

**“It is the worst of our time”:  
Youth language, language attitudes, and arguments about *literally***

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**1. Introduction**

Young speakers face particular social and linguistic pressures as they progress through their middle school and high school years. At this age they are often striving to create identities for themselves that are separate from the adults in their lives — teachers, parents, coaches, older siblings — and make them stand out among their peers; using language creatively is one powerful resource for them to do so (Eckert, 1997). As a result, youth are the primary creators of novel words and innovative uses for existing words. At the same time, they are being socialized by adults to conform to the linguistic styles deemed appropriate for pursuing higher education and/or entering the workforce. These competing pressures have led to young speakers frequently being the targets of linguistic criticism — criticism that often stems from misperceptions about what they are attempting to achieve through their language (cf. Darcy, 2007; Kiesling 2004).

Over the past decade, young speakers have been publicly chided for adopting a new use of the word *literally*. In addition to its existing meanings of ‘in a literal sense’ and ‘word for word,’ *literally* is now used as an intensifier that can modify both literal and non-literal phrases, as in (1) and (2).

- (1) I literally cannot deal with how cold I am. [Tumblr]
- (2) My life is literally a Lifetime movie right now & I cannot deal. [Twitter]

Critics of this new use have voiced their opposition in a variety of ways. Facebook groups have been created for like-minded people opposed to its use (3); online magazines such as *The Awl* have published articles about it (4); the word appears on numerous “worst word” and “pet peeves” lists (5); and formal English usage guides now differentiate between “correct” and “incorrect” ways to use *literally* (6).

- (3) Don't Use the Word 'Literally' in a Sentence Unless You Can Use It Properly [Facebook]
- (4) “Literally the Worst Word On the Planet (Miller, 2012)
- (5) Words that will make me hit you if used improperly [Wordnik]
- (6) *Quite Literally: Problem Words and How to Use Them* (Hicks, 2004)

Despite the prevalence of these types of negative opinions and ongoing debates about the “proper” uses of the word, there has been relatively little linguistic research conducted on it. This paper offers a small-scale analysis of the various modern uses of *literally* and how these compare to speakers’ perceptions of its use. Specifically, it aims to answer the following research questions:

1. How do speakers perceive new uses of *literally*, particularly its use as an intensifier?
2. How does *literally* function syntactically and pragmatically in English, and how do these functions compare to listeners’ perceptions?
3. What are the common arguments criticizing or defending the use of *literally* as an intensifier?
4. How do people perceive speakers who use *literally* in innovative ways?
5. What are the consequences of these perceptions for speakers who use it, particular young speakers?

To answer these questions, 125 tokens of *literally* were selected at random from public media, primarily social media (Twitter, Tumblr, Facebook, YouTube, television, online newspapers and magazines). Multiple sources of data were used to increase the probability of capturing any source-specific syntactic constructions or pragmatic uses. Language attitude data were collected from three sources: the aforementioned public media with the addition of entertainment websites (e.g. Buzzfeed, College Humor), blogs, and online commentary; an online survey completed by 270 university students 18 to 25 years of age<sup>1</sup>; and a focus group interview with four university students.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The survey consisted of 23 questions designed to elicit participants’ attitudes about their own language, language change, and various features of youth speech, including *literally*.

<sup>2</sup> The interview participants were students well-acquainted with each other and myself prior to the time of the study. Their genders, ages, and areas of study were as follows:

JG: Male, 22, International Business and Real Estate

EM: Female, 21, Chemical Engineering (Honors College)

TS: Female, 21, Elementary Education

EQ: Female, 22, Exercise Science and Business (Honors College)

## 2. Perceptions of Use

The word *literally* has been used as an intensifier in English for nearly 250 years (*Oxford English Dictionary*), but it has only recently become a controversial topic of public discourse. Because communication today can be widespread and instantaneous through the use of social media, and because “many of the most enthusiastic, expert, and creative users of media are youth” (Bucholtz, 2000: 281), young speakers’ linguistic practices are visible to a much larger audience today than they have been in previous decades. This increased prevalence of nonstandard forms like intensifier *literally* has made young speakers and their linguistic choices easier targets for criticism and debate.

Much of the debate about *literally* stems from people having different and/or contradictory perceptions of how the word functions in speech, and the range of these perceptions was exemplified in the responses of survey participants. Nearly all (96%) acknowledged that *literally* can function as an intensifier, selecting ‘emphasis’ as the word’s function in the sample sentence “I literally died laughing.” However, 29% of respondents selected ‘meaningless filler word’ as its function in the same sentence, meaning that some speakers perceive it as having a function but no meaning. Other perceptions in the survey included those in (7)-(10).

- (7) I think of it mostly as slang or an exaggeration.
- (8) It’s just like positively, really, absolutely — they all mean “truthfully.” “Literally” just means it more.
- (9) It means ‘in a literal sense.’
- (10) It has become vernacular for “literally” to more or less mean “figuratively.”

## 3. Syntactic and Pragmatic Functions

Unlike smaller words that can occur anywhere in an utterance (e.g. *um*, *er*; Brinton, 1996), my syntactic analyses of tokens of *literally* revealed that the word is syntactically restricted: 89% of tokens occurred in one of the six predictable sentence positions for an English adverb (Lobeck, 2000), most frequently after a ‘to be’ main verb (28%) and before any main verb (25%). In terms of collocation patterns, the tokens primarily modified the types of phrases expected for an adverb, namely verb phrases and adjective phrases as in (11) and (12). However, some tokens in my dataset had the less common constructions of modifying noun phrases and prepositional phrases, as in (13) and (14).

- (11) I am literally giving up on everything and everyone. [Twitter]
- (12) You are literally perfect. [Twitter]
- (13) Girls can spend literally their whole day thinking about a specific someone they like. [Twitter]
- (14) ...my entire team is literally behind me right now.  
[*The Daily Gamecock*, “Equestrian Knocks off No.1, No.4 After Struggles”]

Using functions of *literally* identified in previous research as guidelines (Israel, 2002; Liberman, 2011; Lukes, 2011), my pragmatic analyses revealed six primary functions for the tokens of *literally* in the data set, the majority of which are not mutually exclusive. In

the list below, an asterisk (\*) denotes a function that was not present in my data set but was identified in previous research.

1. To indicate translation, ‘word for word’\*
  - (15) Collections of Old and Middle Irish stories called *dindshenchas*, literally “histories of places,” were compiled between the tenth and twelfth centuries A.D. [BYU Corpus of Contemporary American English]
2. Arbitrate between two literal expressions\* (Israel, 2002)
  - (16) ...receive a certificate for a free weekend night...Then enjoy the extra room (literally), the two telephones with call waiting...two televisions...
3. Avoid more awkward or less-fitting word choice\* (Lieberman, 2011)
  - (17) A tree-ring clock can be used to date a piece of wood, say a beam in a Tudor house, with astonishing accuracy, literally to the nearest year.
4. Invert a figurative expression, ‘in a literal sense’
  - (18) just rolled out of bed, literally rolled and fell onto the ground b/c i can [Twitter]
5. Highlight apt or clever word choice (Israel, 2002)
  - (19) These are fat times in politics. Literally. Nearly 400 obesity-related bills were introduced in state legislatures across the country last year. [*TIME Magazine*, “The Politics of Fat,” 3/19/2006]
6. Strengthen the force of an utterance by marking speaker commitment (Israel, 2002)
  - A. Literal expression
    - General utterance
      - (20) Oh, no, Tarquin, I can’t come shopping on the King’s Road today...yeah, ‘cause I...I’m literally in Burma. [YouTube, “Gap Yah”, 2010]
    - Number or measurement (Lukes, 2011)
      - (21) ...this is literally the 4<sup>th</sup> One Direction song in a row [Tumblr]
  - B. Non-literal expression
    - Figurative: simile or metaphor
      - (22) It is literally like shooting fish in a barrel for police/doctors. [Twitter]
    - Hyperbolic
      - ⇒Superlative
        - (23) This is literally the cutest thing I’ve ever seen in my life... [Twitter]
      - ⇒ Number or measurement
        - (24) I literally sent him flying 20 feet across the lawn. [YouTube “Literally,” 2010]
  - C. Humor (literal or non-literal expression)
    - (25) These men are so old they literally make Michael Douglas look only 75. [Television: *Mad TV* “Literally a Parade,” 2004]
  - D. Insult (literal or non-literal expression)
    - (26) I literally could not hate you more. [Tumblr]

The most frequent function in the data set (61% of tokens) was strengthening the force of an utterance by marking speaker commitment (i.e. acting as an intensifier). For

the class of adverbs to which *literally* belongs, modal adverbs, this is typically the result of grammaticalization. Modal adverbs are adverbs that comment on the truth or sincerity of an utterance and include words such as *seriously*, *totally*, *truly*, *really*, and *honestly* (Kačmárová, 2011). Grammaticalization — the process by which a word gradually shifts from a lexical to a grammatical function (Hopper & Traugott, 2003) — changes modal adverbs to words that intensify an utterance without changing the meaning in any way (Kačmárová, 2011; Ito & Tagliamonte, 2003). During the process of grammaticalization, modal adverbs generally first increase their range of collocation (i.e. begin to modify phrases like NPs and PPs more frequently) and then increase in overall frequency of use (Ito & Tagliamonte, 2003), functioning primarily as an intensifier but retaining other functions as well. Because the process typically takes centuries, there are always multiple adverbs grammaticalizing at a given point in time. The age range of speakers who use an adverb as an intensifier most frequently can index how grammaticalized that adverb is: more grammaticalized forms are used by older speakers more often, and less grammaticalized forms are used by younger speakers more often. Because *literally* was used for intensifying effect in the majority of cases in the data set, is used more often by younger speakers, and has functioned as an intensifier for approximately 250 years, it can be inferred that it is in the process of grammaticalizing but is less grammaticalized than other intensifier modal adverbs. Another indicator that *literally* is grammaticalizing is its ability to occur in the same constructions as other grammaticalized modal adverbs. One survey question asked the participants to substitute a different word for *literally* in the following sentence:

My dreams have been so realistic lately I literally can't remember if they were real or not. [Twitter]

The most frequent responses were all modal adverbs that can be used as intensifiers in modern English: *seriously*, *honestly*, *really*, *actually*, *truly*, *totally*. Based on detailed linguistic analyses, then, the use of *literally* as an intensifier can be seen as the result of a regular form of language change and as one of several concurrent uses of the word. Everyday arguments about *literally*, however — how speakers should or should not use it, the “true” meaning of the word — are not based on detailed linguistic analyses. They are based on speakers’ intuitions about language and attitudes toward language change at a broader level.

#### 4. Attitudes and Arguments about Intensifier *Literally*

Across the survey data, interview data, and language attitude data collected online, common arguments emerged between people critical of intensifier *literally* and between people accepting of its use. Interestingly, people on opposing sides of the argument used several of the same strategies to articulate their opinions: explicitly contrasting the tenets of prescriptivism and descriptivism, appealing to pragmatism, authorization and illegitimation (Bucholtz & Hall, 2004), and specification.

##### 4a. Prescriptivism vs. Descriptivism

Many people critical of intensifier *literally* argued that language has prescribed rules and standard forms and meanings, and no matter how many people use a particular linguistic form it is incorrect if it does not conform to these rules. In other words, the concept of “majority rules” does not apply to language.

- (27) Some take the position that when a wrong usage becomes sufficiently widespread, it *ipso facto* becomes right. I hope not. Yes, language evolves and changes. But words have precise meanings, which are worth respecting and preserving. Let's not abandon that noble goal. (Hauptman, 2012)

Those accepting of intensifier *literally*, on the other hand, argued that there are no "standard forms" because language is fluid and definitions constantly change based on the most common ways that speakers use a word at a particular point in time.

- (28) There's no such thing as 'misusing' a word or using it 'wrongly.' Words don't have fixed, legally set definitions. If people use 'literally' to mean 'figuratively' — and they do — then that is, literally, what it means. [online comment]

#### 4b. Appeals to Pragmatism

The second shared strategy was appealing to the idea that language must be useful for its speakers and allow them to communicate effectively with each other. Critics of intensifier *literally* claimed that a word's usefulness is maintained through regular, rule governed speech, which keeps speakers "on the same page." Otherwise, miscommunication occurs.

- (29) If you want to describe something that could easily be interpreted figuratively, then it's very useful to have a word which means "Alert: no figurative language intended here!" Literally would be the ideal word for that, but it has been diluted. [Personal blog]

They also argued that useful, effective communication adequately expresses a speaker's ideas and emotions as concisely as possible. Since *literally* lengthens an utterance without (in their opinion) adding anything to the meaning of the utterance, it is expendable.

- (30) Like for example if someone's being an idiot, and you're like, "You're literally being an idiot right now," that's like, not a necessary literally. [EM, interview]

Some critics perceived *literally* as having the potential to intensify an utterance in certain contexts, which would make it useful, but its "excessive" use undermines attempts to use it to draw attention to something of importance.

- (31) People who say "literally" in every sentence. Every. Single. Fucking. Sentence. Is it necessary? Really? [Tumblr]

In contrast, descriptively-oriented people claimed that language change, not static rules, is what ensures a language is useful for its speakers since it is adapting to their linguistic needs; and, regardless of the forms of the words, as long as speakers understand each other then the language they use is pragmatic.

- (32) Literally doesn't mean "literally" at all, but is the equivalent of verbal italics. It is a verbal emphasis. [survey]

- (33) As for literally, as long as sentences like “don’t take me so literally” are understood, no harm. And that’s not in danger. [survey]
- (34) ...such sentences are understood to be exaggerations. [survey]

Sheidlower (2005) also notes that English speakers already use many words in their everyday language with contradictory meanings without miscommunication (e.g., *dust*, *cleave*, *peruse*), and argues that *literally* is simply an addition to that list.

#### 4c. Authorization and Illegitimation

People accepting the intensifier *literally* often used the strategy of authorization, legitimating the use of the word through an institution or other authority (Bucholtz & Hall, 2004). The most common authorities were famous authors (35), respected publications (36), and dictionaries (37), which are often considered the utmost authority on definitions and acceptable uses.

- (35) If it’s good enough for [James] Joyce, it’s good enough for me. [online comment]
- (36) Again, I ask for the evidence of what constitutes good usage? It has been good enough for TIME magazine for close to a century! (Lukes 2011)
- (37) It’s officially ok to (mis)use literally for emphasis. [survey]

People critical of *literally* also legitimated their usage preferences through the dictionary, arguing that there are “real” or “original” definitions that indicate a word’s intended meaning and secondary definitions that have been added only to appeal to the speakers who are using a word incorrectly to being with. *Literally*’s new use may be in the dictionary, but it is still incorrect because it contradicts the “real” dictionary definition (38). By taking away dictionaries as an authority to which their “opponents” can appeal, critics are simultaneously engaging in the practice of illegitimation, stripping the authorities of their authority (Bucholtz & Hall, 2004). They also did so with famous authors, arguing that an author’s fame does not make him or her incapable of making errors (39).

- (38) ...in various dictionaries you have the proper definition (that it means in a literal manner; word for word) and then a sheepish add-on definition. [Blog: The Literally Project]
- (39) The word Literally has been misused for years – by all sorts of famous writers from Mark Twain to James Joyce. That doesn’t make it right. [Blog: The Literally Project]

#### 4d. Specification

The final shared strategy was the use of specification. When speakers critical of intensifying uses conceded that speakers would continue to use it despite their opposition, and speakers accepting this use argued that speakers should be able to use it without judgment, they often added the caveat that *literally* should only be used in specific

contexts. The overarching attitude was that the more formal the context is the less appropriate it is for a speaker to use *literally* in its intensifying form. Educational and professional setting and formal writing were all deemed “off-limits.”

- (40) While it’s one thing to allow “literally” to be used in everyday speech to exaggerate a figurative point, as is often the case, it is entirely grammatically wrong to use it this way in writing. [blog]
- (41) It depends on who you’re talking to. If it’s a friend, then it’s fine, but in a professional setting it’s completely inappropriate. [survey]
- (42) JG: ...say you’re talking about one of your past achievements and you say like “I was literally the best salesperson in the region for four years.”

TS: But see in a formal situation I think I would just say “I was the best salesperson for four years in a row.” [Interview]

#### 4. Negative Perceptions and Their Consequences

Although, as demonstrated above, there was observable acceptance and support of the use of *literally* as an intensifier in the data (primarily from speakers who use it themselves), the overwhelming majority of attitudes were negative. These negative attitudes about the word are translating into negative perceptions of speakers who use it. Critics of the word view speakers who use *literally* as an intensifier as less intelligent, less educated, lazy, and generally less attractive than speakers who do not.

- (43) You sound stupid. You literally do not know what you’re saying. [survey]
- (44) They take meaning away from the word “literally” and indicate laziness and lack of thought. [survey]
- (45) Some hyperbole is okay, but more often than not it just makes me think that the person saying it is uneducated. [survey]
- (46) ...But “literally,” yeah, if somebody says it...it’s so unattractive. It’s actually a turnoff to me if I’m talking to somebody and they use the word literally incorrectly. [JG, interview]

These negative perceptions are particularly problematic for younger speakers planning to attend college or enter the workforce after high school. When people who hold these negative attitudes about *literally* are people in positions of authority (e.g., teachers, guidance counselors, potential employers, admissions officers) they have the potential to influence young speakers’ futures. Youth may face accusations of unprofessionalism or ignorance of English grammar rules and be perceived as less intelligent simply because their word choice or manner of speaking does not adhere to their interlocutor’s ideas about language. In a worst-case scenario, then, a young speaker may lose the opportunity to progress academically or professionally because of the use of a single word.



## 5. Conclusion

Speakers who use *literally* as an intensifier are not less intelligent or less competent English speakers than those who do not. The word, in all its various uses, is syntactically rule-governed and has particular interactional purposes in speech. A large portion of the university-educated students who participated in the survey — including students in honors programs — stated that they use it among friends and in informal situations. Although *literally* is continuing to grammaticalize and is becoming much more widespread in its use as an intensifier, it will likely be many more decades before negative attitudes about the word dissipate. Based on the argument strategies described above, people who are critical of this usage are aware of the arguments that people are using to advocate for its acceptance and are responding directly to them. If *literally* is following the same pattern as other modal intensifiers, then time and a continually increasing frequency of use will be the factors that transform attitudes about the word. *Really*, for instance, took nearly 400 years to become widely accepted in its grammaticalized form as an intensifier (Ito & Tagliamonte, 2003), but speakers today are not writing opinion articles or derogating other speakers for not knowing the word's "true" meaning. Since *literally* has been used as an intensifier for approximately 250 years now, it could be up to another 150 years before speakers can use it as such without incurring harsh judgment from prescriptively-minded listeners.

The linguistic data discussed in this paper, though by no means an exhaustive analysis, have highlighted the various contradictions and misperceptions that are part of people's attitudes about *literally* and speakers who use it as an intensifier. The results presented here have laid the groundwork for further research into the nuanced differences between the word's intensifying usages and diachronic analyses of the word's syntactic patterns. By building on existing research to offer a more comprehensive analysis of this data set, this paper also provides multiple types of linguistic evidence on which discussions about *literally* can be based as the word continues to develop into a fully grammaticalized form.

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