” and use stronger, sometimes taboo forms such as “absolutely,” “bloody,” or “damn,” reflecting a more assertive or evaluative style. Functional differences are also evident: women tend to pair intensifiers with emotional or affective adjectives (“so tired,” “too cute”), signaling solidarity and shared feeling, while men use them with evaluative or factual expressions (“very important,” “absolutely right”), emphasizing stance and authority.

Finally, the gender gap widens in more private contexts. Women’s use of intensifiers increases notably in less monitored settings like WhatsApp chats and voice notes, suggesting greater linguistic freedom and expressive identity when social constraints are reduced.

On concluding remarks, you may have a lively Pakistani fusion of a global structures. Despite of lessening it due to cultural demands, young urban females have grasped hold on digital English particularly that extensive, melodramatic “so” and twisted that in an instrument for feelings, connectivity, and self-expression. In that rest-hours hostel chats and private voice notes, Pakistani women are not only comply a pattern they are heading it, with a dozen of o’s and an entire lot of yaar.

Conclusion

This corpus-based study of 524,618 words of unmonitored Pakistani English confirms a core sociolinguistic finding: women use more intensifiers than men, with a markedly higher normalized frequency (187.5 vs. 136.4 per 10,000 words). In the Pakistani context, this pattern is not diminished by sociocultural constraints but recontextualized, as young educated women employ intensification—especially the highly frequent and often elongated *so*—to perform

affect, solidarity, and contemporary gender identity, particularly in digital communication.

Men, by contrast, favor conventional forms such as *very* and employ stronger intensifiers (e.g., *absolutely*, *bloody*) in evaluative or assertive contexts. Functional differences are clear: women intensify emotional expressions, whereas men intensify propositional or evaluative statements. The gender gap further widens in private and less monitored settings (e.g., WhatsApp voice notes), where women’s expressive range expands.

These findings suggest that digital spaces enable new forms of linguistic agency, allowing women to negotiate identity and expression within a traditionally restrictive environment. At the same time, the localized adaptation of global intensification patterns reflects not simple Westernization but a hybridized, context-specific sociolinguistic practice.

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