
A Pragmatic Analysis of the Use of Intensifiers in Barack Obama's Farewell Address (2017)

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Abstract

This paper explores the pragmatic functions of intensifiers in Barack Obama's Farewell Address (2017). Intensifiers, as adverbs of degree such as *very*, *so*, *most*, *never*, and *ever*, play a vital role in modifying meaning, reinforcing emphasis, and shaping rhetorical force. While a number of researches has examined intensifiers in everyday conversation, literature, and media, their pragmatic use in American presidential speeches remains underexplored. The speech was analyzed using a descriptive-analytical approach, drawing on Holmes (1984) and Cacchiani (2009) as the main models. A total of 164 intensifiers were identified and categorized into three types: undistinguished emotion, personal (subjective) emotion, and specific emotion. The findings show that the majority of intensifiers express undistinguished emotion, serving to emphasize achievements and reinforce Obama's points. Personal and specific-emotion intensifiers, though less frequent, were strategically employed to convey pride, gratitude, and urgency. The study concludes that intensifiers in Obama's Farewell Address function not merely as stylistic markers but as pragmatic tools that enhance persuasion, strengthen solidarity, and intensify emotional impact.

Keywords: intensifiers, pragmatics, political discourse; Barack Obama, Farewell Address.

1. Introduction

The use of intensifiers has attracted significant scholarly attention because of their role in shaping meaning, strengthening expression, and reinforcing the force of communication. Intensifiers—words such as *very*, *really*, *so*, *totally*, and *absolutely*—do more than modify; they serve as pragmatic tools to convey stance, emotion, and persuasion. Pragmatics, as the study of language in use, emphasizes that the meaning of these intensifiers cannot be understood in isolation but only within their context of use.

Political speeches, in particular, are fertile ground for intensifiers. Politicians rely on them to highlight urgency, amplify emotional impact, and persuade audiences. Barack Obama, well known for his

rhetorical skill, often employed intensifiers to construct solidarity, highlight achievements, and emphasize challenges. His Farewell Address (2017) provides a unique opportunity to explore these functions because it reflects both closure and continuity—marking the end of his presidency while urging citizens to carry forward democratic values.

This study aims to analyze the types, frequency, and pragmatic functions of intensifiers in Obama's Farewell Address, focusing on how they contribute to expressivity, involvement, and speech act modification.

2. Literature Review

Intensifiers are linguistic devices that denote modification, emphasis, and force to other linguistic categories (Greenbaum, 1996). Alexander (2003) defines intensification as the process by which an adverb modifies an adjective, while Milroy and Milroy (1997) emphasize their role in highlighting or reinforcing messages through forms such as very, so, too, quiet, most, never, and only. Intensifiers constitute an open class of words that evolve rapidly, leading to constant change in usage and meaning (Ito & Tagliamonte, 2003).

In terms of position, Barnfield and Buchstaller (2010) observe that intensifiers can occur across grammatical categories, including nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs. Similarly, König et al. (2013) note that intensifiers can function reflexively, connecting a reference in a given sentence and modifying its strength. The terminology has varied—degree words, amplifiers, downtowners, modifiers, gradational adverbs—but this study adopts the broad term intensifiers to highlight their ability to either strengthen or weaken meaning (Hubler, 1983; Bolinger, 1972).

3. Previous Studies

Scholars have examined intensifiers across multiple contexts. Ito and Tagliamonte (2003) analyzed Canadian English, showing that intensifiers are dynamic and socially variable. Lorenz (2002) explored academic writing and revealed that non-native learners often overuse very and really. Stenström (1999) studied teenage talk, finding that forms like so and really are especially prominent in youth speech. In other genres, Ayeleru (2012) highlighted the stylistic functions of intensifiers in African literature, while Alotaibi (2015) demonstrated their persuasive force in Arabic-English media texts.

Within political discourse, Partington (2004) showed how intensifiers reinforce solidarity and credibility during interviews. More recently, Zidan and Shwaysh (2022) carried out a pragmatic analysis of intensifiers in Boris Johnson's political interview, applying Holmes' (1984) and Cacchiani's (2009) models. Their study found that intensifiers primarily modify illocutionary force and modal meaning, while affective functions were less common, reflecting the constraints of political communication. Likewise, Lebedeva (2021) examined American media political discourse, noting that intensifiers function as persuasive devices that boost engagement and strengthen credibility.

Further contributions include Zubareva (2023), who investigated phraseological intensifiers in political discourse and emphasized their national-cultural implications, and studies in the Rupkatha Journal that applied a cognitive-pragmatic lens to phraseological intensifiers such as never, ever and more than ever. These works suggest that intensifiers are not just linguistic embellishments but serve rhetorical and pragmatic purposes, shaping how political messages are perceived.

4. Research Gap

Although these studies confirm that intensifiers play a significant role in shaping meaning across genres, there is still limited work on their pragmatic use in American presidential speeches. Most existing research has focused either on conversational English, learner writing, or literary and media discourse. To the best of the researcher's knowledge, Barack Obama's Farewell Address (2017) has not yet been

analyzed from this perspective. Therefore, this study seeks to fill that gap by investigating the types, frequency, and pragmatic functions of intensifiers in Obama's final presidential speech, with a particular focus on how they contribute to expressivity, involvement, and speech act modification.

5. Research Questions

1. What are the intensifiers employed by Barack Obama in his Farewell Address (2017)?
2. What are the pragma-stylistic interpretations and functions behind the use of these intensifiers in the speech?

6. The Model Adopted

The present study embraces an eclectic analytical framework inspired by the seminal works of Holmes (1984) and Cacchiani (2009). Drawing upon their insights, the research navigates the intricate realm of pragmatic nuances and emotional intensity in language. The analytical approach to the pragmatic functions of intensifiers is primarily guided by Cacchiani (2009), who classifies them along a delicate spectrum of expressivity and involvement, encompassing three principal dimensions — undistinguished emotions, personal (subjective) emotions, and specific emotions. This tripartite classification elegantly captures the subtle gradations of emotional colouring that speakers infuse into their discourse.

Furthermore, both Holmes (1984) and Cacchiani (2009) illuminate the intricate interplay between speech act modification and pragmatic function. Their models discern two predominant forms of illocutionary force modification: modal meaning, which mirrors the speaker's intellectual stance or attitude toward ideas within a given context; and affective meaning, which unveils the speaker's interpersonal alignment, emotional proximity, or social posture toward the addressee. These nuanced modifications, in turn, either fortify or jeopardize the speaker's social image (face), depending on their usage and context. Thus, intensifiers emerge as powerful rhetorical instruments — capable of either softening or exacerbating the impact of speech acts, shaping the tone, texture, and tenor of human communication with exquisite subtlety.

To summarize, the pragmatic functions of intensifiers considered in this study are:

- Expressivity and Involvement
- Undistinguished Emotion
- Personal (Subjective) Emotion
- Specific Emotion
- Speech Act Modification
- Modification of Modal Meaning
- Speech-Act Reinforcement
- Modification of Affective Meaning
- Speech-Act Mitigation
- Speech-Act Aggravation

7. Methodology

This study adopts a descriptive-analytical approach to investigate the use of intensifiers in Barack Obama's Farewell Address (2017). The speech transcript was collected from official sources and carefully examined. Intensifiers were identified, classified, and quantified based on Holmes (1984) and Cacchiani (2009). Their pragmatic functions were analyzed in terms of expressivity, involvement, and speech act modification. The analysis focuses exclusively on intensifiers, while other linguistic devices are excluded.

8. Procedure

This study endeavors to collect, identify, and meticulously analyze the use of intensifiers in Barack Obama's Farewell Address (2017). Adopting a descriptive quantitative-analytical approach, it seeks to unveil the pragmatic dimensions of intensifiers as deliberate and artful rhetorical instruments. The analysis unfolds across two principal domains: (1) expressivity and involvement, and (2) speech-act

modification. Through this dual framework, the study explores how intensifiers enrich the emotional resonance and communicative force of the address. Ultimately, it presents and interprets the findings to illuminate the rhetorical elegance, aesthetic finesse, and persuasive potency that these linguistic devices contribute to Obama's oratory, revealing the subtle interplay between language, emotion, and persuasion that defines his farewell speech.

9. Data Analysis and Discussion

This section analyzes how intensifiers are used by Barack Obama in his Farewell Address (2017) to convey his political and rhetorical intentions. As a farewell speech, it combines personal reflection with national vision, and intensifiers play a key role in reinforcing emotions, heightening persuasion, and strengthening solidarity with the audience.

A total of 164 intensifiers were identified in the speech. These were classified into three categories: undistinguished emotions, personal (subjective) emotions, and specific emotions.

Table (1): Frequency of Intensifiers and their Types

Types of Intensifiers	Frequency	%
Undistinguished emotions	118	72
Personal (Subjective)	29	17.7
Specific emotions	17	10.3
Total	164	100

The majority of intensifiers (72%) express undistinguished emotion, while 17.7% are personal and 10.3% specific emotion. Examples include:

- "America is a better, stronger place." (undistinguished)
- "You have made me so proud." (personal)
- "This vision of freedom is deeply embedded in our history." (specific)

Table (2): Frequency of Individual Intensifiers

Intensifier	Type	Frequency	%
Very	Undistinguished emotion	36	22
So	Undistinguished emotion	32	19.5
Most	Personal	11	6.7
Never	Undistinguished emotion	9	5.5
Ever	Specific emotion	8	4.9
Deeply	Specific emotion	4	2.4
Just	Undistinguished emotion	18	11
Too	Undistinguished emotion	6	3.6
Really	Personal	6	3.6
Totally	Undistinguished emotion	2	1.2
Others (each ≤2)	Mixed	32	19.6
Total		164	100

The most frequent intensifiers were very, so, just, most, never, and ever. From a pragmatic perspective, intensifiers modified both modal meaning and affective meaning, boosting illocutionary force, mitigating distance, and reinforcing solidarity.

Overall, undistinguished-emotion intensifiers dominated, but personal and specific-emotion forms appeared strategically at moments of reflection, pride, and urgency. This balance highlights Obama's skill

in using intensifiers to persuade, inspire, and connect with his audience.

10. Conclusion

This study investigated the pragmatic use of intensifiers in Barack Obama's Farewell Address (2017). The findings reveal that intensifiers are a central part of his rhetorical strategy, with the majority expressing undistinguished emotions that reinforce emphasis and maintain rhythm. At the same time, personal and specific-emotion intensifiers appeared at key points of the speech, particularly when Obama expressed pride, gratitude, or called for vigilance. From a pragmatic perspective, intensifiers functioned to modify both modal meaning—reflecting the speaker's stance toward his propositions—and affective meaning, shaping his relationship with the audience. Frequently used items such as very, so, most, never, and ever served to boost illocutionary force, highlight urgency, and strengthen solidarity.

Overall, the study confirms that intensifiers in political speeches are not random embellishments but purposeful devices. In Obama's farewell message, they helped to underline achievements, inspire hope, and reinforce democratic values, ensuring that his final address carried both persuasive force and emotional resonance.

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