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PROBING THE SOCIAL MEANING OF ENGLISH ADJECTIVE INTENSIFIERS AS A CLASS LAB PROJECT

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Adjective intensification, as exemplified in (1)–(4), is a richly variable and relatively fast-changing aspect of the English language.

1. That homework assignment was REALLY difficult.
2. I had some REAL tasty crab cakes last night.
3. You did a SUPER nice job painting the house.
4. The game I've been playing is VERY addicting.

Extensive research over the past several decades has been devoted to uncovering patterns of variation and change in the intensifier system in speech and writing (e.g., Ito and Tagliamonte 2003; Tagliamonte and Roberts 2005; Macauley 2006; Tagliamonte 2008; Barnfield and Buchstaller 2010; D'Arcy 2015; Wagner 2017). For our purposes, adjective intensification presents an exciting arena for undergraduate students to empirically study language variation and change.

Thanks in particular to a series of studies published by Sali Tagliamonte and colleagues (e.g., Ito and Tagliamonte 2003; Tagliamonte and Roberts 2005; Tagliamonte 2008), rich sociolinguistic descriptions of adjective intensifier variation and change are available. These studies outline community patterns of competition among intensifiers, especially *very, pretty, real, really,* and *so,* across genders and age groups. They also identify a pattern described as "recycling," where forms that have been around for centuries (such as *really*) can relatively suddenly rise in use over apparent time. Tagliamonte and Roberts's (2005) study of intensification in the popular television series *Friends* (1994–2004) provides an accessible and fun introduction to intensifier patterns for students (especially now that the popularity of *Friends,* now in syndication, appears to have recycled among the college aged). The research literature on adjective intensification presents an accessible introduction to a range of interesting questions relevant for classroom discussions about sociolinguistic patterns, the study of variation and change, corpus and historical linguistics; for example, what factors contribute to a lexical item's grammaticalization as an adjective intensifier? What are the social and linguistic pathways through which a particular lexical item enters into usage?

In our experience, the intensifier system is also a manageable variable for students to probe how their intuitions about language align (or not) with actual patterns of usage and to conduct analyses of their own. We also note that despite a rich and extensive research literature, many questions remain open, providing opportunity for student-led empirical research.[1]

In this short article, we outline a course project, an experimental inquiry into the social meaning of adjective intensifiers and the extent of change in intensifiers' social meanings in apparent time. We have successfully used this project three times as a laboratory assignment in a three-week unit on sociolinguistics within an introductory course at our university. In the next section, we briefly outline the course and describe the lab assignment and its motivation. We then detail a small sampling of the findings obtained from the first two instantiations of the project. Following this, we present a sampling of students' experiences with the lab project, and conclude.

THE COURSE: INTRODUCTION TO LINGUISTIC BEHAVIOR. The lab project is a part of the course Introduction to Linguistic Behavior (Ling 302), a course designed to introduce students to empirical approaches to the study of language through three main subject areas: first- and second-language acquisition, language and cognition (psycholinguistics), and language and society (sociolinguistics). This course is a complement to another introductory course, Introduction to Linguistic Analysis (Ling 301), which, like many such courses, spends the majority of the term introducing the traditional areas of linguistics (phonetics, phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, pragmatics). Although these courses are targeted for undergraduate linguistics majors, both consistently have high numbers of nonmajors from a wide range of departments (in fact, many Ling 302 students have never taken linguistics courses previously).

Each of the three subject areas is the focus of a three-week unit in the course, with course themes on empiricism and the scientific method, and on experimental and corpus-based studies of language, running through the entire term. Each unit involves readings and discussions, in-depth tutorials on reading primary research articles, a guest lecture on relevant research being done on our campus, a unit exam, and, most importantly, a laboratory assignment that students work on during the entire three-week unit. The lab assignments have a number of pedagogical purposes: they give students first-hand experience with a methodology used in each subfield being studied, they emphasize the empirical nature of language study and the process of conducting research, and they give students experience with data analysis and interpretation. We stress to students the importance of analyzing and interpreting data as a skill that is transferable beyond linguistics classes into other majors and also future occupations.

Thus far in the course, the laboratory assignment for the language and society unit has taken an experimental approach to the investigation of the social meaning of sociolinguistic variables, following Campbell-Kibler's (e.g., 2007, 2009) well-known study of variable (ING), but focusing on the social meaning of adjective intensification. Adjective intensification was chosen for the reasons described above as well as our sense that this variable was accessible enough to cover in only three weeks and exciting enough to engage students without extensive preamble. An additional motivation for the focus on perception in a three-week unit is that it is not necessary to devote class time to the extensive training required to perform fieldwork and grammatical coding and phonetic analysis that production based data analysis projects in sociolinguistics might entail (further, students can get exposure to such training in an upper-level course devoted to sociolinguistics in our department; see note 1).

In addition to its pedagogical value, we note that this laboratory project has generated empirical results that are interesting in their own right. Thus far, we know of only one study to have investigated the social meaning of intensifiers, Beltrama and Staum Casasanto (2017), which looked at the social evaluation of the intensifier *totally*. Furthermore, the investigation of changing social meanings over time has received very little attention (e.g., Labov 2001; Labov et al. 2011; Eckert 2014) but has important implications for sociolinguistic theory. For instance, Eckert's (2014) demonstration that the social meaning of creaky voice differs by the age of the listener suggests that there may be different norms within a speech community that different subgroups of listeners are orienting toward (see also discussion of the PRINCIPLE OF UNIFORM EVALUATION in Labov 2001; Levon and Buchstaller 2015). Given that adjective intensification is indeed a relatively rapidly changing variable, it represents an ideal test case for such a question. Thus, our class investigation of social evaluations of intensifiers based on listener age can contribute novel empirical findings in conversation with important theoretical discussions within the field. We suggest that students can especially thrive in situations where they know they are producing new scientific knowledge and not just recapitulating the "tried and true."

THE LAB PROJECT: EXPLORING THE SOCIAL MEANING OF ADJECTIVE INTENSIFIERS. The lab project was comprised of multiple phases, beginning with reading relevant background studies and culminating in a write-up analyzing experimental findings. Having the lab as a shared activity throughout the unit provided a helpful framework for discussions about a range of sociolinguistic topics; when introducing concepts like the sociolinguistic variable, the speech community, apparent time, and indexical fields, asking students how each concept might relate to our lab's design, hypotheses, and results

provided useful grounding. For some parts of the lab, we (the instructors)[2] dictated the structure and focus of the empirical project, and for other parts we let students lead entirely, providing guidance when appropriate. Certain aspects of the project, such as obtaining IRB approval, implementing the experimental survey, and preprocessing the data, were solely conducted by the instructors. The seed of the project given to students was that we would investigate social evaluations of speakers using different intensifiers and would do so using a particular experimental template. We approached the lab with the goal of developing an online survey that participants could complete in just a few minutes, so that students could recruit friends and family easily. The class activities over the three terms we have used this project have differed, with students in the first term more involved in the design of the experiment and students in the second and third terms more engaged in adding on to the experimental design, participant recruitment, and data interpretation. The exact intensifiers we investigated and the specific social factors we collected from participants were decided by the students during the first term, and we focus on this class' activities primarily here.

First, students read Tagliamonte and Roberts (2005), and in class we used that article as an introduction to adjective intensification as a phenomenon and to the concept of a sociolinguistic variable. Then, the idea for the lab was introduced and, over a couple of class and discussion section meetings, students discussed and selected intensifiers of interest. Out of the many potential intensifiers of interest, students decided to focus on four intensifiers: *very*, *really*, *real*, and *super*. Based on student intuitions about current language use, there was particular interest in potential differences between *really* and *real*, so both were included.[3]

Once intensifiers were selected, each student came up with a sentence that could contain any of our four selected intensifiers, as well as no intensifier. Half of the class wrote sentences with attributive adjectives; the other half wrote sentences with predicative adjectives. Rough guidelines about the characteristics of the target sentences (such as length) were given. Then students were asked to find a college-aged speaker to produce their sentence in each of the five guises: once with each of the four intensifiers, and once with no intensifier.[4] Examples (1)–(4) were four of the sentences designed and selected by the students (each example given with just one of the intensifiers). Students collected minimal demographic information from speakers (including age, gender, home state/country; not including the speakers' names). Students were given guidelines about how to do the recording (in a quiet room; any recording device was fine); how to coach their speaker (to use the same stress pattern for each guise and to avoid list intonation); and how to name and upload their files to our course website. They were also instructed on how to trim their audio files using freely available web

software and how to convert their audio files to a unified file format. We had originally hoped to guide students through splicing (i.e., copy and pasting) the different intensifiers into a single sentence frame (following Campbell-Kibler 2007, 2009), but could not fit that extra instructional time into the unit. Students received hands-on practice with these steps in discussion section and were also invited to attend office hours for help.

Meanwhile, students read Campbell-Kibler (2009) and began to think about what sorts of evaluation questions to ask participants about the speakers. In discussion section, the TA led students through the process of selecting the survey questions, keeping in mind the process used in Campbell-Kibler's focus groups. To keep the experimental survey short, students came up with five questions to ask participants about each speaker: four scalar questions and one question that asked listeners to select attributes describing the speaker. Given the nature of intensifiers as a rapidly changing variable, we were especially interested in probing participants' judgments of speakers' degree of youthfulness; the attributes chosen largely reflect this interest.

1. How much do you agree with the following statement? This person feels strongly about what they're talking about. (1: Disagree, 6: Agree)
2. How intelligent does this speaker sound? (1: Unintelligent, 6: Intelligent)
3. How casual vs. formal does this speaker sound? (1: Casual, 6: Formal)
4. How old does this speaker sound? (14–18, 18–22, 22–26, 26–30, 30–40, 40–50, or 50+)
5. This person sounds: (Check all that apply. You must select at least one.)

| Hip/Trendy | Annoying | Masculine | Millennial | Articulate |
| Cool | Immature | Feminine | Old-Fashioned | Friendly |

Questions 1–3 were presented as 6-point Likert scales; question 4 provided the age ranges shown, and participants were asked to select one; and question 5 presented participants with checkboxes.

After receiving all the sentence recordings from students, the instructor and TA chose 10 sentences to use. Our criteria for selection were to find five female voices and five male voices, five attributive uses and five predicative uses, speakers whose prosodic frame did not vary considerably from guise to guise, and recordings of reasonably good quality. The speakers selected were representative of our students' submissions; the majority were from the Western United States. The instructor amplitude normalized the selected audio files so there would be no change in loudness across tokens.

Then, the instructor built the experiment using the online survey platform Qualtrics, so that students could collect participants easily by sending a link to friends and family. The experiment presented one version of all 10 sentences to each participant (so that a participant never heard the same sentence twice). The sentence order was randomized by participant. Each

listener heard each intensifier option twice (so that every participant heard two *really*s, for example, but the sentences in which *really* occurred were counterbalanced across participants). Listeners were able to listen to each sentence as many times as they wished.

During the first term, students were asked to recruit participants of any demographic profile to complete the survey. During the second term, students used the stimulus materials created by the students from the first term and were asked specifically to recruit older listeners as participants, targeting listeners of the students' parents' generation or older. Other demographic restrictions were not placed on participants (except that they should be 18 or older), and minimal demographic information was collected (age, gender, native language, and home state or country). The survey had a consent page at the beginning of the experiment, and on the final page of the experiment, participants were given a short debriefing and were encouraged to talk to the referring student about what the study was about and the results they found.

Students (36 students in the first term, 33 in the second term; we restrict our discussion of results to these two terms) were able to recruit a large number of participants ($n = 680$). The second class intentionally recruited more participants (12+ participants per student; $n = 385$) than the first (5+ participants per student; $n = 295$) because they were less involved in the initial development of the experiment. Results were exported from Qualtrics by the instructor and preprocessed before being provided to the students. The design and analysis phases proceeded differently for the different classes. The first class to undertake the lab was responsible more for designing the lab up front and recording stimuli; thus, students were not asked to work directly with the raw data and were instead given summary plots to interpret for their final write-up. The second class, which reused the design and stimuli from the first class, had more of their lab devoted to analyzing the data themselves (with time during discussion section devoted to plotting and analysis techniques).

Each term, the lab concluded with students writing up responses to several question prompts about the experiment and its findings. We describe just a sampling of questions we have posed to students here; a nice feature of this lab is that questions can be tailored to specific aspects of the project that the instructor wishes to emphasize. We regularly ask students to begin the write-up by describing the experiment, its methods and goals, and their predictions about the findings, without reference to the actual data obtained but with reference to previous literature (e.g., asking them to formulate predictions about our results based on the findings of Tagliamonte and Roberts 2005). This line of questioning ensures that students are able to clearly articulate the rationale and design of the study in their own words. The majority of the questions, though, have asked students to describe the class' findings and

their broader implications. For example, we have asked what the results tell us about the social meanings of intensifiers; that is, are speakers evaluated differently depending on their choice of intensifier? And, we have asked whether these social evaluations are different depending on the age groups of participants (and for the third class, the age groups of the speakers). We have also asked students to look for interactions between speaker and listener gender and to choose an intensifier and describe its indexical field. Finally, we have asked "choose your own adventure"-style questions, where students pose and then attempt to answer some question about the data based on their own interests or observations.

While the data collected each term led to numerous specific questions we could ask the students to consider about their results, an additional strength of this exercise is that it creates a larger database of responses that future classes can use and expand on. Each new class can start "from scratch," but they can also be given access to the existing database of results and use it to derive new questions and findings. In this way, the lab not only exposes students to sociolinguistic experimentation, but can also introduce them to how researchers develop new knowledge by iteratively expanding on previous work.

SOME FINDINGS: THE SOCIAL MEANING OF INTENSIFIERS. In this section we describe a few of the findings from the first two terms of the course project. Although the data are from a large number of participants, we note that all participants are making judgments about the same 10 voices reading 10 specific sentences. Thus, we do not wish to generalize widely beyond what our data can support (indeed, the complex interaction of particular speakers and listeners with regard to social meaning is a point of emphasis in the lab); later iterations of the class project (using different speakers reading the same sentences, and different sentences, for example) will allow us to speak to patterns of evaluations of intensification more broadly.

We first present some of the results for the scalar data through barplots, where bars represent mean values and error bars indicate one standard error.[5] Figure 1 displays the responses to the question about the speaker's strength of belief, collapsed across all participant age groups: "How strongly does the speaker feel about what they're talking about?"[6] Perhaps not surprisingly, the data show that all four intensifiers increase listeners' ratings of speakers' strength of belief compared to the no intensifier sentences; intensifiers do intensify. Figure 2 displays the responses for the intelligence scale, collapsed across all participant age groups: "How intelligent does this speaker sound?" The intelligence ratings indicate a finer-grained hierarchy in terms of how listeners interpret intensifiers: the intensifier *very* and the no intensifier case are rated highest, followed by *really*, with *super* and *real* lowest.[7] Despite all

Strength of Belief Rating by Intensifier across All Listener Age Groups
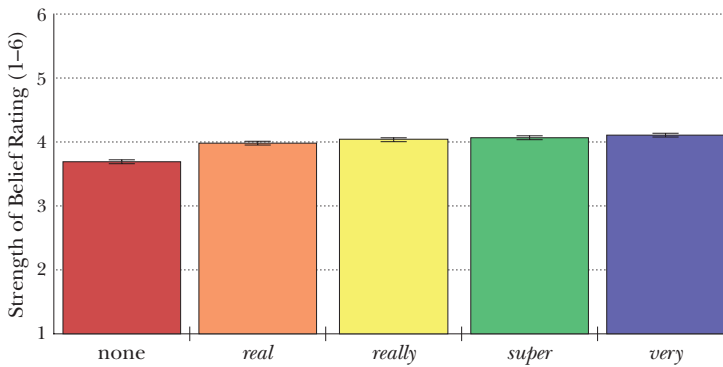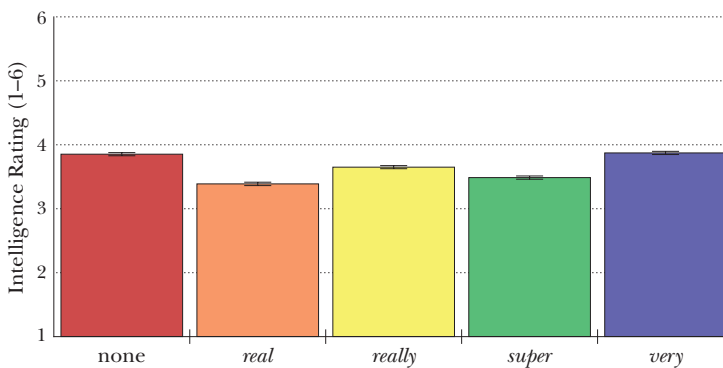
Intelligence Rating by Intensifier across All Listener Age Groups

four intensifiers doing similar "boosting" work, the choice of intensifier affects listeners' perceptions of speakers' levels of intelligence. Neither strength of belief nor intelligence (nor casual/formal) ratings varied significantly according to listener age; thus, we do not present these data broken down by participant age groups.

However, attribute selections (i.e., responses to question 5 of our survey) showed starkly different patterns across age groups. Table 1 summarizes the rank ordering of the selections for 8 of the 10 attributes described above;[8] for each attribute, the intensifier selected by the largest number of participants is listed first, and the one selected by the fewest is listed last. Results are displayed for two age groups, comparing the youngest participants (ages 18–24) to the oldest participants (ages 60–81). An interesting pattern emerges from the table: for the youngest listeners, *very* and *really* cluster together, being

TABLE 1
Attribute Selection for the Youngest and Oldest Listeners

	Intensifier Order (highest to lowest)	
	Youngest Listeners (18–24; n = 378)	*Oldest Listeners (60–81; n = 63)*
Hip/Trendy	*very* > *really* > *real* > *super* > none	*super* > none > *real* = *really* > *very*
Millennial	*very* > *really* = *real* > *super* > none	*very* > none > *super* > *really* > *real*
Immature	*really* > *very* > *real* > *super* = none	*super* > none = *real* > *really* > *very*
Annoying	*really* > *very* = *real* > *super* > none	*super* > *very* > none > *really* > *real*
Cool	*real* > *very* = *really* > none > *super*	none > *real* > *super* = *really* > *very*
Friendly	*very* > *real* = none > *really* > *super*	*super* > *real* > *very* > *really* > none
Articulate	none = *super* > *real* > *very* > *really*	*really* > *real* > *very* > none > *super*
Old-Fashioned	*super* = none > *really* > *real* > *very*	*really* > *real* = *very* > *super* > none

NOTE: Attributes are ordered roughly according to how the intensifiers grouped together in the results. Clusters of attributes related to youthfulness (toward the top of the list) and not-youthfulness (toward the bottom) emerge from the rankings.. The imbalance in *n*s across listener age groups is a consequence of our combining data across two classes; students in the first term collected only younger-aged participants, while the second term recruited both younger and older participants.

selected most often for attributes like Hip/Trendy, Millennial, and Annoying, while *super* clusters with no intensifier as least selected for the same attributes by this age group. Meanwhile, young listeners selected Articulate or Old-Fashioned the least for *very, really,* and *real.* On the other hand, the oldest listeners linked *super* to attributes like Hip/Trendy, Millennial, and Annoying. And *really, real,* and *very* most often led to the selection of Articulate and Old-Fashioned. For these sentences and these speakers, then, listeners' associations for these intensifiers have almost completely swapped over apparent time. To summarize, older listeners associated *super* with young people, but young people indicated that *super*'s time has already passed.

While a full discussion of these results is beyond the scope of this pedagogy-focused article, we observe that intensifiers did affect how speakers were socially evaluated by listeners and that some of those evaluations differed according to the age group of the listener, while others did not. Future iterations of this class project will further refine our understanding of how intensifiers are socially evaluated.

STUDENT OUTCOMES. To evaluate the lab's effectiveness as a teaching tool, we distributed a short survey to students who had taken the course. The response rate was low (with 26 students responding), which is not surprising given that some students from the earlier terms had graduated and the contact information we have may be out of date. And, since this survey was

TABLE 2
Student Ratings about Learning Outcomes from the Lab
(scale: 1 = strongly disagree, 6 = strongly agree)

Response to:	Mean Rating	Min	Max
"I enjoyed the sociolinguistics lab about adjective intensification."	5.00	3	6
"This lab was an engaging way to explore concepts in sociolinguistics."	5.39	4	6
"Designing, implementing, and analyzing an experiment helped solidify course material."	5.31	3	6
"This lab made me think more deeply about the social meaning of language."	5.46	4	6
"My understanding of experimental methods in sociolinguistics improved after this lab."	5.39	4	6

completely optional, we expect that many students who chose to respond may have been the ones motivated to respond by an inherent interest in the material. Thus, the survey is not a perfect measure to evaluate student outcomes, but it does allow us the opportunity to share student feedback about the project.

The survey asked students to select how much they agreed with statements about their learning outcomes from the lab, on a scale of 1 to 6 (1: strongly disagree, 6: strongly agree). For these rating scales, we collapse responses from students across all three terms, but note that the pattern of responses was similar for students enrolled in each of the three terms. Table 2 summarizes the questions and responses. Overall, the ratings suggest that students found the lab effective at improving their understanding of the major concepts we had hoped to stress in the unit.

Further, we had hoped that another positive outcome of having students record stimuli and collect primary data in this lab would be that they would engage with their friends and family members about ideas we were discussing in the course. Thus, the survey asked students whether they spoke with friends or family about the lab, to which 81% of the responding student said that they had. When asked what specifically they had shared, students offered comments like (5) and (6):

5. I was sharing to them about what we learned in class, about sociolinguistics, and the correlation between language use and social judgements. [student in first term]
6. I talked to my friends about how amazing it was that one word could change how we are perceived, and how these things are often subconscious. [student in third term]

Next, the responses in (7)–(9) provide representative responses to a question asking students what they learned from the lab.

7. I learned how people are able to make these social judgements just by hearing what kind of intensifier someone is using. Before doing this Lab, I didn't even think that the choice of intensifier matters. [student in first term]

8. Language evolves! It's great to see this process in action! [student in second term]

9. I learned more about the process of designing a good sociolinguistics experiment, and the thought process behind picking the characteristics that we had the participants choose from to describe the speakers. [student in third term]

Finally, we were interested in how much students from previous terms retained about the lab, its goals, and its findings. Almost exactly one year later, students shared the following recollections:

10. I remember certain intensifiers were more associated to millennials and some more associated with someone who's older. Also, certain intensifiers can make the speaker appear more intelligent or more formal. There were certain traits that the participants have to choose depending on the intensifier that the speaker was using. [student in first term]

11. I can't remember the exact results, but it was about how we evaluate various intensifiers like 'very, really, super, etc' across different age groups of native English speakers. [student in second term]

While we do not have a baseline comparison for how much students would remember about social meaning or adjective intensification had we done a different activity, we are encouraged that the lab seems to have left, at least somewhat, a lasting impression on students. Future versions of the lab project (or similar classroom endeavors) would benefit from having more explicit assessments for comparing the effectiveness of the project against other possible activities.

CONCLUSION. Overall, the lab project provided, we believe, an exciting opportunity for students (and their instructors) to explore the intersection of social meaning and language variation and change. The lab brought together many of the core concepts involved in an introduction to language in society while helping students develop empirical and data processing skills that will aid them in future linguistics courses (as well as other disciplines or career areas). It also led to interesting, novel outcomes that have the potential to contribute to larger research in sociolinguistics, empowering introductory linguistics students to see first-hand how language variation and change operate and to recognize their own potential to contribute to the development of scientific knowledge. We are encouraged that the lab seems to have been

rewarding for our students, because it has been extremely rewarding for us as instructors. We close by acknowledging that the lab is a substantial undertaking, taking a lot of active work by the instructors and by the students. Our experiences have indicated, however, that the benefits are worth the work.

NOTES

We wish to thank the students in Ling 302 at the University of Oregon in Winter 2017, Spring 2017, and Winter 2018 for their active participation and interesting insights during this lab project. We also thank Jason McLarty, who was the TA for the course during the Winter 2018 term. Finally, we thank our audience at the 2018 meeting of the American Dialect Society (Salt Lake City, Utah, Jan. 4–7) for helpful comments and suggestions.

1. We have also used adjective intensification as the basis of class projects in our linguistics department's upper-level sociolinguistic course, Ling 491. For this course, students have replicated production studies like Ito and Tagliamonte (2003) as a way to learn, hands-on, about research in sociolinguistics. We do not detail that project here, but see the course description (https://blogs.uoregon .edu/lvclab/ling-491/) for more information about this course and an example of a student project.
2. The first author (Vaughn) designed the course and lab and taught the course the first and third term this lab was used; the second author (Kendall) taught the second term; and the third author (Gunter) was the TA for the first and second term.
3. Students wished to examine *so* following Tagliamonte and Roberts, but because of an interest in determining whether the social meaning of intensifiers patterned differently across attributive and predicative adjectives (it did not in these results), we could not include *so* because it is currently restricted to predicative adjectives.
4. In the third term this lab was used, students recorded the same sentences used in the first term's experiment, but by new college-aged speakers as well as by speakers over 40 years old. However, we limit our discussion here of the third term's lab and its findings as this term was just finishing at the time of writing.
5. We do not report statistical tests in this article for sake of space and relevance to the goal of this article, but we note that generally nonoverlapping error bars indicate statistically significant differences.
6. This question was asked based on an initial interest in determining whether the strength of intensification of an intensifier positively or negatively correlated with its use in social evaluation.
7. While we do not present the casual/formal rating data here for sake of space, the pattern of results parallels the intelligence ratings.
8. We do not discuss selection of the other two attributes, Feminine and Masculine, which largely aligned with the perceived gender of the speakers' voices.

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TEACHING LINGUISTICS THROUGH LEXICOGRAPHY

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Teaching students to read a dictionary entry is an essential part of any education, but what about teaching students to WRITE a dictionary entry? What can students learn about language from coining a word and then writing a dictionary entry for it? What can we, as teachers and linguists, learn from their responses to such an assignment?

During the many years I taught an undergraduate English grammar course for the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, I used an assignment that called on students to define and analyze words of their own creation. This assignment simulates the work that actual lexicographers do, since students must craft standard dictionary entries, complete with pronunciations, senses, and more. It differs in one important respect, however, since students draw their definitions from their own ingenuities instead of a careful examination of corpora. This distinction is a downside in terms of capturing the real work of lexicographers, but the opportunity to coin words brings some advantages of its own. As I will show in this article, this assignment, together with an ensuing discussion of the results, can deepen students' understanding of lexical gaps, numerous types of word formation, and basic morphology while sharpening their appreciation and knowledge