

# Negative intensification in the spoken language of British adults and teenagers: A corpus-based study<sup>1</sup>

*Ignacio M. Palacios Martínez, University of Santiago de Compostela*

## Abstract

Intensification, a general device used by speakers to convey their message more clearly and to strengthen their position to it (Bolinger 1972), has been discussed widely in the literature. However, the specific use of intensification on negatives (i.e. *it didn't do any harm at all, I hadn't the faintest idea who he was*) has received much less attention. The aim of this paper is to identify and explore the resources used by British adults and teenagers in the intensification of negative constructions. A second focus of interest will be the extent to which differences exist here in the language of adults and teenagers, given that the latter are, broadly speaking, more prone to use intensification. Findings indicate that the strengthening of negatives in English can be achieved in different ways: a) by means of a number of non-assertive and negative polarity-oriented items, such as *in the slightest, in the least, at all, even*; b) the repetition of the adverb *never* or the combination *never ever*; c) cases of multiple negation or negative concord intended to heighten a negative meaning; d) negative polarity collocations and idiomatic expressions; and e) adverbs such as *definitely, absolutely, certainly* plus a negative (*not/no or nothing*). Teenagers tend to intensify negatives more than adults, although these differences are not so clearly marked as expected, and while the former prefer the use of swear words and idiomatic or semi-idiomatic expressions together with locutions such as *no way*, the latter opt more often for negatively oriented polarity sensitive items.

Keywords: spoken English, negative polarity, intensification, youth language, negative concord, negative polarity items

## 1. Introduction

Intensification is “the linguistic expression of exaggeration and depreciation”, according to Bolinger (1977: 20). It can thus be defined as a general linguistic resource used by speakers to convey the message or

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part of the message more clearly and to strengthen their position in relation to what they are saying. There is generally an attitudinal or emotional component to the expression of an intensifying structure, which may have to do with different pragmatic or communicative purposes.

Broadly speaking, intensification has traditionally been associated with the adjective and adverb categories, although, as Bolinger (1972: 15) claims, it is not exclusive to these and can be present in other word classes (verbs, nouns, prepositions) and can have within its scope not only a word or a phrase but a whole clause. Hence, a number of *wh*-words can function as intensifying determiners in exclamations (*What a child John is!*)<sup>2</sup>, and indeed *what* and *such* can themselves function as intensifiers of a NP (*What a lawyer!, he is such a fool that I cannot trust him*). Bolinger (1972: 115) also notes several figurative ways of expressing intensification: rhetorical questions (*“Is he clever?” = “Is he clever!”*), similes (*He’s hard as nails*), hyperbole (*He’s dying to hear you*) and litotes (*I was not unaware of the problem*).

With regard to the system of polarity in particular, intensification has been studied primarily within positive clauses, such as *I DID come to the meeting*, where the auxiliary verb together with the main verb serve to give emphasis to the clause. This is generally known as the “emphatic DO” (Stein 1990: 272; Wilder 2013; Breitbarth, De Clercq and Haegeman 2013).

Turning to the language of teenagers, we see that intensification, more particularly adjective and adverb intensification, has received a great deal of attention, not least because some of the intensifying strategies used by teenagers differ from those typical of adults. Several studies (Lorenz 1999; Stenström *et al.* 2002; Macaulay 2006; Palacios Martínez and Núñez Pertejo 2012) have shown that adults use adjective and adverb intensifiers almost twice as frequently as teenagers, with these latter resorting to other devices, as well as the usual adverbs (*very, really, so*), such as swear words (*bloody, fucking, damn*) and a number of expressions denoting the highest quality of something (*wicked, cool, massive*). Some scholars have focused specifically on those intensifying adverbs which behave differently in the language of teenagers as compared to adults. Lorenz (1999), Stenström *et al.* (2002), Paradis and Bergmark (2003), and Paradis (2003) provide

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<sup>2</sup> This, and all the examples that follow in this introductory section, have been taken from Bolinger (1972).

evidence of the tendency in teen speech to use *really* instead of *very*, the latter being more common in adults. Tagliamonte and Roberts (2005) also conclude that the intensifier *so* is increasingly favoured over *really* in the language of American teenagers; similarly, it seems that Canadian youths use *so* and *pretty* more often than *very*, which is gradually losing its leading role as an intensifier (Tagliamonte 2005). Finally, Erman (1998), Stenström *et al.* (2002), Ito and Tagliamonte (2003) and Aijmer (2011) discuss the particular intensifying meanings and syntactic properties of *just*, *well*, *right*, *enough* and *totally* in the expression of British and American teenagers.

Despite such studies on adjective and adverb intensification in English generally, and particularly in teen talk, we note that the heightening of negatives has received very little attention, and even less so from a contrastive, adult-teen perspective. It seems clear from the literature that teenagers and adults show sharp contrasts in their use of intensification strategies, not only as regards frequency but also in the way that these strategies are achieved. This paper takes as its starting-point Jespersen's (1917: 14-19) brief account of the "strengthening of negatives", plus two preliminary studies (Palacios Martínez 1996, 2011); the first of these two surveys is concerned with negative intensification in general English, looking at a small sample of written and spoken data extracted from the ICE corpus (British English component), and the second focuses on the expression of negation in the language of teenagers based on data from COLT (*The Bergen Corpus of London Teenage Language*). It should be made clear that the concept of negative intensification used here is different from Wouden's "emphatic negation", which he identifies exclusively with "the usage of multiple negation to strengthen the force of the negation", since, in his view, this use "fits into a more general pattern of double or multiple marking, the mechanism that if you want to stress something, you say it more than twice" (1997: 242). On the contrary, I believe that double or multiple negation is just one of the possible resources to heighten a negative and, as will be shown below, not all cases of double or multiple negatives should necessarily be regarded as cases of emphatic negation, since some of them will be equivalent to single negatives.

Closely related to the notion of intensification is "reinforcement", defined by Quirk *et al.* (1985: 1416) as "a feature of colloquial style whereby some item is repeated (either completely or by pronoun

substitution) for purposes of emphasis, focus, or thematic arrangement”. One of the examples provided by Quirk *et al.* is “It’s far, far too expensive”; in my study reinforcement is regarded as one of the strategies available to the speaker to intensify a negative, as with the repetition of *never* (e.g. *I have never never said that*), although it is not the only strategy. The strengthening of negatives is wider in scope and can be expressed in many different ways, as will be described below.

## *2. Purpose and Method*

This paper has two main objectives. I intend, firstly, to identify and examine more thoroughly the intensifying resources used by British adults and teenagers in the strengthening of negatives. Secondly, I will explore the extent to which differences exist here in the language of these two speaker groups. In light of previous studies (Stenström 1999, 2005, Palacios Martínez, 2011, Palacios Martínez and Núñez Pertejo 2012), my expectations are that teenagers will be more inclined to negative intensification, given that they use far more negatives than adults, that they are very fond of lending force to their statements as part of their personality and their age, and that they typically show a higher level of spontaneity and frankness than adults in that they do not feel the need to mitigate their expression, especially when communicating with their peers.

The data have been taken from the COLT corpus. Compiled in 1993, this corpus, part of the *British National Corpus* (BNC), consists of 431,528 words from a total of 377 spontaneous conversations produced by teenagers from between 13 and 17 years of age in the London area, including the boroughs of Tower Hamlets, Barnet, Camden, Hackney, and the county of Hertfordshire. These conversations together represent roughly 100 hours of recorded speech. Although most of the informants can be classified as being in mid-adolescence, some of the informants’ teachers and relatives also make contributions, although their participation is very limited.

Although COLT was compiled in an attempt to represent language produced by British adolescents, all the speakers are from the London area, with its own geographical, social and ethnic variables. The London boroughs represented in the corpus also have substantial numbers of children from ethnic minorities and this itself could have a bearing on the

type of English used. Thus, this corpus should not be regarded as fully representative of general adolescent British English, but rather of London teenager speech. Furthermore, this corpus, which has been widely used to characterize the language of British teenagers, can be regarded now as somewhat outdated, in that the language of teenagers evolves very quickly and what was common in the early 1990s may not be so current nowadays. Despite these limitations, COLT provides very interesting data for the present study.

With the purpose of comparing the findings here with adult mainstream British English, data from COLT will be compared to analogous samples taken from the *Diachronic Corpus of Present-day Spoken English* (DCPSE). I have selected an adult spoken corpus for two main reasons: for questions of comparability with COLT, and because it is in spoken English that the highest number of examples of negative intensification can be found. Texts classified as informal face-to-face conversations (403,844 words) and assorted spontaneous speech (21,675 words) were selected from DCPSE, a total of 425,519 words; this ensures the best comparison, since COLT is formed by students' self-recorded spontaneous verbal exchanges. The DCPSE is sampled from both the London Lund corpus and ICE-GB. For the present study, 75 percent of the DCPSE data is taken from ICE-GB, which was recorded at the early 1990s, that is, at a similar time as COLT; the remaining material was recorded between 1958 and 1977.

The information extracted from these two corpora was complemented with data taken from the *Linguistic Innovators Corpus* (LIC). This will provide us with a more accurate and comprehensive picture of the phenomena under investigation. LIC complements COLT, since it was compiled by Cheshire and members of her research team in the area of London between 2004 and 2007, specifically in the boroughs of Hackney (inner London) and Havering (outer London) (Cheshire *et al.* 2008). It contains about 1,300,000 words of teen talk, although part of it also includes samples of older, adult speakers from those two districts. These samples of adult talk will serve as a point of comparison for us. Finally, I will resort very occasionally to the spoken samples of conversations extracted from the BNC to contrast or complement data that were not provided by the main corpora considered here.

Table 1: Corpora used in the analysis

Corpus	Nber. of spkrs.	Spkr. age	Area	Nber. of words	Collection method & material	Date
COLT (The Bergen Corpus of London Teenage Language)	33	13 to 17	London (Hackney, Tower Hamlets, Camden, Barnet, Havering, etc).	438,531	subjects recorded themselves. Spontaneous conversation exchanges	early 1990s
DCPSE sample (Diachronic Corpus of Present-Day Spoken English)	1,268	26 to 92	Britain	425,519	recordings of spontaneous speech (face to face and assorted conversation exchanges)	75% (early 1990s) 25% (1958-1977)
LIC (Linguistic Innovators Corpus) young	100	13 to 21	London (Hackney & Havering)	1,223,230	group interviews recorded by a field worker	2004-2007
LIC (Linguistic Innovators Corpus) elderly	21	early 70s	London (Hackney & Havering)	261,695	group interviews recorded by a field worker	2004-2007

My starting-point, and also a means of searching for suitable data, was the small amount of information on negative intensification in general reference grammars (Quirk *et al.* 1985: 785-787; Huddleston, Pullum *et al.* 2002: 823; Carter and McCarthy 2006: 447) and the sections dealing with this issue in the standard monographs on negation (Jespersen 1917; Horn 1989; 2011; Tottie 1991; Mazzon 2004). Meanwhile, corpus data were retrieved with the aid of the CONCAPP program, although they had to be subsequently filtered manually, with a high number of examples discarded. There were several reasons for this. Some of the examples were not tokens of intensifying negatives, although they appeared to be so at first sight. Consider the following:

- (1) He was called out **at all** hours of the day.<sup>3</sup> (LICADU)  
 (2) **Even** if you **don't** swim in it. (COB137201/489)

In (1) *at all* does not convey any kind of intensifying meaning but is part of the prepositional phrase (*at all hours of the day*) where *all* functions as a typical determiner of the NP *all hours of the day*. Something similar is seen in (2) where *even* goes with *if* and introduces a prototypical conditional clause. On other occasions examples had to be disregarded due to hesitations, vacillations or incomplete and truncated sentences typical of speech, as in the following, which made any interpretation impossible:

- (3) *he don't do really do nothing even...* (LICYOU)  
 (4) *not even... don't... the worse thing is* (LICYOU)

### 3. Results

This section is divided into two main parts. The first of these will focus on the general resources used by English speakers to intensify negatives, by presenting and discussing the data based on the analysis of the corpora. The second will describe the main differences between adult and teen language regarding the frequency of these intensifying structures and the particular lexical expressions and syntactic structures present in each sociolect.

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<sup>3</sup> All the examples included in the rest of the study have been transcribed following the conventions of the corpus from which they were drawn. Each example is followed by an identification code indicating the corpus or other source (CO for COLT, LIC for the *Linguistic Innovators Corpus*, DCP for *Diachronic Corpus of Present-day Spoken English*, BNC for the *British National Corpus*), its corpus code number, and, where possible, the conversation turn reference. In the case of LIC we also make a further distinction between the data extracted from adult speakers (ADU) and those from younger ones (YOU); in this corpus the interactions are not numbered according to their turn, and hence such information cannot be provided. Thus, (1) was selected from the *Linguistic Innovators Corpus* (LIC), adult sample. This system clearly facilitates the tracing and retrieving of the original, if necessary.

3.1. General resources used to strengthen negatives

Five main methods to intensify negatives were identified in both adult and teen talk, as the following examples illustrate.

(i) Clause negatives with non-assertive items,

(5) You *didn't* do the work *at all*. (COB140709/16)

(6) There's *not even one* in this room you know. (COB140301/66)

(ii) Repetition of the adverb *never* and the combination *never ever*,

(7) I've *never ever* had one. (LICYOU)

(iii) Multiple negatives or double negatives intended to heighten a negative meaning,

(8) I *ain't* got *nothing* to do, sit and play my computer.  
(COB132707/302)

(iv) Negative polarity collocations and idiomatic expressions,

(9) They *haven't got the foggiest idea* about it. (DCPDLB010457)

(v) *absolutely/ definitely/certainly* + negative word (*no, not, nothing, nobody*, etc)

(10) I don't, I *definitely don't* think you're in that majority.  
(COB141701/132)

Table 2 provides an overview of the general frequency of all these negative intensifying strategies in the expression of adults and teenagers. Negative concord structures, that is, double and multiple negatives, were not included here because, as will be explained below, they do not always express an intensifying meaning, that is, not all cases of negative concord express intensification.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Thus, in the following example, *I ain't got no headphones* (COB135802/44), we find two negatives in the same clause, one in the verb form *ain't* and the other in the negative determiner *no* as part of the NP *no headphones*; however, there is no

Table 2: Negative intensification in the language of teenagers (COLT and LIC young) and adults (DCPSE and LIC adults)

	All corpora considered (2,337,647 words)		
	N	freq.*	%
<b>1. Clause negatives with non-assertive words and expressions</b>			
<i>1.1. not even + verb/ not even a (single) word/ thing</i>	944	40.4	46.4
<i>1.2. not at all</i>	524	22.4	25.9
<i>1.3 not in any way</i>	158	6.75	7.8
<i>1.4 not in the slightest</i>	4	0.17	0.2
<i>1.5. not in the least</i>	4	0.17	0.2
<i>1.6. not under any circumstances</i>	2	0.08	0.1
<i>1.7. not by any means</i>	3	0.12	0.15
<i>1.8. not a/one bit</i>	8	0.34	0.4
<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>1647</b>	<b>70.4</b>	<b>81.1</b>
<b>2. Repetition of the adverb <i>never</i> and the combination <i>never ever</i></b>			
<i>2.1. never ever</i>	53	2.26	2.6
<i>2.2. never never</i>	8	0.34	0.4
<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>61</b>	<b>2.6</b>	<b>3.0</b>
<b>3. Negative polarity collocations and idiomatic expressions</b>	<b>248</b>	<b>10.6</b>	<b>12.2</b>
<b>4. <i>absolutely/ definitely certainly + negative word (no, not, nothing, nobody, etc)</i></b>	<b>76</b>	<b>3.33</b>	<b>3.7</b>
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>2032</b>	<b>86.9</b>	<b>100</b>

\* frequency per 100,000 words

Table 2 clearly shows that negatives with non-assertive words and expressions are the most common strategy that speakers resort to when they want to heighten a negative, at 81.1% of the total. This is followed by negative polarity collocations and idiomatic constructions, at 12.2%. The repetition of *never* and the combination of *never ever*, taken together,

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intensification of any kind, since the speaker is simply making a negative statement regarding the fact that he does not have any headphones.

represent 3%, while those intensifying negatives containing an adverb such as *definitely/absolutely/totally* plus a negative word are at 3.7%. In the following I will consider each of these negative intensifying strategies in detail.

3.1.1. *Clause negatives with non-assertive items: even, in the slightest, in the least, at all, in any way, by any means, in any circumstances, a bit*  
This group includes a wide variety of examples in which the non-assertive items that go with the negative may occur in different positions in the clause. *Not even* is by far the most common, followed by *not at all* and *not in any way*. Observe the following:

- (11) He is not funny **at all**, he is a bastard. (COB133905/35)
- (12) There's **not even a single** person at Hayleybury. (COB142306/238)
- (13) There's **no way** you can know. (LICADU)

From these examples we can see that it is not unusual for speakers to first introduce the intensifying negative structure and then go on to provide an explanation for having said it. Example (11) is a clear illustration of this. It is even possible to find two or more of these expressions occurring together, as a way of giving more prominence to the statement. This tendency to accumulate different types of intensifiers has also been observed in the case of adjectives (Núñez Pertejo and Palacios Martínez 2014), as in the following:

- (14) They are not related **at all**... oh no nothing **not in the slightest** (DCPDLB070076)
- (15) And it wasn't **at all. No way**. (DCPDIB010165)

Such non-assertive expressions may occur in subordinate clauses with negative main sentences containing verbs of thought, perception, probability, opinion, intention and volition (*think, know, believe, seem, appear, be probable, be likely*, etc). This type of negative is generally recorded in the literature as being *transferred* (Quirk *et al.* 1985: 1033-1035), *transported negation* (Leech 1975; Downing and Locke 2005), *neg-abscription* (Klima 1964) or even *negative raising* (Horn 1978, 1989;

Fisher 1999; Tovina 2001; Mazzon 2004). The negative in fact belongs to the subordinate clause but is moved to the main clause for pragmatic reasons. The meaning of the whole utterance is not greatly altered, although the speaker does in this way sound less direct or critical of events, situations, others, etc. It is a kind of hedge, a way for the speaker not to get too involved in what is being expressed. Consider the following:

(16) I **don't** think that's healthy **at all**. (DCPDIB440195)

A closer look at all these non-assertive expressions reveals that they all have the following features: a) they are mainly restricted to the negative or at least to non-assertive or non-affirmative contexts (Quirk *et al.* 1985: 784-785; Huddleston, Pullum *et al.* 2002: 834-838;<sup>5</sup> b) they do not necessarily collocate with any specific lexical item, showing a high degree of variation in this regard; c) they function mainly as subjuncts, according to Quirk *et al.* (1985: 566); d) all of them, with the exception of *not even*, can stand on their own as a reply to a previous sentence (e.g. A: *They are not so related at all*. B: *Not in the slightest*. (DCPDLB070076); A: *you know home entertainment was not in them days at all*. B: *No, not at all* (LICADU)); and, finally, e) they may occur in mid (12), (13), or final position (14), (15), (16), although the latter is more common.

The adverb *even* with a negative is a common way for both teenagers and adults to intensify negatives. It occurs with a wide range of main verbs and auxiliaries, although verbs of perception (*hear, listen, see, feel, look, sound, touch*) and thought (*realize, remember, know, think, understand, believe*) are the most frequent.

(17) He **don't even know** what I wanna do. (LICYOU)

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<sup>5</sup> This means that they may occur in questions such as in *wh-* and *yes/no* questions, as in *have you seen Jim at all during the week?* (COB133905/497), in conditional clauses e.g. *if you think you can help at all, see Aurel afterwards*. (BNCDCH557), and they may also be found with the so called fuzzy, approximate or incomplete negators, that is, adverbs and determiners which are negative in meaning but not in form (Quirk *et al.* 1985: 780; Huddleston, Pullum *et al.* 2002: 815; Tottie 1991: 7): *hardly, scarcely, rarely, seldom, barely*, e.g. *he hardly talked at all* (LICYOU), *they've hardly moved at all*. (BNCKCY570).

Certain collocations recur frequently in all the corpora considered, such as those having **bother** as main verb.

(18) Some of them **can't even** be **bothered**. (LICYOU)

As a variant of the previous construction, we also find the pattern *not (even) a/one* and *not (even) a single* plus a noun, these commonly used as emphatic alternatives to the countable determiner *no*. They generally express the meaning of there being none of something. Although in theory there are no restrictions on the selection of the noun, in fact they tend to collocate with a limited number of lexical items, including *scrap, jot, crumb, ounce, iota, shred, sign, speck*, etc.<sup>6</sup> All these nouns very often play the role of partitives and are generally classified in the literature as minimisers (Bolinger 1972; Hoeksema and Rullmann 2001; Horn 2001) since they occupy the lowest position on the scale, being equivalent to *any*.<sup>7</sup>

(19) A: Have you actually like translated it and stuff?

B: No way. **Not a word**. (COB142302/9).

(20) There's **not even a single** person at Hayleybury. (COB142306/238)

Traugott (2012: 42-52) also shows how some of these nouns and NPs, such as *a bit* and *a shred*, have developed in the history of English from their role as partitives to quantifiers and then to degree modifiers. These changes, according to Traugott, took place in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In fact, in present-day English both *a bit* and *a shred* are polysemous and can function as partitives (unit of), quantifiers (some, many) and degree modifiers ('rather') (Traugott 2012: 48). More recently,

<sup>6</sup> Hoeksema and Rullmann (2001: 134) note in this respect that some, such as *a red cent, a Chinaman's chance, a hill of beans*, are idiomatic expressions that refer to the endpoint of a pragmatic scale that "is now conventional and arbitrary".

<sup>7</sup> In the data I did not register many examples of these partitives, although in the BNC several cases are recorded: he **ain't an ounce** of trouble. (BNCKBE7654); he's **never** deviated **one iota** from his commitment to both the trade union... and to the Party. (BNCHDU230); anyway the only we know is that the lifeboat was washed ashore near and **not a sign** of men on it. (BNCHET312); you people have neither tile over your heads **not speck** of land under your feet. (BNCKGN661)

Hartman (2015:97) also refers to this issue with specific reference to *a bit* which behaves differently to some other diminizers/minimizers in its response to negation, since in negated contexts it takes on an emphatic negative meaning (*he was not a bit defensive = he was not at all defensive*). This contrasts with *little*, for example, since here an emphatic affirmative is expressed rather than a heightened negative (*he was not a little defensive = he was very defensive*).

Also, at lower frequencies we find constructions with *not even* as part of negative concord structures, more particularly, when the other negative is *nothing*.

(21) You *ain't even* done *nothing*. (LICYOU)

*At all* can appear on its own as a polite reply to a statement of thanks, one which these days is in general merely conventional, or as an answer to a negative question. It shows more flexibility than the other prepositional phrases of this group since it may occur not only with *not* but also with other negatives, such as *never*, *nobody*, *nothing*, *nowhere*, *none*, etc.

(22) I think I was *never at all* in the morning. (DCPDLB03110)

(23) There is *nowhere* to park *at all*. (DCPDLB500647)

It may also occur in negative concord structures and as a kind of reinforcement to a previous negative, as in (24):

(24) Stop the people that *don't do nothing at all*. (LICYOU)

Although in modern English *at all* occurs mainly in negative and in non-assertive contexts, according to the OED in the past it was used quite extensively in the affirmative with a heightening meaning, and this seems to have been preserved in some parts of the USA,<sup>8</sup> especially after a superlative, as in:

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<sup>8</sup> *At all* as a negative intensifier is not attested by the OED until late in the 15th century (1476). Data from the *Corpus of Contemporary American English* (COCA) show that in AE it is possible to find cases of this adverbial form in affirmative contexts, although they are not very common: *It is a miracle that you*

(25) He is the greatest man **at all**. (OED online)

*In the least* is found in very few examples, only 4 in our data, and can appear on its own as a reply to a previous question. The negative particle *not* is generally bound to the verbal form. Sentences such as *\*I find it not in the least surprising*, rather than *I would not find it in the least surprising*, could be regarded as non-grammatical in standard English. The only exception would be when a negator such as *nobody* occupies initial position.

(26) Nobody would worry **in the least**. (DCPDLB270582)

End position is more common, and may alternate with mid position, although the latter tends to be more emphatic. Moreover, whereas in final position it modifies the verb phrase, in mid position it is part of an adjective phrase.

(27) I'm not **in the least** convinced. (DCPDLJ040099)

*In the slightest* is, like the previous expression, linked to the verb and can also stand on its own as a reply to a previous question. The number of instances recorded is once again very limited, with only 4 tokens in the data.

*In any way* with its variants *in no way* and *no way* is also used to intensify a negative utterance. *No way* seems to be more common than the other two, and differs from all the other forms described above in that it can easily be fronted through inversion of the subject-verb position. This is generally done to achieve a higher level of intensification than where there is no inversion.

(28) **No way** am I gonna let my... someone go and hit my mum.  
(LICYOU)

The modal auxiliaries *would* and *will* are usually placed after *no way* and convey an unfulfilled hypothesis.

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*are sitting there to talk to us at all*. (COCSPOKCBS\_Morning); *I think that everybody who has watched this at all*. (COCSPOKCNN\_Talkback)

(29) and **no way** would in Jerusalem sacrifice be offered.  
(DCPDIB710100)

*No way* can also occur with other modal verbs, such as *can*.

(30) **No way** can I eat this. (DCPDLB310407)

*No way* is also found quite frequently on its own as an answer to a previous statement, to express not only refusal but also the speaker's amazement or incredulity.

(31) A: I mean that would explain why the writing is not that of Charles Dickens.  
B: **No way**. (DCPDI060239)

In about 10% of all cases of *no way* (16 examples) we find it with existential *there* constructions followed by a dependent clause. The heightening effect of the existential clause can be compared to that expressed by the inverted process noted above.

(32) That pisses me off there ain't **no way** to do it. (LICYOU)

We also find examples in which this negative intensifying form is modified by an intensifier such as *absolutely*.

(33) There's **absolutely no way** of restoring it artificially.  
(BNCF07140)

*By any means, a bit* and *under any circumstances* occur on very few occasions in the data, and behave quite similarly to the previous expressions.

3.1.2. Repetition of the adverb *never* and the combination *never ever*

The repetition of the adverb *never* also serves to intensify negative statements.<sup>9</sup> Consider the following examples:

- (34) I love my Christmas dinner I will ***never never*** leave that out.  
(LICYOU)

A distinction must be made here between cases in which *never* is a mere repetition typical of spoken language and cases where the repetition has an intensifying force. Access to the audio files helped clarify this question in some but not all cases. We also find structures in which *never* combines with *ever* to strengthen a negative utterance.

- (35) I've never I've ***never ever*** heard Jim's voice before.  
(COB132707/303)

The combination of *never* and *ever* is also found, although at a low frequency, in existential *there* clauses (36) and even in double negatives or negative concord structures (37).

- (36) there's ***never ever*** blooming. (COB141101/75)  
(37) he hates (name) like fucking driving his car {unclear} so ***don't never ever*** let (name) drive my car. (LICYOU)

*Ever* also occurs with other negative words such as *nobody*, *nothing* and *none* to achieve a similar communicative purpose.

- (38) Nobody's ***ever*** said it. (COB132707/173)

Furthermore, *ever* also appears bound to *wh*-words such as *what*, *who*, *where*, *which* with a similar intention.

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<sup>9</sup> Although I did not record any examples in the data analyzed, it is not at all unusual to find *never* with other intensifying expressions, such as *(all) my life*, *in a million years*, *for a million of pounds*, e.g., There was one particular hole and I looked at it and thought, ***in a million years*** we will ***never*** get up there. (BNCG59561).

- (39) We never shot Hag or French or **whoever** the old fools were.  
(DCPDLB150330)

The adverb *whatever* can also be used in a negative clause after a NP or clause containing the quantifier *any* in order to make the negative more prominent.

- (40) They had no plans **whatever**. (DCPDLB15071)

Similar to *whatever* is *whatsoever*, which usually appears after the negative pronouns *none* and *nothing*, with a similar function.

- (41) There are none **whatsoever**. (DCPDIF060113)

*Whatever* may also be placed after a NP if the determiner *no* or *any* forms part of it, and occupies final position.

- (42) She makes no effort **whatsoever**. (LICYOU)

### 3.1.3. Multiple negatives or double negatives intended to heighten a negative meaning

By double negation, or negative concord, we mean the presence of two or more negatives in the same clause which do not cancel each other out (Huddleston, Pullum *et al.* 2002: 843).

- (43) He **ain't** got **no** water left. (COB133901/184)

I have observed that, through the use of negative concord, speakers sometimes strengthen the negative meaning of the message. This can be seen in following example:

- (44) The third man comes out like this ... he goes what's a matter with you? He goes you've got your cigarettes. <shouting>I **didn't get no fucking matches**, did I?</> That was my little joke that.  
(COB132701/6)

This example forms part of a monologue in which the speaker is coming to the end of a joke which she has been telling to a group of friends. Here, *fucking* also serves as an intensifier to accentuate the negative meaning.

As already noted, it is not always easy to tell whether the speaker's intention is to strengthen a negative meaning, or is simply a matter of reporting a negative fact or giving a refusal. The audio recording in such cases might help to clarify this, although not always, and indeed with these data the sound quality was sometimes not good enough to allow for any firm decision. In such cases, contextual and pragmatic factors have prevailed in the analysis.

#### *3.1.4. Negative polarity collocations and idiomatic expressions*

These are intensifying expressions that occur in combination with a limited set of common verbs in everyday interactions, such as *have, know, care, give, see, lift, move, pay, say, hear, eat* and *speak*. They can be regarded as a subgroup of general-negative polarity-items (NPIs) (Huddleston, Pullum *et al.* 2002: 823) and are not exclusive to English.<sup>10</sup> Their degree of idiomaticity varies and although their general meaning can usually be gathered from the meaning of their constituents, few are found in positive forms. They are quite common in modern English and in a previous study (Palacios Martínez 2003) they amounted to around 23% of all idiomatic expressions showing negative polarity. Here are some examples:

- (45) I *don't know a clue* what he's saying. (LICYOU)
- (46) They *haven't got the foggiest idea* about it. (DCPDLB010457)
- (47) You *never pay a penny* over the odds for what it cost them. (DCPDIB22078)

The majority show clause negation and tend to follow these main syntactic patterns:

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<sup>10</sup> These have been reported in many languages, including Spanish, Galician, French, German, Portuguese, Dutch and Italian (Price 1962; George 1970; Gaatone 1971; Bernini and Ramat 1992; Bosque 1980; Hoeksema, Rullmann, Sánchez-Valencia and Wouden 2001). However, this does not mean that perfect translated equivalents can be found across different languages.

*I haven't got a clue.* [NP+ VP (have got)+ not+ NP]  
*I don't give a toss.* [NP + not + VP (lexical verb) + (NP)]  
*She won't give you a farthing.* [NP+ VP (mod. verb (will)+ not + Vb)+ (NP)]  
*The house ain't worth a blight.* [(NP) + be + not + (AdjP)]

Although in the examples above *not* negation prevails over *no* negation, this is not necessarily the rule in all such negative polarity idiomatic constructions. Their frequency also varies notably, although the combinations with *have*, *give* and *see* tend to be the most common.<sup>11</sup>

### 3.1.5. Adverbs such as *absolutely*, *definitely* and *certainly* plus *not/no* or *nothing*

Adverbs like *absolutely*, *definitely* and *certainly* plus a negative also constitute a simple way of intensifying a negative expression, and are used by both adults and teenagers. These may occur in initial, mid or final position and their meaning and pragmatic value may change accordingly.

- (48) I'm ***certainly not*** going to wear a uniform. (DCPDLB240361)  
 (49) It's not an apocryphal story this ***absolutely no*** darling so. (DCPDLB220795)

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<sup>11</sup> The following NPIDs were the most commonly recorded in the data analyzed: ***not be*** bothered, ***not care*** less, a shit, a sod; ***not do*** a/such a thing; ***not eat*** a thing; ***not get*** a chance, a penny; ***not give*** a bugger, a crap, a dickie bird, a fuck, a monkey's shit, a sod, a toss, a (blooming) damn, a farthing, a crap, a shit; ***not have*** a (bloody) clue, a chance, a hope in hell, a penny, a piss, a thing, a word, the foggiest idea; ***not hear*** a word; ***not know*** a clue; ***not lift*** a finger; ***not mention*** a word; ***not move*** a muscle; ***not pay*** a penny; ***not say*** a dickie bird, a word, a boo, a thing; ***not see*** a dickie bird, a word, a soul, a thing; ***not speak*** a word; ***not spend*** a penny; ***not turn*** a hair; ***not understand*** a (bloody) word; ***not worth*** a blight. Here are some further examples: *I don't give a damn. Shut up, hush hush.* (COB137804/135); *Cassie, we don't give a fuck about!* (COB132503/38); *I don't think the parents give a crap what they do.* (LICYOU); *she won't give a farthing when she had her period.* (LICYOU); *they don't give you a shit where you go.* (LICYOU).

They may also be found on their own as a categorical answer to a previous statement or question (50), and may even occur in double negatives (51).

- (50) A: Can I have a pen anyway?  
 B: No, **certainly not**. (COB139003/61)
- (51) I'm not the best person in the world. I'm not the prettiest person in the world but **I certainly not ain't** ugliest right? (LICYOU)

As a variation on the use as a categorical answer, there are cases in which one of these adverbs may modify a whole NP.

- (52) the amount of times I've walked home like two in the morning and got **absolutely no** trouble. (LICYOU)

The use of swear words such as *bloody*, *fucking* and *damn* as general intensifiers is quite frequent and has been already reported in the literature (Stenström *et al.* 2002; Biscetti 2006; Palacios Martínez and Núñez Pertejo 2012), more particularly, in the language of teenagers. For the purposes of this study, I have focused on those cases in which such words serve to intensify negatives, and in this respect their function is quite similar to regular intensifiers such as *absolutely*, *definitely* and *certainly* reported above. Their frequency in negatives is not so high as in clauses of positive polarity, yet is still noteworthy. In all cases they function as subjuncts modifying the VP of the clause and are always found next to the main verb of the VP.

- (53) I'm **not fucking** going to the toilet. (COB133901/24)  
 (54) I **can't bloody** tell you. (COB133901/564)

No tokens of *damn* have been recorded in the analysis, since this particular swear word tends to modify NPs, AdjPs or AdvPs rather than full VPs.

- (55) I lost the **damn** letter (LICYOU)  
 (56) I know **damn** well a couple of people. (LICYOU)

One set of examples which I have not considered as part of this group are cases in which such swear words occur in negative polarity clauses but modify only part of the clause, mainly a NP or an AdjP, rather than the whole clause. The following are examples:

(57) she **don't** even get **fucking** income support. (LICYOU)

(58) it's **not** a **bloody** tea party. (LICYOU)

A special group of these negatives intensified by an expletive involves imperatives with a strong directive meaning; these have indeed been included in my data. Here are two such examples:

(59) **don't** you **fucking** tell me. (LICYOU)

(60) Oh **don't bloody** push me away! (LICYOU)

### *3.2. Negative intensification in the language of teenagers and adults*

In this section I will focus on two main features. Firstly, I will draw a comparison between the language of teenagers and adults as regards the frequency of the negative intensifying expressions outlined in the preceding sections; secondly, I will assess the extent to which teenagers and adults use the same linguistic strategies and resources to intensify negatives, looking especially at where possible differences can be identified.

#### *3.2.1. Negative intensification frequency*

As hypothesized, the findings show that teenagers tend to intensify negatives more than adults, and that this is statistically significant:  $X^2=36.15$ ,  $df=1$ ,  $p<.0001$ . However, such a finding needs to be read with caution, in that the corpora used here are not wholly comparable in terms of size and the methodology of data collection; while in COLT the teenagers recorded themselves in their everyday interactions, in DCPSE the samples of conversations were selected for this purpose and LIC is based on sociolinguistic group interviews conducted by two field researchers. Such differences across the corpora may partly explain the results here; nevertheless, a greater tendency in favour of negative intensification in the teen data is clearly observed, and this is confirmed

by the Chi-square test. If we focus only on the results obtained for COLT (teenagers) and for DCPSE (adults), we note that the differences here are not so clearly marked, and indeed are not statistically significant at the .05 level,  $X^2= 2.51$ ,  $df=1$ ,  $p<.1131$ . By contrast, differences are clearly observed in the case of youths and adults from LIC  $X^2= 50.14$ ,  $df=1$ ,  $p<.0001$ , although, as discussed above, the size of these two datasets differs considerably; while the sample of teenagers contains almost 1,300,000 words, that of the adults' has around 260,000 words.

Figure 1: Negative intensification frequency in the four corpora considered: adult versus teen talk

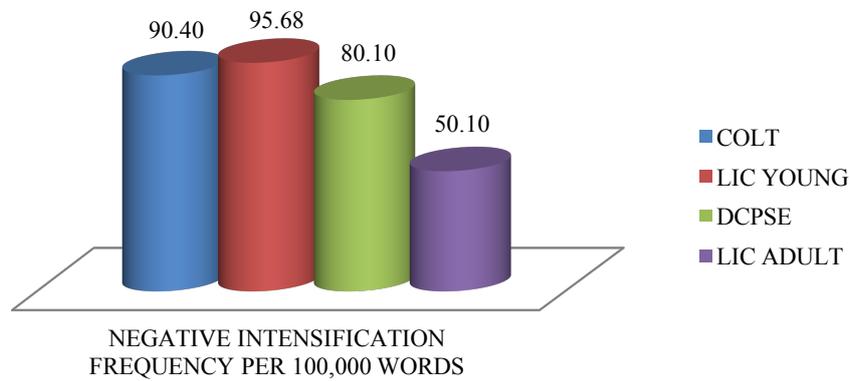


Table 3: Negative intensification in the language of teenagers (COLT and LIC young) compared to that of adults (DCPSE and LIC adults)

	COLT (young, 431,528 words)		LIC (young, 1,223,000 words)		DCPSE (adult, 425,519 words)		LIC (adult, 257,600 words)	
	N	freq.*	N	freq.*	N	freq.*	N	freq.*
<i>not (even)+ verb/not even a (single) word/ thing/</i>	161	37.3	689	56.3	65	15.3	29	11.2
<i>not at all</i>	78	18.1	200	16.4	192	45.1	54	20.9
<i>not in any way</i>	27	6.3	97	7.9	22	5.2	12	4.7
<i>not in the slightest</i>	0	-	2	0.2	1	0.2	1	0.4
<i>not in the least</i>	0	-	0	-	4	0.9	0	-
<i>not under any/ those circumstances</i>	0	-	0	-	2	0.5	0	-
<i>not by any means</i>	1	0.2	-	-	1	0.2	1	0.4
<i>not a/one bit</i>	3	0.7	1	0.08	3	0.7	1	0.4
<i>never never</i>	-	-	4	0.3	2	0.5	2	0.8
<i>never ever</i>	8	1.8	26	2.1	5	1.1	14	5.4
Negative intensifying idioms	88	20.4	124	10.1	25	5.9	11	4.3
<i>not absolutely/ definitely certainly + negative word (no, not, nothing, nobody, etc)</i>	12	2.8	19	1.5	17	4	3	1.2
<i>not fucking/bloody</i>	12	2.8	10	0.8	2	0.5	1	0.4
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>390</b>	<b>90.4</b>	<b>1172</b>	<b>95.68</b>	<b>341</b>	<b>80.1</b>	<b>129</b>	<b>50.1</b>

\* frequency per 100,000 words

Arising from the above findings is the question of why teenagers intensify negatives more often than their adult counterparts. Two factors might be in operation here. Firstly, a previous exploratory study (Palacios Martínez 2011) showed that, broadly speaking, teenagers make use of more negatives than adults. This has to do with pragmatic, social and

cognitive factors. Youths tend to be more spontaneous, natural and categorical than adults, and mitigate or hedge their expressions less; they are prone to refuse proposals or deny facts promptly. On the contrary, adults behave in a more self-conscious way and tend to convey their attitudes and views more indirectly. All of this could, by extension, be reflected in the use of negative intensification structures in the expression of the two groups. Secondly, several studies (Rodríguez 2002; Stenström *et al.* 2002; Androutopoulos and Georgakopoulos 2003; Palacios Martínez and Núñez Pertejo 2012) have shown that teenagers are very fond of using expressions that denote the highest qualities of a scale (*she is cool; he is a wicked rapper; they are wicked computer games; what a great fun, it's gonna be a massive orgy*), they make heavy use of certain intensifiers (*it was a really bollocks match; they are so bloody thick; he was pretty crap*) and expletives with a strengthening function (*they're all bloody wicked; damn fool man; it's so fucking cool*). Furthermore, it is common in teen talk to find words formed with prefixes such as *super-* (*amazing super games, super goals, super cool, super bike clutching gears*) and *mega-* (*mega stuff, mega crap, mega CD, mega money*), which also serve to convey extreme degree. The heightening of negatives could well be considered to be in keeping with this general tendency, in that it is natural for teenagers to add force to their expression as a means of showing their feelings and views openly and directly; they tend to react spontaneously to the other participants in their interactions and ultimately this leads to an intensification of the language used.

### 3.2.2. *Differences in the way teenagers and adults express negative intensification*

The results clearly indicate that not only do teenagers and adults differ in the frequency with which they intensify negatives, but that differences are also found in how they heighten negative clauses. While teenagers prefer to use idiomatic expressions and swear words (*fucking, bloody*) as negative intensifiers, adults opt for non-assertive and negatively-oriented polarity-sensitive items (NPIs), with the exception of structures with *not even* where the opposite tendency is found. In the case of teenagers' language the expressions with non-assertive items are represented almost exclusively by *at all, no way* and *a/one bit*. Very few instances are

recorded of *in the least*, *in any circumstances*, these latter two perhaps sounding too formal for this group of speakers.

*At all* is clearly more favored by adults than teens, the figures in both adult corpora being much higher than those corresponding to teenagers. However, in the case of *in any way* the opposite is true, with frequencies per 100,000 words of 6.3 and 7.9 in COLT and LIC (young group) respectively, versus 5.2 and 4.7 in DCPSE and LIC (older subjects). This is explained by the fact that teenagers tend to use the expression *no way* very often to convey a complete refusal or absolute disagreement with something; as a short and direct negative it is very much in keeping with the spontaneity and explicitness of the teen sociolect. Notice that in many cases it occurs on its own, in an independent turn, and the speaker tends to repeat it to make their point clear. Thus:

(61) **No way** you're not supposed to do that. (COB133905/13)

(62) A: Go on Daniel, go for it.

B: **No way**. (COB132611/269)

Indeed, from a total of 124 tokens of expressions with the meaning *not in any way* in our teen talk data, almost 90% (111 examples) are of *no way*. This illustrates the popularity of this intensifying negative in the language of teenagers, which is present to a similar degree in the two teen corpora analyzed. For adults, *no way* is less common; from a total of 34 tokens of *not in any way* expressions, we find 8 examples of *no way* (23.5%), although *there-existential* sentences with *no way* are also quite frequent.

No significant differences are identified between teen and adult data regarding the use of *never never* and *never ever* as negative strengthening expressions, and the same is true of adverbs such as *absolutely*, *certainly* and *definitely* plus a negative. However, this contrasts with findings on the use of swear words such as *bloody* and *fucking* as negative intensifiers. As expected, the numbers for teenagers here are notably greater than those for adults, with frequencies per 100,000 words of 2.8 and 0.8 for COLT and LIC (youths), respectively, versus 0.5 and 0.4 for DCPSE and LIC (elderly speakers).

Negatives with *not even* are also much more common in the language of teenagers in each corpora, with frequencies per 100,000 words of 37.3 and 56.3 in COLT and LIC (youths) respectively, versus 15.3 and 11.2, in DCPSE and LIC (adults). *Not even* is generally used to express a negative

contrast with something mentioned or stated previously, and tends to be associated with a hypothetical situation; this may explain why we find a large number of examples with modals such as *could* and *would*.

As mentioned above, negative intensifying idioms are also more frequent in the language of teenagers than adults, and when found in the latter are of a different nature. As usual, teenagers tend to opt for more colloquial and informal expressions, and are also very fond of slang and swear words. Expressions such as *not give a fuck, a shit, a damn, a crap, a farthing, a toss, not have a piss, not care less* are typical of teen talk, and although they may also form part of the speech of adults, they do so at a much lower frequency.

Table 4 summarizes the most significant differences found between adults and teenagers as regards negative intensification. The data obtained from COLT and LIC -young are compared with those provided by the two adult corpora (DCPSE and LIC-adult).

Table 4: Main significant differences between adults and teenagers as regards negative intensification

	COLT + LIC (teenagers) 1,654,528 words)		DCPSE + LIC (adults) (683,119 words)	
	N	freq.*	N	freq.*
<i>not (even)+ verb/not even a (single) word/ thing!</i>	850	51.3	94	13.7
<i>not at all</i>	278	16.8	246	36
<i>not in any way</i>	124	7.49	34	4.97
Negative intensifying idioms	212	12.8	36	5.26
<i>not fucking/bloody</i>	22	1.32	3	0.43

\* frequency per 100,000 words

#### 4. Conclusions

English has a wide range of resources to intensify negatives, from negative import expressions to reinforcement expressions achieved through the repetition of *never*, double/multiple negatives, and both semi-idiomatic and idiomatic negative polarity expressions.

Teenagers and adults show differences in the strengthening of negatives, not only in terms of their frequency (teenagers tend to use a higher number) but also in terms of the particular strategies they use. While adults opt more often for expressions of negative import, teenagers prefer negative polarity idioms and short, strong negatives such as *no way*. Negative concord constructions can also be used to reinforce a negative, and are also more common in teen talk than in adults.

The choice of different intensifying resources by the speakers of each group may also have a pragmatic motivation. Teenagers are in general less likely to mitigate their language than adults and tend to be more spontaneous, frank, direct and categorical in their statements. Furthermore, whereas adults tend to use intensifying negatives mainly for explicit or implicit denials (Tottie 1991: 21), teenagers often use them not only for this purpose but also to show their complete disapproval of something or their absolute refusal to accept what they are told. In this way we can see their use of intensifying negatives here as more closely associated with refusal and rejection (Tottie 1991: 22). The negative *no way* might well represent this; it is a short but effective way of making their position clear. Hence we can say that these intensifying negatives help to construct teens' identity and are in keeping with other features typical of the youth expression. Accordingly, this study shows in more global terms that the language of teenagers cannot be analyzed exclusively on the basis of internal linguistic factors (morphosyntax, discourse, lexis, phonology); contextual, social and pragmatic variables need to be considered in a full understanding of this code.

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