

A variationist study of Spanish intensifiers

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Abstract. This study explores the use of intensifiers in three Spanish-speaking communities: Medellín and Tunja, Colombia, and Baton Rouge, Louisiana (Puerto Rican). We analyzed the effects of internal and external constraints on 7,835 tokens. Results reveal that periphrastic intensification is favored over morphological alternatives. The use of *súper* as an intensifier is an innovation promoted by young middle- and upper-class women. Findings corroborate that the use of intensifiers is both internally and externally conditioned. More broadly, the dominance of periphrastic intensifiers parallels the expansion of analytic constructions in Spanish, including the rise of the periphrastic future. This study expands our collective knowledge about the role of intensifiers in language variation and change.

Keywords. sociolinguistics; intensifiers; language variation; Latin American Spanish

1. Introduction. Intensifiers constitute a highly dynamic domain of crosslinguistic variation. They are devices which scale a quality upward or downward from an assumed norm and can be used to praise, persuade or impress an interlocutor (Biber et al. 1999:554; Bolinger 1972:17; Partington 1993:178; Quirk et al. 1985: 589-590; Stratton & Sundquist 2022: 386). Unlike morphosyntactic variables that evolve over centuries, intensifier systems can shift within a single generation. Like discourse markers, intensifiers can rise, lose semantic content, expand distributionally, and be replaced—only to be recycled in new functional configurations. For this reason, intensification offers an unusually transparent window into processes of grammaticalization, semantic bleaching, and sociolinguistic innovation (Tagliamonte & Roberts 2005; Tagliamonte 2008). Despite some variationist research on Spanish intensifiers (Brown & Cortés-Torres 2013; Kanwit et al. 2017, 2018), there is still a lack of multivariate investigations across several Spanish-speaking communities.

This preliminary study contributes to recent variationist studies of mainland Colombian Spanish (cf. Orozco & Hurtado 2021; Orozco, Marmolejo, & Grajales 2024) and Puerto Rican Spanish (cf. Brown & Cortés-Torres 2013; Gutiérrez-Rexach & González Rivera, 2014), extending this line of research to variation across speech communities. We analyze data from Medellín and Tunja (Colombia) and Puerto Ricans in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, exploring internal and external constraints. Overall, the emergence of *súper*, the Spanish equivalent of English *super*, is particularly revealing. Unlike inherited Romance intensifiers such as *muy* ‘very’ or *bien* ‘well,’ Spanish inherited *súper* from Latin as a prefix which subsequently started to function as a fully independent adverbial modifier as it does in English. Its diffusion pattern—socially stratified and gendered—suggests a classic case of innovation from above, aligning with long-standing findings that women frequently lead linguistic change (Chambers 2009). Concurrently, its distribution across communities allows us to evaluate whether this innovation reflects global diffusion, local identity construction, or contact-induced acceleration.

¹ We are grateful to Lee-Ann Vidal-Covas, who collected the Louisiana Puerto Rican Corpus, to María Claudia González Rátiva, who directed the PRESEEA Medellín Project, and to Donald Calderón Noguera, director of the PRESEEA Tunja Project, most of all, we are grateful to the anonymous speakers who provided the data analyzed. Authors: Rafael Orozco, Louisiana State University (rorozc1@lsu.edu) William Morales, Louisiana State University (wmoral2@lsu.edu) & Latasha Valenzuela, Louisiana State University (tashavale@lsu.edu).

Beyond documenting usage frequencies, this study situates intensification within a broader trajectory of Spanish morphosyntactic change. By integrating cross-dialectal comparison with quantitative variationist analysis, this article contributes to three domains: (1) sociolinguistic theory of innovation and diffusion, (2) grammaticalization and semantic stratification in Romance, and (3) empirical documentation of Spanish intensifier systems in understudied communities. Throughout the remainder of this paper, we review the historical and theoretical background of intensification (§2), describe our methodological approach (§3), present our findings (§4), and discuss implications for variation and change (§5).

2. Background. As illustrated in (1), Spanish intensifiers can be broadly divided into two groups: periphrastic intensification (*muy/bien/súper* + *adjective*) and synthetic forms (*-ísimo*). These variants coexist providing fertile ground for studying variation and change.

- (1) a. *Mi casa es muy/bien/súper bonita.*
“My house is **very** beautiful.”
b. *Dónde venden como aquí eso es carísimo*
“Where they sell it like this, it’s **very** expensive.”

2.1. DIACHRONIC PERSPECTIVE. The evolution of intensifiers reflects well-documented processes of grammaticalization, including semantic bleaching and decategorization (Hopper & Traugott 2003; Tagliamonte 2008; Kanwit et al. 2017). As items increase in frequency, they lose lexical content and expand distributionally. This process is evident cross-linguistically and particularly well documented in English, where intensifiers are frequently recycled rather than eliminated (Tagliamonte 2008). In the Romance languages, both analytic and synthetic strategies have long coexisted.² Latin *multus* and *bene* developed into Spanish *muy* and *bien*, while the suffix *-ísimo* encodes absolute degree. Historical evidence suggests that these forms were socially stratified early on, with *multus*-based forms associated with higher-status varieties and *bene*-based forms with lower-status usage (Serradilla Castaño 2017). Over time, functional overlap and interchangeability increased, accompanied by further grammaticalization and expansion in syntactic flexibility (Gutiérrez-Rexach & González-Rivera 2014).

The study of intensifiers, particularly in English, has been discussed in many previous studies (Lorenz 2002; Ito & Tagliamonte 2003; Tagliamonte & Roberts 2005; Méndez-Naya 2008; Tagliamonte 2008; Stratton 2020a). Many of these studies show that intensifier usage can be directly related to social constraints such as gender, education, and age. Tagliamonte (2008) has suggested that rather than disappearing, intensifiers are frequently recycled, finding a general increase in the rate of intensification over time when analyzing data from Ito & Tagliamonte (2003). Another study by Stratton (2020a) found that the intensifier *well* from Early Modern English to Present Day English has mostly fallen out of use as an intensifier in most dialects of English, while still being retained in others.

Intensifiers undergo grammaticalization, delexicalization, and semantic broadening (Lorenz 2002; Ito & Tagliamonte 2003). This can be observed in the English word *very*, which completely lost its original meaning of ‘true’ (Brown & Cortés-Torres 2013; Lorenz 2002). Delexicalization can also occur discontinuously, with some intensifiers becoming fixed in a particular semantic domain and potentially reactivating later (Tagliamonte 2008).

² Glosses used throughout the paper: periphrastic intensifiers *muy* ‘very,’ *súper* ‘super,’ *bien* ‘well/so,’ *bastante* ‘quite,’ *mucho* ‘much,’ *casi* ‘almost/quite,’ *demasiado* ‘too/very’; morphological intensifiers *re-* ‘very (prefix)’ and *-ísimo/a(s)* ‘very (suffix)’; copular verbs *ser* ‘to be’ and *estar* ‘to be (stative)’.

Grammaticalization has been part of the development of Romance intensification. As the Romance languages evolved, *bien/bem* has become de-formalized and decategorized as it became interchangeable with *multu + adjective* (Gómez Torrego 2006; Serradilla Castaño 2017). This supports the idea that grammaticalization occurs not only from lexical to functional, but also from functional to functional of the same category (Hopper & Traugott 2003). It has also been established that as a word becomes more grammaticalized, it will have a wider range of position and greater flexibility (Gutiérrez-Rexach & González-Rivera 2014:62-63). A more recent change is the appearance of the intensifying construction *bien/bem + adjective* in Caribbean Spanish and Brazilian Portuguese. Moreover, a variationist sociolinguistic study on French intensifiers (Kunkel 2024), revealed that over time there was a decrease in the rate of intensification (unlike in English) and a recycling of several intensifiers.

2.2. SOCIOLINGUISTIC PERSPECTIVE.

The variationist study of intensification in English and other Germanic languages (Ito & Tagliamonte 2003; Tagliamonte & Roberts 2005; Tagliamonte 2008) predates variationist research on the Romance languages (Kanwit & Teran 2020; Visconte 2022; Kunkel 2024). In the Romance languages, alternative forms have coexisted interchangeably (Serradilla Castaño 2017). Visconte (2022) points out that synthetic constructions (*-ísimo*) were historically associated with superlatives, while analytical constructions (*multus/bene + adjective*) were more closely associated with comparatives. *Multus*, which evolved into Spanish *muy*, enjoyed literary usage, while *bene*, which evolved into *bien*, was mostly used colloquially.

Variationist research has consistently shown that intensifier use is conditioned by social factors. Women tend to lead in the adoption of innovative forms, while younger speakers exhibit higher rates of intensification and greater sensitivity to shifting norms (Ito & Tagliamonte 2003; Tagliamonte & Roberts 2005; Chambers 2009). Intensification rates vary cross-linguistically, with Germanic languages generally exhibiting higher rates than Romance languages, as shown in Table 1. Sociolinguistic research on Spanish intensification remains limited. Brown & Cortés-Torres (2013) document variation between *muy* and *bien* in Puerto Rican Spanish, while Kanwit and colleagues (2017, 2018) explore dialectal differentiation and distributional constraints across varieties. While these studies report both internal and social conditioning, they do not provide a comparative, multivariate account across multiple speech communities.

Variety	Rate (%)
Norwegian (Stratton & Sundquist 2022)	44.7
Toronto GLBQ (Tagliamonte & D'Arcy 2009)	41.0
Toronto Spoken English (Tagliamonte & D'Arcy 2009)	37.0
German (Stratton 2020b)	37.0
American Blogs (Uscher 2010)	35.8
Britain English (Ito & Tagliamonte 2003)	28.0
Swabian 2017 (Stratton & Beaman 2025)	27.0
American English (Tagliamonte & Roberts 2005)	22.0
French (Kunkel 2024)	17.9

Table 1. Cross-linguistic intensification rates

Intensification rate, the percentage of adjective heads that are preceded by or affixed by an intensifier, is perhaps one of the most direct ways that relative usage of intensifiers can be compared across other internal and social variables. Regarding social conditioning, according to Chambers (2009), women are more likely to be innovative in language than men. Following this

theory, it has been found that women exhibit a rate of intensification that is higher than or very close to that of men (Tagliamonte & Roberts 2005). Younger speakers also seem to typically have a higher rate of intensification than older speakers (Ito & Tagliamonte 2003:265; Stratton 2020b:207), and intensifier choice likewise appears to depend on speaker age (Ito & Tagliamonte 2003; Tagliamonte 2008; Stratton 2020b). Ito & Tagliamonte (2003:275) also suggest that there is interaction between education and gender. Thus, there are several internal and external factors that condition intensification cross-linguistically.

3. Methodology. This section presents the data, speaker sample, and methodological approach, including the corpora, research questions, and analytical procedures.

3.1 HISTORICAL DATA SOURCES. In addition to our primary corpora, we conducted a small-scale analysis using *Don Quixote* (Cervantes Saavedra 1605) as well as a selection of 17th–19th century Spanish plays available through Project Gutenberg.³ These texts provide a comparative baseline for evaluating historical patterns in intensifier usage.

3.2 THE SPEECH COMMUNITIES, THE CORPORA, AND THE DATASET. Our analysis explores data from Medellín and Tunja (Colombia) and Puerto Rican residents of Baton Rouge, LA (henceforth referred to as ‘LAPR’).

Medellín, Colombia’s second-largest metropolitan area (population 2,372,330), is located in the department of Antioquia and represents Western Andean Colombian Spanish (Montes Giraldo 1982). The local *Paisa* variety is characterized, among other features, by a tripartite second-person singular (*tú, usted, vos*) pronoun system (Millán 2014). Data were drawn from the *Proyecto para el Estudio Sociolingüístico del Español de España y de América* (PRESEEA) Medellín corpus (González-Rátiva 2008), consisting of 119 sociolinguistic interviews conducted between 2007 and 2010 with speakers aged 15–85.

Tunja, the capital of the Department of Boyacá (population ~165,000), represents a highland Latin American variety that remains comparatively understudied (Calderón 2011). Data come from the PRESEEA Tunja corpus, comprising 54 semi-directed interviews balanced by gender and representing speakers who have lived most of their lives in the region.

The Louisiana Puerto Rican (LAPR) sample includes 18 speakers (9 women, 9 men) residing in Baton Rouge. All were born and raised in Puerto Rico and migrated as adults. Participants are highly educated and maintain predominantly Spanish-speaking social networks, forming a community of practice despite geographic displacement.

3.3 RESEARCH QUESTIONS. The aim of this study is to explore how intensification in Spanish is conditioned by internal and external constraints and how our findings compare to those of previous research. The main questions this article will attempt to answer are:

1. *How are intensifiers in Spanish conditioned by certain sociolinguistic constraints?*
2. *How do these constraints differ from those of other dialects and languages?*
3. *How have these constraints changed over time (if at all)?*

3.4 SPEAKERS. All Columbian speakers were born and lived most of their lives in or around the city where they were interviewed. Colombian speakers are from the PRESEEA Medellín (González-Rátiva

³ The plays examined include *El delincuente honrado* (Jovellanos 1787), *El gran Galeoto* (Echegaray 1881), *El sí de las niñas* (Fernández de Moratín 1806), *El viejo y la niña* (Fernández de Moratín 1790), *Entre el cielo y la tierra* (Pérez Galdós 1858), *La conjuración de Venecia* (Martínez de la Rosa 1830), *La petimetra* (Fernández de Moratín 1762), *Raquel* (García de la Huerta 1778), *Traidor inconfeso y mártir* (Zorrilla 1849).

2008) and Tunja corpus. LAPR speakers were born in Puerto Rico and migrated to the United States as adults (Vidal-Covas 2013). Across the three corpora, a total of 315 speakers provided the data analyzed. They were stratified by age, gender, and educational level (Table 2). Speakers were classified into three categories according to their educational level: high (university or postgraduate); medium (some university); and low (high school or less).

	Total	Women	Men	Ages
Medellín	119	54	65	15-85
Tunja	50	27	23	21-74
LAPR	18	9	9	19-68

Table 2. Information about the corpora and the speakers

3.5 DATA ANALYSIS. To analyze the collected transcripts, the first few minutes (~2) of each interview were discarded to account for the fact that participants used a different (more formal) speech register at the beginning, which might not reflect their vernacular. Following the methods used by Tagliamonte and cohorts, all adjectival heads were included in the data, rather than just positive cases of intensification (Ito & Tagliamonte 2003). This study additionally collected data on the rate of intensification of adverbs as well. The transcripts were analyzed using TagAnt and a Python script algorithm, followed by a manual verification of the data accuracy. The number of cases of intensification and intensification heads is shown in Table 3.

	Cases of Intensification	Total Cases Examined
Medellín	5,378	70,993
Tunja	2,040	31,489
LAPR	417	6,889

Table 3. Intensification data

Más was not included due to ambiguity regarding whether it acts as an intensifier or a comparator; therefore, data on this intensifier were not extrapolated. Following Brown & Cortés-Torres (2013), we will also exclude the intensifier *tan*, for similar reasons. As a result, all comparative and superlative contexts involving *más* and *tan* were excluded. Our analysis is also concerned only with amplifiers and does not consider downtoners, as defined by Stratton & Beaman (2025). All negative contexts involving *no* ‘no’ + an intensifier were also removed.

4. Results. This section presents historical and contemporary distributions of intensifiers, overall rates of intensification, and the conditioning effects across the three speech communities.

4.1. HISTORICAL DATA.

Figure 1 shows sources grouped by century, with *Don Quijote* being separated since it is the only source from the 1600’s. *Muy* is the most popular intensifier in each century. *Bien* and *-ísimo* also occupy a very significant percentage of these sources. *Súper* is completely absent; however, the prefix *super-* does appear although not functioning as an intensifier. Taken together, these patterns point to a high degree of continuity in the Spanish intensifier system: *muy* functions as the dominant default form across time, alongside the stable presence of *bien* and *-ísimo*. The

absence of *súper* in these historical sources highlights its status as a recent innovation, rather than a continuation of earlier intensification strategies. This contrast underscores the dynamic nature of the system, in which long-standing forms coexist with emerging variants, and provides a baseline for evaluating the synchronic patterns observed in the contemporary data.

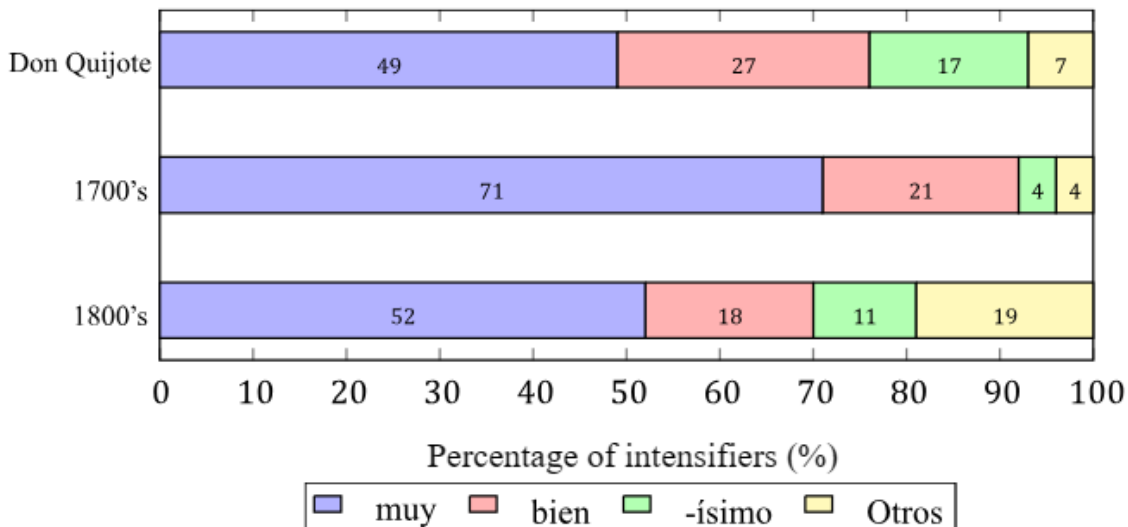


Figure 1. Distribution of intensifiers in historical sources

4.2. RATES OF INTENSIFICATION. Previous research such as Tagliamonte (2008) focused solely on the intensification of adjectives, not adverbs. For this preliminary study, we will calculate the rates for adjectives, adverbs, and both adjectives and adverbs together. Table 4 presents the rates of intensification for our corpora. These rates are consistently higher for adjectives than for adverbs across all three varieties. Adjective intensification rates range from 11.2% in LAPR to 19.1% in Medellín, while adverb intensification rates are lower, ranging from 2.3% (Medellín) to 2.6% (LAPR). When both categories are combined, Medellín shows the highest overall rate (7.6%), followed by Tunja (6.3%) and LAPR (5.9%). The gap between adjective and adverb intensification suggests that intensifiers are deployed far more frequently in adjectival contexts, a pattern that holds across all three varieties examined.

Corpus	Adjectives	Adverbs	Adverbs & Adjectives
Medellín	19.1% (4,285)	2.3% (1,122)	7.6% (5,407)
Tunja	14.8% (1,570)	1.9% (404)	6.3% (1,974)
LAPR	11.2% (298)	2.6% (110)	5.9% (408)

Table 4. Rates of intensification per corpus

Table 5 presents adjectival intensification rates by gender. As occurs across the board, women consistently show higher intensification rates than men in our three varieties.

Corpus	Women	Men	Total
Medellín	21.5% (2,056)	17.3% (2,229)	19.1% (4,285)
Tunja	16.1% (858)	13.5% (712)	14.8% (1570)
LAPR	13.9% (149)	9.4% (149)	11.2% (298)

Table 5. Rates of intensification by gender

The difference is most pronounced in LAPR, where women intensify at 13.9% compared to 9.4% for men, a gap of 4.5 percentage points. Medellín shows a similar pattern, with women at 21.5% and 17.3% for men. Tunja presents the smallest gender gap, with women at 16.1% and men at 13.5%. These results suggest that women lead in the use of intensifiers across all three varieties examined.

Figure 2 plots intensification rates by speaker’s birth decade. The rates for LAPR and Tunja are consistently lower than those for Medellín, except for speakers born in the 1930s. It seems that the rates for LAPR and Tunja also increased for people born from 1940 to 1970, but we do not see the same for Medellín. Medellín maintains consistently high intensification rates throughout, hovering around 15–21% across most birth decades, with relatively little variation. In contrast, LAPR shows the most dramatic fluctuation: a sharp peak for people born in the 1930s (~27%) followed by a steep drop for people born in the 1940s (~2.5%), before gradually recovering through subsequent decades. Tunja follows a broadly similar upward trajectory from the 1940s onward, converging with Medellín by the 1990s at around 14–15%. Overall, the figure points to a possible apparent change in progress in LAPR and Tunja, where younger speakers use intensifiers at higher rates than older ones, a pattern less evident in Medellín, where rates remain relatively stable across generations. This also assumes that a person’s intensification rate is relatively static after language acquisition, which remains an avenue for subsequent research.

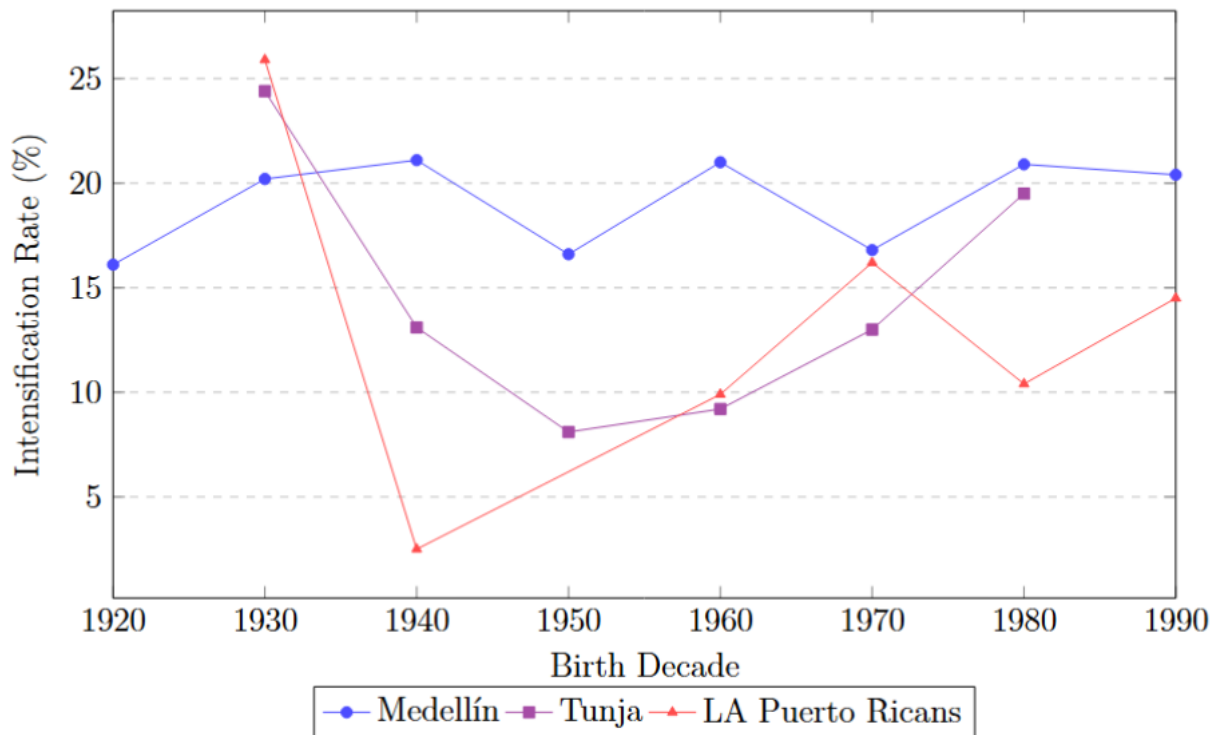


Figure 2. Rate of intensification by birth decade

Figure 3 plots the average intensification rate of adjectives grouped by frequency rank against their mean log frequency, with point size scaled by the number of unique adjectives in each rank group. Across all three varieties, intensification rates are widely dispersed, particularly at mid-range frequencies (log 2–4), where the greatest variability is observed. At higher frequencies, rates converge toward the bottom of the graph, forming a floor effect in

which the most common adjectives tend to have lower intensification rates. This floor effect differs from the pattern reported by Erker & Guy (2012), suggesting that adjective frequency does not straightforwardly predict intensification likelihood in these varieties. Medellín shows the widest spread of rates across the frequency range, with several high-frequency rank groups still reaching rates above 50%. Medellín and Tunja pattern more similarly to each other than either does compared to LAPR, with generally lower and more compressed rate distributions.

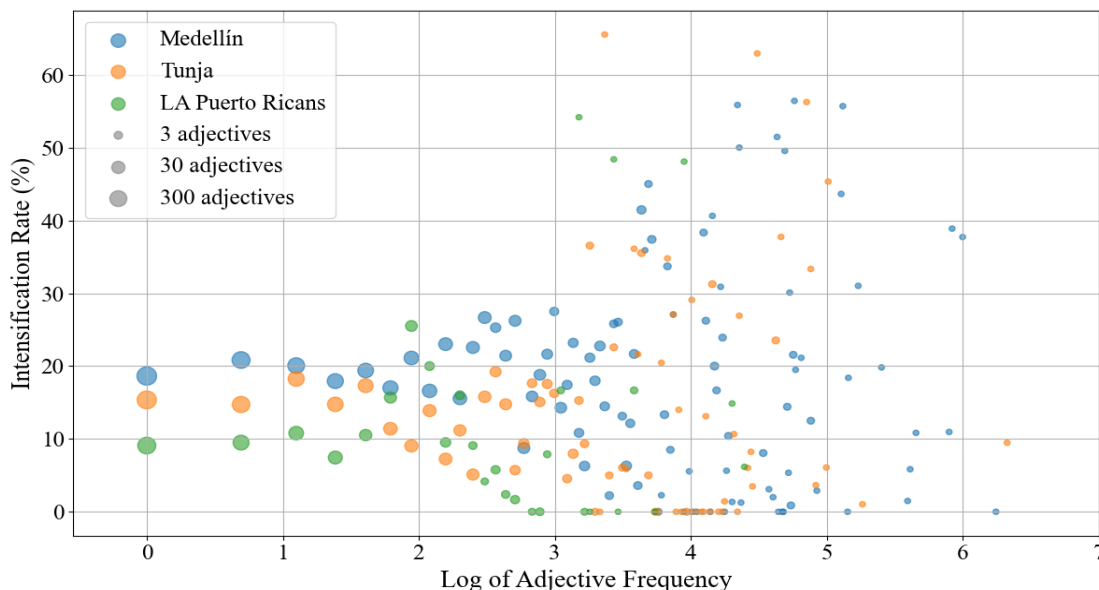


Figure 3. Intensification rate by log adjective frequency

Regarding educational levels (Table 6), there are no individuals in the LAPR corpus who would be considered to have either a low or high education level. Therefore, we cannot compare how educational levels affect the intensification rate in this community. The rate for LAPR residents is shown with N/A used for the unavailable education levels.

	Low	Middle	High
Medellín	19.4% (935)	20.6% (1774)	17.5% (1576)
Tunja	10.4% (274)	14.7% (564)	17.6% (732)
LAPR	N/A	11.2% (298)	N/A

Table 6. Rate of intensification by education level

Among the remaining two varieties, the patterns diverge considerably. In Medellín, rates are relatively stable across educational levels, ranging narrowly from 17.5% (high) to 20.6% (middle), with no clear directional trend. Tunja, by contrast, shows a pronounced monotonic increase with education: rates rise from 10.4% among speakers with less formal education to 14.7% (middle) and 17.6% (high), suggesting that higher educational attainment is associated with greater use of intensifiers in this variety. This divergence between Medellín and Tunja may reflect different social evaluations of intensification across the two communities.

In all three corpora (Table 7), predicative adjectives are intensified at a significantly higher rate than attributive adjectives. It should be noted, however, that a large percentage of the adjectives were unable to be automatically classified as either attributive or predicative. This is the reason why the percentages do not all add to 100%. Also note that the ‘Total’ column does include the ambiguous adjectives.

	Attributive	Predicative	Total
Medellín	14.1% (1048)	27.6% (1500)	19.1% (4285)
Tunja	11.9% (438)	22.0% (604)	14.8% (1570)
LAPR	9.3% (98)	16.9% (110)	11.2% (298)

Table 7. Rate of intensification by adjective type

4.3. INDIVIDUAL INTENSIFIERS. First, we will look at the overall distribution of each intensifier. As shown in Figure 5, the most striking difference is between LAPR and the two Colombian varieties: while Medellín and Tunja are strongly dominated by *muy* (79.8% and 72.9%, respectively), LAPR speakers use *muy* at only 26.9%, instead favoring *bien* as their primary intensifier at 42.2%. In both Medellín and Tunja, *bien* accounts for approximately 5% of tokens, making this divergence the most salient distributional contrast across the three corpora. It should also be noted that *bien* has not completely replaced *muy* in dominance, with *muy* still being used in 27% of intensification cases. This suggests that the shift from *muy* to *bien* is not yet complete.

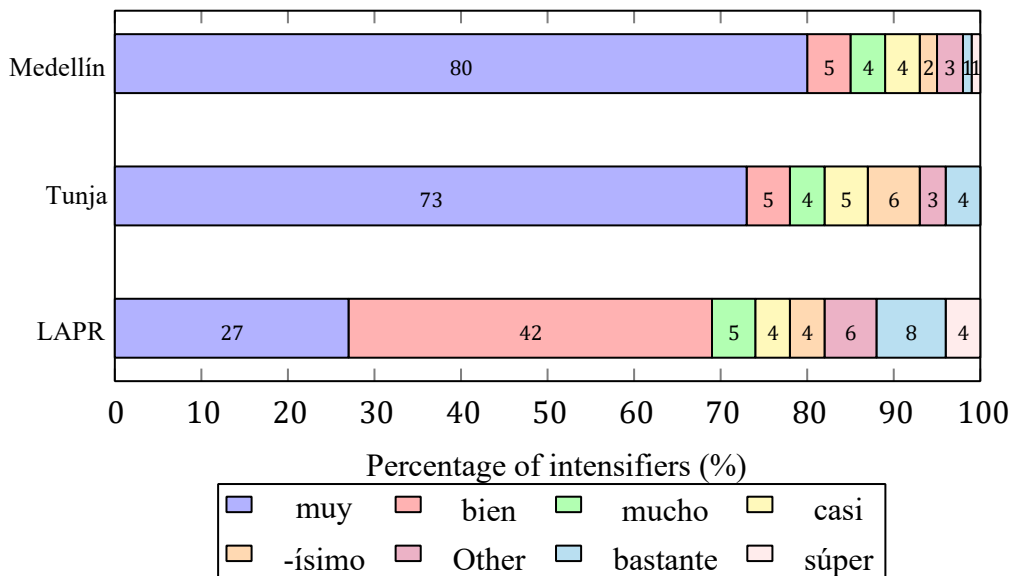


Figure 5. Distribution of intensifiers by corpus

Beyond the *muy/bien* split, the varieties also differ in secondary intensifiers. *Bastante* is notably more frequent in LAPR (7.9%) than in Medellín (0.6%) or Tunja (3.6%). *Súper* is present in all three but most common in LAPR (4.3%) and Medellín (1.7%), while nearly absent in Tunja (0.8%). This may be due to influence from English, since the Puerto Rican variety is the only one out of the three corpora that has significant contact with English. On the other hand, the

morphological intensifier *-ísimo* shows the opposite pattern, being most frequent in Tunja (6.3%) and comparatively rarer in LAPR (4.1%), and Medellín (2.2%).

In Figure 6, women’s rates (solid lines) consistently exceed those of men’s (dashed lines) across most age groups. Medellín and LAPR show a sharp peak among speakers born in the 1970s, with Medellín women reaching the highest recorded rate (1.6%), followed by LAPR women (1.4%). After this peak, men's rates rise considerably while women's rates show divergent trajectories: Medellín women rebound strongly by the 1990 cohort (1.3%), whereas LAPR women decline modestly (0.8%) and Tunja women remain comparatively low throughout. The near-zero rates observed for all groups in earlier birth decades (1920–1950) suggest that a higher usage of intensification is a feature of younger and middle-aged speakers, consistent with a change in progress led by women.

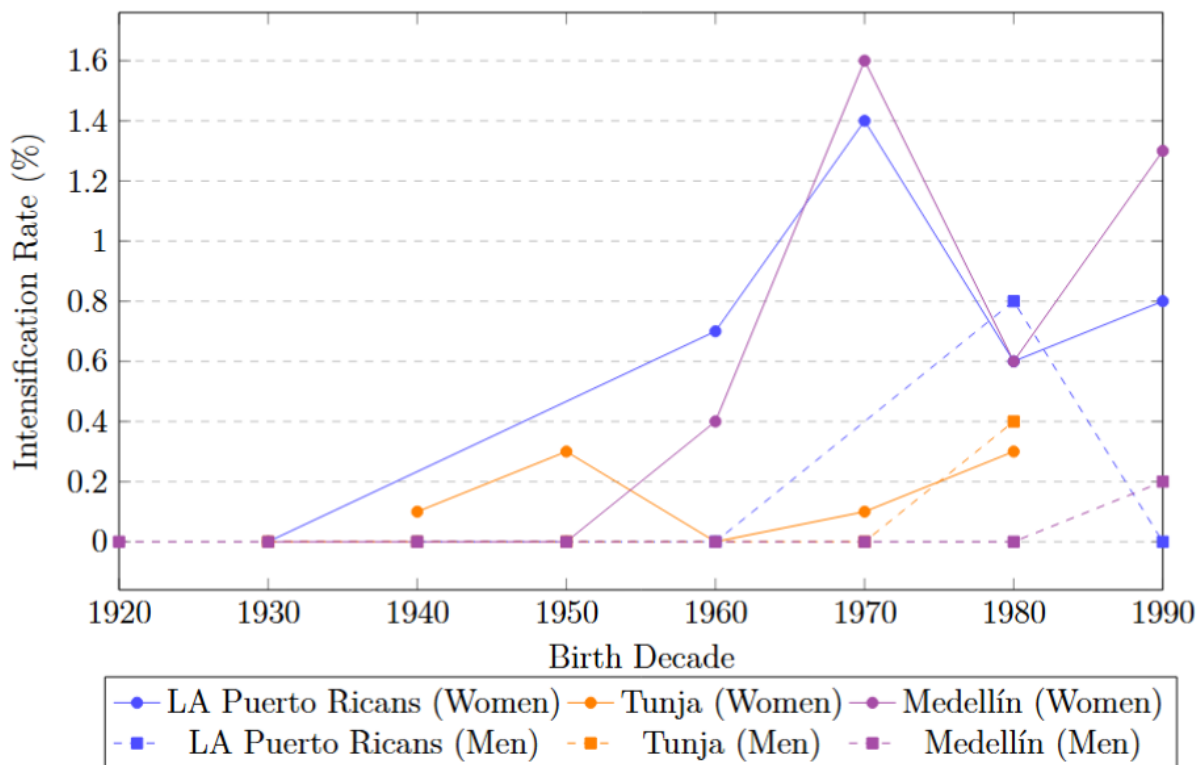


Figure 6. Rate of *súper* by birth decade

Table 8 shows the rate at which speakers in each education group select *súper* and *bastante* as the intensifier in adjectival contexts. For *súper*, Tunja displays a clear education stratification: the form is entirely absent among low-education speakers (0.0%, 0 tokens) and reaches a higher rate among middle- (0.2%, 5 tokens) and high-education speakers (0.2%, 7 tokens). Medellín shows a similar pattern with low having the fewest usage of *súper* (0.2%, 6 tokens), followed by middle (0.5%, 34 tokens), and high (0.4%, 27 tokens) education levels, suggesting *súper* is socially preferred by people of middle-to-high education level.

For *bastante*, Tunja shows use concentrated almost entirely among high-education speakers (1.6%, 57 tokens), with low and middle groups contributing minimally (0.2% each, 5 tokens each). In Medellín, *bastante* is distributed relatively evenly across low (0.2%, 8 tokens), middle (0.2%, 15 tokens), and high (0.1%, 10 tokens) education levels, showing no meaningful

stratification. Across both intensifiers, education sensitivity is most consistently observed in Tunja, where both forms skew toward higher education strata.

	Low	Middle	High
<i>súper:</i>			
Medellín	0.2% (6)	0.5% (34)	0.4% (27)
Tunja	0.0% (0)	0.2% (5)	0.2% (7)
<i>bastante:</i>			
Medellín	0.2% (8)	0.2% (5)	0.1% (10)
Tunja	0.2% (5)	0.5% (5)	1.6% (57)

Table 8. Rate of intensification of *súper* and *bastante* by education level

Table 9 displays the rate of intensification of *súper*, *demasiado*, and *bastante* with relation to gender. There is substantial variation in intensifier use by gender and region. The intensifier *súper* exhibits the strongest gender effect, with nearly exclusive usage by women in Medellín (0.9% W vs. 0.0% M), while having relatively equal distribution in Tunja and LAPR. *Demasiado* displays complex geographic patterning: it maintains a higher usage by women in Colombian cities (0.5% W vs. 0.2% M in Medellín; 0.2% W vs. 0.0% M in Tunja) but reverses to only by men in LAPR (0.0% W vs. 0.2% M). However, this is probably due to *demasiado* occurring only 3 times in the LAPR corpus. *Bastante* demonstrates another pronounced patterning, shifting from a gender-neutral distribution in Medellín (0.2% W/M) to being strongly favored by women in LAPR (1.7% W vs. 0.5% M) and Tunja (1.0% W vs. 0.5% M). These patterns suggest that intensifier gender indexing is not uniform across regional varieties but rather subject to significant differences between each Spanish variety.

	Women	Men	Total
<i>súper:</i>			
Medellín	0.9% (65)	0.0% (2)	0.4% (67)
Tunja	0.2% (7)	0.1% (5)	0.1% (12)
LAPR	0.8% (7)	0.5% (7)	0.6% (14)
<i>demasiado:</i>			
Medellín	0.5% (39)	0.2% (21)	0.3% (60)
Tunja	0.2% (9)	0.0% (2)	0.1% (11)
LAPR	0.0% (0)	0.2% (3)	0.1% (3)
<i>bastante:</i>			
Medellín	0.2% (13)	0.2% (20)	0.2% (33)
Tunja	0.5% (21)	1.0% (46)	0.7% (67)
LAPR	0.5% (5)	1.7% (25)	1.3% (30)

Table 9. Rate of intensification of *súper*, *demasiado*, *bastante* by gender

Turning towards common collocations found with intensifiers, with LAPR, the synthetic intensifier *-ísimo*, shows a strong preference to occur with the adjective *rico* ‘rich’, occurring as

the adjective being modified in 63.6% of all cases of *-ísimo*. This is extremely different in the Colombian cities, where *-ísimo* occurs the most with *bueno* ‘good’ (21.1%) and *grande* ‘big’ (26.4%) in Medellín and Tunja respectively. Another collocation that is found in Medellín and Tunja, *mucho mejor* ‘much better,’ is almost completely absent from LAPR, with only one occurrence of *mucho* in the entire corpus. As for verbs, most intensifiers are most often used with *ser* when they appear with a verb, e.g. *es muy interesante* “it’s very interesting.”

Across all three corpora, the most common instance of double intensification was *muy muy*. The only other common combination of double intensification is *muy bien*, which could be because *muy bien* can function as both an intensifier and an adverb, rather than just two intensifiers before an adjective. All other double-intensifier combinations occur fewer than three times in each corpus.

5. Discussion. There is substantial evidence that the three corpora each have different internal and social conditioning factors. Gender, age, education level, and adjective type proved to be significant predictors of intensifier use. A notable weakness of this study is the lack of true diachronic data, preventing us from comparing the precise changes that have occurred in the form of intensifiers. However, we were able to establish many different sociolinguistic constraints that are readily available on Spanish intensification. We can also use data from older speakers (controlling for the transcription date by birth year) to gather information about what the intensification system possibly looked like in the past. By examining the use of each intensifier, three main groups appear to emerge: *muy*, *bien*, and all other intensifiers. This appears to be similar to the tripartite system proposed by Kanwit & Teran (2020); however, the use of *re-* is almost entirely absent, appearing only three times in all our corpora.

While no intensifiers appear to be disappearing, a new intensifier has entered the system: *súper*. An interesting comparison is the difference in adoption dates and usage. Tunja sees usage by the oldest speakers (born around 1945) compared to the other communities; however, *súper* is rarely used, even among younger speakers. This contrasts with Medellín, where *súper* is used by speakers born around 1965, and shows significantly higher usage than Tunja. The intensifier also commonly appears among people with higher levels of education, suggesting a possible connection between those who attend university (or beyond) and adopting newer vocabulary earlier than others.

6. Conclusion. This study underscores the dynamic nature of intensifiers, corroborating that intensification is a robustly variable domain shaped by both internal and external constraints. Drawing on 7,835 tokens from Medellín, Tunja, and Puerto Rican residents of Baton Rouge, we show that intensifier use is neither random nor purely stylistic, but systematically conditioned by gender, age, education, and adjective type. Across all three communities, periphrastic intensification overwhelmingly dominates the intensifier landscape. The suffix *-ísimo* remains productive but is far less frequent than analytic forms such as *muy*, confirming that the Spanish intensifier system aligns structurally with broader tendencies toward periphrastic constructions observed elsewhere in the grammar (e.g., the expression of futurity). This convergence suggests that intensification participates in larger morphosyntactic trajectories within Spanish.

The results further reveal that while *muy* continues to function as the unmarked default intensifier in Colombian varieties and *bien* in Caribbean varieties, the system is not static. The emergence and diffusion of *súper* constitutes a clear case of ongoing innovation. Its distribution is socially embedded: in Medellín, it is strongly associated with younger, middle- and upper-class women, consistent with well-established findings that women often lead linguistic change from above (Chambers 2009). Tunja presents an earlier point of entry for *súper* but lower overall

adoption, illustrating that innovation does not diffuse uniformly even within geographically proximate communities. The Baton Rouge Puerto Rican data show comparatively modest rates of intensification overall, but the presence of *súper* suggests that contact and bilingualism may accelerate lexical borrowing in certain contexts. Importantly, no intensifier in our dataset shows signs of obsolescence. Rather than replacement through loss, the Spanish system appears to expand through layering, recycling, and semantic specialization—patterns consistent with previous research on English and Romance intensifiers (Ito & Tagliamonte 2003; Tagliamonte & Roberts 2005; Tagliamonte 2008; Kunkel 2024). The data therefore support a model of additive innovation rather than zero-sum competition.

Finally, the findings refine current theoretical models of Spanish intensification. While our results partially align with the tripartite system proposed by Kanwit & Terán (2020), the near absence of *re-* and the overwhelming dominance of *muy* indicate that regional frequency patterns remain central to understanding constraint hierarchies. Future research should incorporate longitudinal corpora to test apparent-time inferences directly, examine social-network effects, and further explore contact-induced acceleration in bilingual communities. Expanding the dialectal scope—particularly in varieties where *bien* functions as a default intensifier—would also clarify whether the Colombian pattern represents stability or a transitional stage within a broader pan-Hispanic shift. Taken together, this study positions intensifiers as a productive site for examining grammaticalization, lexical innovation, and socially embedded change in contemporary Spanish.

More broadly, we hope that the growing body of variationist research on intensification across languages will give rise to large-scale crosslinguistic investigations, similar to recent comparative work on subject pronoun expression across multiple languages and communities (Erker, Guy, Beaman, Bayley, Adli, Orozco & Zhang 2026), which demonstrates the explanatory power of multi-language quantitative approaches. By documenting both stability and innovation within the same system, we contribute to a more precise understanding of how micro-variation reflects larger trajectories of linguistic change.

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Appendix: Historical data sources

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