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Adverb-adjective combinations in young writers' English (EL1 and EL2)

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Abstract

The topic of the present study is adverb-adjective combinations in narrative writing by lower secondary school pupils in Norway and the UK. The investigation is based on subsets of the TRAWL (Tracking Written Learner Language) and GiG (Growth in Grammar) corpora and thus compares English as a second language with first-language usage (EL2 and EL1). A number of differences were identified between the two writer groups. While adverb-adjective constructions, such as *so happy, much better* and *really bad*, were more frequent and widespread in EL2, they showed more variability in EL1 regarding syntax, semantics and lexical choice. In particular, the amplifying function of modifiers was more dominant in EL2 writing at the cost of other modifier functions. There was also a stronger concentration on a few highly frequent intensifiers in the EL2 than in the EL1 material.

Keywords

Adjective modification, adverbs, intensification, narrative writing, English L1 and L2.

1. Introduction

This study examines adverbial modification of adjectives in narrative texts by writers in their early teens. While a number of previous studies have looked into the topic of intensifiers in writing by advanced learners of English (e.g. Granger, 1998; Lorenz, 1998; Hinkel, 2003; de Haan & van der Haagen, 2013; Schweinberger, 2020a, 2020b), few have focused on younger learners (see below for some exceptions). Adverb-adjective combinations (AACs) are interesting from a language learning perspective because they have been linked to language proficiency

and to the communicative competence of learners (Grant & Ginther, 2000, p. 134; Pérez-Paredes & Sánchez-Tornel, 2014, p. 180). Furthermore, AACs "constitute a particularly rich category of collocation, involving as they do a complex interplay of semantic, lexical and stylistic restrictions" (Granger, 1998, p. 147), and instantiating the idiom principle as well as the open-choice principle (Sinclair, 1991), i.e. they range from relatively fixed, idiomatic combinations to free combinations that leave room for linguistic creativity.

The material for this study comprises English L2 writing in lower secondary school in Norway, culled from the Tracking Written Learner Language (TRAWL) corpus, and English L1 writing by similarly aged pupils from the Growth in Grammar (GiG) corpus (see section 3.1 for further description of the corpora). From TRAWL, narrative texts from school years 8 and 9 were selected (ages 13-14), and from GiG, literary texts from year 9 (age 13). The main aim of the study is to identify similarities and differences between Norwegian learners of English (EL2) and first-language users (EL1) as regards the following questions:

- How frequently do the young writers use adverb-adjective combinations?
- In what syntactic environment do they use adverb-adjective combinations (attributive, predicative, etc.) and what meanings are expressed by the modifying adverbs (e.g. downtoner, amplifier, descriptor)?
- Which adverbs are used for adjective modification, and which adjectives are most commonly modified, in the respective writer groups?

Since the EL2 material represents two years of language learning, I will also look for signs of development in the use of adverb-adjective combinations from year 8 to year 9. Since most previous studies of modification of adjectives along the L1/L2 dimension have been concerned with advanced learners at university level, the present study can provide new insights into proficiency at earlier stages of English instruction. Furthermore, the present investigation is not restricted to adverbs functioning as intensifiers, thus painting a broader picture of adverbial modification of adjectives than many previous studies have done.

2. Previous studies

Adverb-adjective combinations have been much studied in L1/L2 contexts, but primarily in advanced learner writing. Some studies have identified a tendency for learners to overuse adverbial intensification (e.g. Lorenz, 1998; Hinkel, 2003; de Haan & van der Haagen, 2013), while other studies have found the opposite tendency (e.g. Granger, 1998; Schweinberger,

2020a).[1] Particular intensifiers, especially *very* (Granger, 1998; de Haan & van der Haagen, 2013; Hasselgård, 2015), have generally been found to be overused by learners compared to native speakers, although it is also the most frequent amplifier in L1 native writing (Schweinberger, 2020a). In a study of Norwegian advanced learners of English, Hasselgård (2015) found underuse of phrase-modifying *-ly* adverbs compared to EL1 novice writers. A larger share of the modifiers used by the Norwegians were downtoners, while the native speakers used descriptive modifiers more (Hasselgård, 2015, p. 180).

Studies of pre-university learners are fewer, but learners from various L1 backgrounds have been examined by e.g. Hasselgren (1994), Pérez-Paredes & Díez-Bedmar (2012), Pérez-Paredes & Sánchez-Tornel (2014) and Hendrikx et al. (2019). Hasselgren (1994) finds that the lexical repertoire of learners is more limited than that of native speakers, which leads to a smaller set of "core" adverbs being used at the expense of more specific words. Similarly, Pérez-Paredes & Díez-Bedmar (2012) find that Spanish EFL learners use a very limited set of intensifying adverbs. The dispersion is limited too, but increases somewhat with the writers' age. They also identify differences in lexical choice between the two registers in their material. Tracking a longitudinal development in the use of adverbs in general by Spanish, Polish and Chinese learners, Pérez-Paredes & Sánchez-Tornel (2014) identify a development in all three learner groups towards more frequent and lexically richer adverb use around year 10. The use of intensifiers is investigated as a potential marker of proficiency by Hendrikx et al. (2019), who investigate intensification in English and Dutch written by French-speaking pre-university learners in CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) and non-CLIL classes. Although CLIL learners are found to be closer to an English L1 control group, both learner groups favour the intensifiers *very, so* and *really* (in that order). The L1 group uses the same items in addition to *pretty*, as well as a substantial proportion of other (unspecified) adverbs (Hendrikx et al., 2019, p. 82), so that the most frequent adverbs account for a lower proportion of the intensifiers.

Adjective phrases in Norwegian and English are structurally rather similar, with both morphological and periphrastic comparison and the possibility of adverbial modification (Holmes & Enger, 2018, p. 104 and p. 398). Wilhelmsen (2019) studied cross-linguistic and translational correspondences of degree modifiers in English and Norwegian and found that modified adjective phrases in the source language, to a great extent, corresponded to the same type of phrase in the translations. The items he selected for particular scrutiny, however, were more frequent

[1] In the tradition of Contrastive Interlanguage Analysis, the terms *overuse* and *underuse* should be read as descriptive terms denoting higher or lower frequencies in learner language than in native language in comparable contexts (Granger, 2015, p. 18).

in Norwegian, resulting in a higher frequency of degree-modified adjective phrases in English translations (from Norwegian) than in English originals.

As Schweinberger (2020a) sums up, "previous studies have found that L2 speakers of English tend to show usage patterns of amplification that mirror conversational style rather than written discourse" (p. 201; see also Gilquin & Paquot, 2008). It is, therefore, relevant to note that Aijmer (2018) and Tagliamonte (2008) find variation in intensifier use across both regional varieties and age groups. For example, *very* is the most frequent intensifier in British English, followed by *really* and *so*, while *really* is most frequent in New Zealand English (Aijmer, 2018). In North American English, *really* is more frequent than *very* and it is also more frequent among younger speakers (Tagliamonte, 2008). Ebeling & Hasselgård (2020) investigated intensifiers in dialogic and narrative parts of fictional texts. The same lexical items were frequent in both subregisters, but their rank orders were different (*very>so>too* in dialogue and *so>too>very* in narrative). *Really* was much less frequent in both subregisters (p. 307).

Since *very*, *so*, and *too* have been found to be frequent in narrative texts as well as in speech, it is expected that these items will also be common in the narrative writing of lower secondary school students writing in both their L1 and their L2. Furthermore, the popularity of *really* in American English and among young speakers (Tagliamonte, 2008) makes it a good candidate for frequent use in the present material. Because of the structural similarities between Norwegian and English adjective phrases, they are not expected to cause severe problems for Norwegian learners of English. If there are dissonances, they are expected to be due to lexical choice and/or collocation (Hasselgren, 1994) or to frequency (in general or of individual modifiers) rather than to morphology and syntax.

3. Material and method

3.1 Corpora and search procedures

The material for the present study comes from two corpora. One is the English part of the TRAWL corpus, representing written English by pupils in Norwegian schools (See Dirdal et al., 2022). Only a small subset of this corpus was used, namely one that contains writing from a single class in lower secondary schools, and which has been annotated for genre. All the pupils included in this subset, referred to as the "Genre subset" in Hasund (2022), are native speakers of Norwegian and thus learn English as an additional language (EL2). (The class in question had only one pupil with a different L1, and this pupil's texts were excluded.) The corpus is longitudinal, containing written texts from the same class across three years of lower secondary

school (years 8, 9 and 10, ages 13-15). However, there are so few narrative texts in year 10 (Hasund & Hasselgård, 2022, p. 451) that only years 8 and 9 are used for the present study. The chosen EL1 reference corpus for the contrastive interlanguage analysis (Granger, 2015) is the Growth in Grammar (GiG) corpus (see Durrant & Brenchley, 2019). Like TRAWL, the GiG corpus comprises texts written by pupils as part of their regular schoolwork.[2] The texts were collected in England from years 2, 4, 9 and 11 and represent a number of subjects and genres (Durrant et al., 2020, p. 426). To achieve maximum comparability between the corpora, I selected the texts classified as 'literary' from year 9 (age 13) and those classified as 'narrative' from TRAWL (Hasund, 2022). All the literary texts from GiG year 9 were written in English classes and are classified as "general", typically representing creative writing (Durrant & Brenchley, 2019). The corpora should thus be comparable in genre, pupil age and school year, i.e. the GiG pupils match the Norwegian year 8 ones in age and the year 9 ones in terms of school year. The size and composition of the material are shown in Table 1. For simplicity, the corpora will be referred to as TRAWL8, TRAWL9 and GiG, respectively.

Table 1: Size and composition of the corpus material for the present study (AAC = Adverb-adjective combinations)

	Words	Texts	Median length	Files with AAC	AAC #	AAC per 1k
TRAWL8	6,339	12	500	10 (83%)	41	6.47
TRAWL9	16,713	26	590	25 (96%)	142	8.5
GiG	94,861	220	393	148 (67%)	359	3.78

The word counts presented in Table 1 come from the corpus tool #LancsBox (Brezina et al., 2020). This was also the tool used for the extraction of adverb-adjective sequences. #LancsBox automatically PoS-tags corpus texts so that searches can be made for tag sequences. These searches were supplemented with lexical searches for adverbs in *-ly* and *very* and *so* followed by adjective because I discovered that the original search output had missed relevant hits due to difficulties of tagging material that contains misspellings, and in the case of the GiG files that were used, markup to indicate spelling errors and corrections. The resulting concordances were manually sifted to remove false hits, such as random sequences of adverb and adjective that did not constitute an adjective phrase (e.g. *never good, up dead*), or were due to tagging errors (e.g. *just stop*) and misspellings (*There four = therefore*). Furthermore, some GiG texts appeared to include revisions, resulting in duplication of some search hits, in which case only

[2] See https://education.exeter.ac.uk/research/centres/writing/projects/growthingrammar/

the version that seemed to be the revised one was retained. This review of the concordance lines resulted in the frequencies reported in Table 1.

3.2 Classification of the material

Each concordance line was annotated for syntactic and semantic features of the adverb-adjective combination. The syntactic features concern the position of the whole AAC, which most typically varies between attributive and predicative (Quirk et al., 1985, p. 417), i.e. premodifying a noun, as in (1), or functioning as predicative complement, as in (2).[3] In addition, a noun-modifying adjective phrase can be postposed (ibid., p. 418), as in (3). The cases where none of these categories was applicable were marked 'Other', e.g. if the adjective phrase appeared as a separate orthographic unit, as in (4), but they are still retained in the material.

(1) It was a *very scary* moment. (TRAWL8_P60103_EVPP_2)

(2) Okay, today's mission is *especially difficult*. (TRAWL9_P60102_WRST_2)

(3) That's when I lost something *very special* to me... (GiG_4_244)

(4) It was cold but light. Strange, *very strange*. (GiG_4_187)

As regards the semantic classification, most previous studies of adverbial modification of adjectives focus on intensification, usually labelled *amplifiers* and *downtoners* following e.g. Quirk et al. (1985, p. 445). These categories are also used in the present study. Certain modifiers, which would have been *emphasizers* according to Quirk et al. (1985, p. 447), have been classified as amplifiers, even if they arguably "add to the force" rather than the degree of the adjective (ibid.).[4] In addition to intensifiers, the following categories have been included to cast the net a bit wider:

- Comparison, typically realized by *more/most* (or *less/least*) to form comparative and superlative phrases, or by *as* ADJ *as*, as in (5).
- *How*, i.e. degree modification by a *wh*-word, and thereby no specification of up- or downscaling, as in (6).
- Descriptor, in which case the adverb may indicate manner or evaluation rather than degree (Hasselgård, 2015, p. 168), e.g. *environmentally friendly, oddly heartless*, and example (7). Quirk et al. (1985, p. 448) use the term *adjunct adverbs* for these.

[3] All corpus examples are quoted verbatim from the corpora, without any error correction. The relevant phrases have been italicized. The code following each example refers to the pupil and the prompt. Thus, in example (1), P60103 identifies the pupil and EVPP_2 the prompt: see further Hasund (2022).
[4] The most frequent member of this category is *really*, which is commonly included in studies of intensification.

(5) You did injure their *most important* player. (TRAWL9_P60102_ HOBB_3B)

(6) I totally forgot *how dangerous* it was out here. (TRAWL8_P60102_ SKES_1)

(7) The sound like a screaming person pleading for mercy in a slow and *agonisingly painful* death. (GiG_4_205)

4. Results

4.1 Overall frequencies of adverb-adjective combinations in the material

As shown in Table 1, AACs are generally more frequent in TRAWL than in GiG, especially in year 9, and they occur in a larger proportion of corpus texts. This is in spite of the fact that words tagged as adjective in LancsBox are overall more frequent in GiG (682 per 10k) than in either TRAWL8 (521 per 10k) and TRAWL9 (601 per 10k). Figure 1 shows the dispersion of AACs, excluding those texts which did not contain any (cf. Table 1). Frequencies per text have been normalized per 100 words. Both the mean and median frequencies of TRAWL8 and 9 are clearly higher than those in GiG. Figure 1 thus indicates that AACs are more frequent and widespread in the EL2 than the EL1 material.

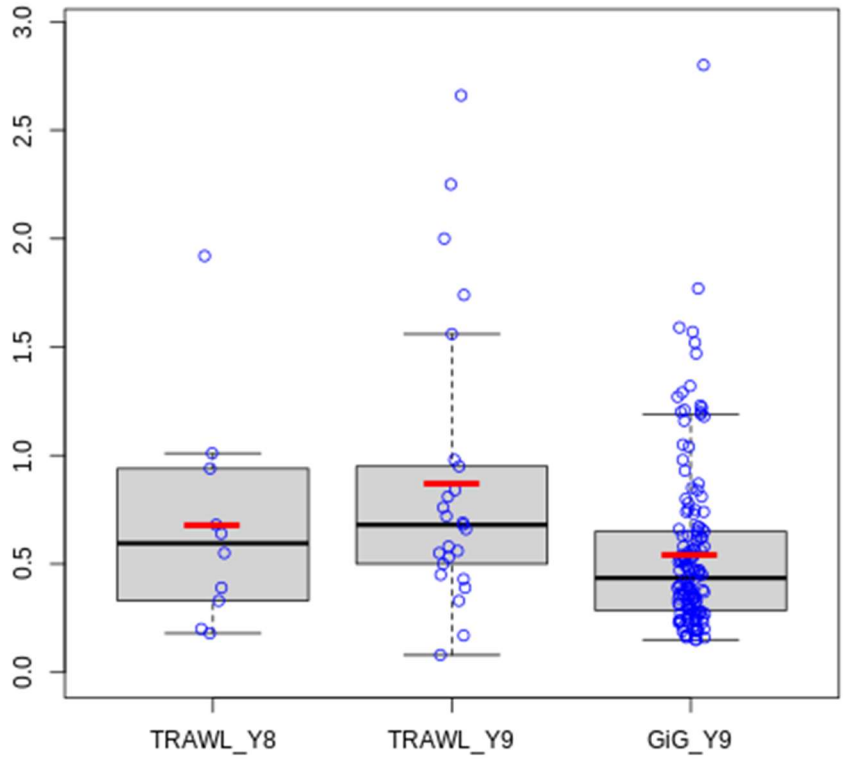

Figure 1: Dispersion and frequencies of AACs per 100 words per text in TRAWL and GiG[5]

[5] Graph produced with Lancaster Stats Tools online. (http://corpora.lancs.ac.uk/stats/toolbox.php)

As a further check on the apparent overrepresentation of AACs in TRAWL, separate searches were made for 12 adjectives that were relatively frequent in the corpora (see Table 3), i.e. *afraid, bad, beautiful, big, good, happy, important, kind, late, sad, small, sorry.* Unlike the PoS tag search for 'adjective' reported above, the concordance lines for these searches were checked manually, which corroborated the overrepresentation. That is, the adjectives taken together occurred with a modifying adverb more often in the TRAWL corpora than in GiG: 26% were modified in TRAWL8, 29% in TRAWL9 and 15.5% in GiG.

4.2 Syntactic and semantic features of the adverb-adjective sequences

As outlined in Section 3.2, an AAC can occur in attributive, predicative, or postposed position. Figure 2 shows the proportional distribution of these functions, with raw frequencies marked in the stacked bars. It is immediately clear that AACs favour predicative position in all three subcorpora. This was expected, as it is also the pattern found in Biber et al. (1999, p. 506) for adjectives in all registers. However, it is interesting to note that while the proportions are practically identical in the two EL2 corpora, the EL1 corpus displays more variation, with a higher proportion of attributive AACs as well as a number of postposed ones, thus making the predicative use slightly less dominant.

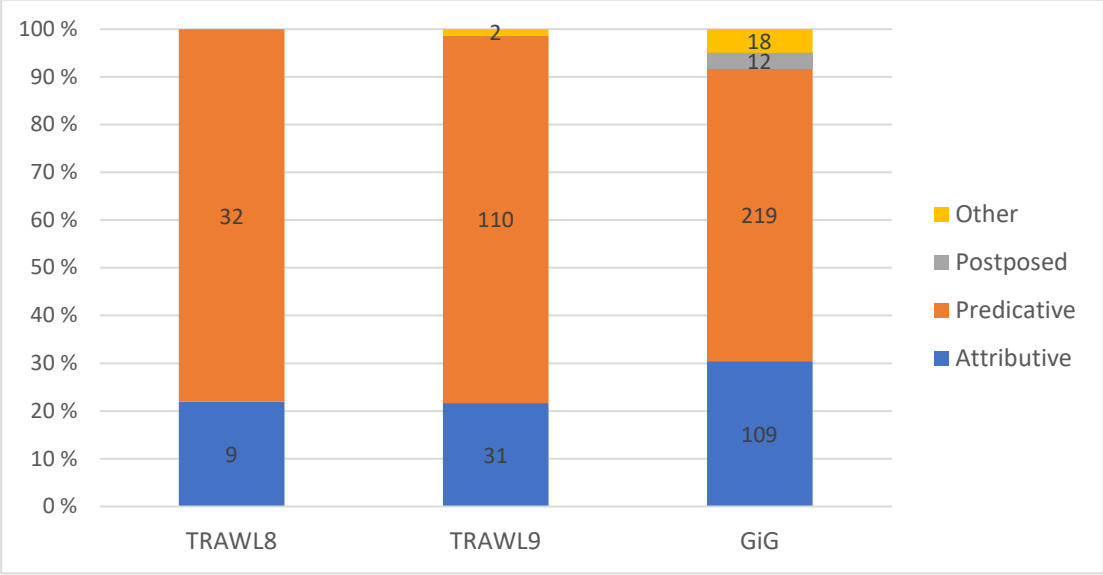

Figure 2: Syntactic position of the AACs

The GiG corpus also displays more heterogeneity than the EL2 corpora in terms of the meanings of the modifying adverbs, as shown in Figure 3. Pupils in all the writer groups greatly favour

amplifiers over downtoners, but this preference is far stronger in EL2 than in EL1, where both downtoners and comparison account for greater proportions.

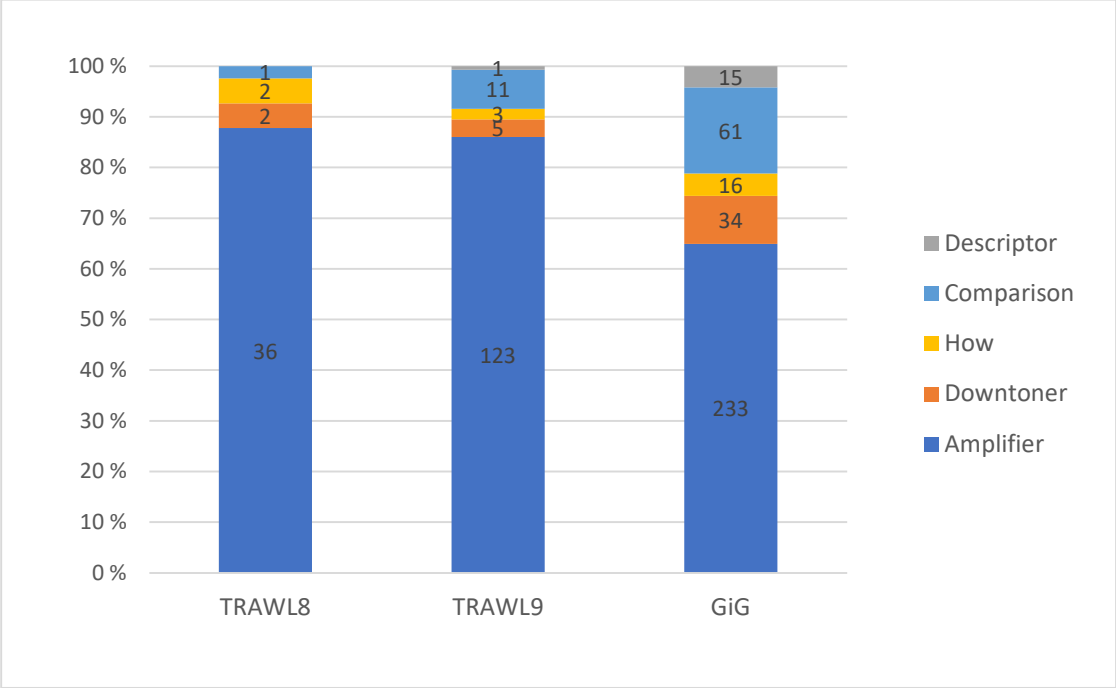

Figure 3. Semantic features of the modifying adverbs.

Figure 3 suggests that the TRAWL writers compose slightly more varied AACs with more meanings in year 9 than in year 8, especially in the use of comparative phrases, as illustrated in (8).[6] However, due to the small size of the TRAWL8 material, no firm conclusions can be drawn about this, but it seems an interesting avenue of further research with a larger dataset from TRAWL.

(8) The smell of dead fish getting cooked by the insanely hot sun made the island feel *more empty and deserted*. (TRAWL9_P60101_WRST_1)

Among adverbs that denote comparison, the downscaling *less/least* are least common in both TRAWL9 and GiG. Upscaling *more* and *most* are clearly most common in GiG (43 out of 61), while in TRAWL9 *more/most* are as frequent as those referring to equal degree (*as...as, equally*).

[6] TRAWL8 contains a single example of comparison: *the most interesting animal in the jungle* (TRAWL8_P60108_SKES_1).

The EL2 writers generally do not use descriptive adverbs to modify adjectives in the manner illustrated by (9). A possible exception is (10), but this example is doubtful, probably representing a spelling error, i.e. *tight* for *tied.* The example comes from the same text as (8) above, in which *insanely hot* might have been characterized as a creative combination, were it not for the fact that it is a direct translation of a Norwegian intensifier that is frequent enough among young people to have been semantically bleached, namely *sinnsykt* ('insanely') (Westervoll, 2015, p. 14).

(9) With *spine chillingly cold* corridors the place was scary. (GiG_4_236)

(10) I tried to get my hands free but they were too *tightly tight*. (TRAWL9_ P60106_ WRST_1)

(11) A creature, with *drowningly deep* black eyes and skeletal hands, … (GiG_10_557)

The descriptor function of the modifier is not very common in GiG either, but 15 examples were identified. Some of these provide vivid descriptions, such as (9) above and in combinations such as *agonisingly painful* and *oddly heartless*, and can also be creative, as in (11). Others are more established combinations, e.g. *environmentally friendly* and *physically sick.* Investigating *-ly* adverbs functioning as modifiers in disciplinary writing by university students, Hasselgård (2015, p. 180) found that EL1 writers use proportionally more descriptive modifiers than Norwegian EL2 writers. Although the university students used more such modifiers than the lower secondary students investigated here, both groups of Norwegian learners of English underuse this aspect of adjective modification.

4.3 Lexical features of the adverb-adjective combinations

It is difficult to compare lexical variation across the subcorpora because of their very different sizes (see Table 1). However, the type-token ratios of modifying adverbs are similar in the three writer groups:

- GiG: 20% (359 tokens, 72 types)
- TRAWL8: 24% (41 tokens, 9 types)
- TRAWL9: 20% (143 tokens, 29 types)

The degree of recurrence is slightly higher in GiG than in TRAWL: 49% of the adverb types are used only once, as against 56% in TRAWL8 and 62% in TRAWL9. However, this difference too may be influenced by corpus size.

There are similarities across the corpora regarding the ten most popular modifiers, as shown in Table 2. Only recurrent items used in at least two texts have been included in the table. Hence there are only four items from TRAWL8. The TRAWL9 list has one item more than the GiG list because the last two items occur with the same frequency. Only the texts that contain AACs have been included in the basis for calculating the percentage of texts that contain each modifier.

Table 2. The most frequent adverbs used in AACs across the corpora. Raw frequencies and frequencies per 1,000 words

GiG (148 texts)				TRAWL8 (10 texts)				TRAWL9 (25 texts)			
	N	Per 1k	texts		N	Per 1K	texts		N	Per 1k	texts
so	89	0.94	56 (38%)	*very*	18	2.84	5 (50%)	*so*	45	2.69	18 (72%)
very	50	0.53	39 (26%)	*so*	11	1.74	6 (60%)	*very*	42	2.51	10 (40%)
too	25	0.26	20 (14%)	*too*	4	0.63	3 (30%)	*really*	9	0.54	4 (16%)
more	20	0.21	17 (14%)	*how*	2	0.32	2 (20%)	*too*	7	0.42	5 (20%)
how	16	0.17	14 (9%)					*much*	5	0.30	3 (12%)
most	16	0.17	14 (9%)					*as*	4	0.24	3 (12%)
really	16	0.17	13 (9%)					*how*	3	0.18	3 (12%)
as	15	0.16	14 (9%)					*more*	3	0.18	3 (12%)
almost	12	0.13	12 (8%)					*a little*	3	0.18	2 (8%)
extremely	11	0.12	9 (6%)					*most*	2	0.12	2 (8%)
								totally	2	0.12	2 (8%)

The findings reported in Table 2 echo those of Altenberg for spoken English, namely "a strong concentration to a few highly exploited amplifiers" (1991, p. 145). The adverbs *so* and *very*, both illustrated in (12), are clearly the most frequent in all three writer groups. *Too* is the third most frequent item in both GiG and TRAWL8, while TRAWL9 places it fourth, preceded by *really*. The relative frequencies of these items are higher in the EL2 corpora than in the EL1 writing. The dispersion of the most frequent items is also generally wider in TRAWL than in GiG.

(12) The insects were *so good* they were salty but *very sweet*.
(TRAWL_P60106_Y09)

In GiG, the mean frequencies per text of *so* and *very* are 1.6 and 1.3, respectively (among those texts that use them), while the corresponding mean frequencies in TRAWL9 are 2.5 and 3.2. The learners thus seem to recycle the most frequent modifiers more than the native speakers do. Other adverbs than *so* and *very* are not repeated much within the same text in any of the subcorpora.

Most of the items in Table 2 are amplifiers. The exceptions are the downtoners *almost* (in GiG) and *a little* (in TRAWL9), and the item *how*, which occurs in all three corpora. *More* and *most* obviously also have amplifying meaning, although they were classified semantically under comparison, along with *as* (Figure 3).

A clear difference between the EL1 and the EL2 writers is that the most frequent lexical items account for a larger share of the total number of AACs in TRAWL. The ten most frequent items listed in Table 2 for TRAWL9 and GiG account for 88% and 75%, respectively, of the total number of modifier tokens in the material. Within the TRAWL material, there seems to be a development from year 8 to year 9 in that the adverbs become more varied, including a wider range of adverbs and a lower proportion of the tokens representing the three most frequent types. Unfortunately, the TRAWL subset used here does not contain enough narrative texts from year 10 to track any further development in lexical and phraseological richness (cf. Pérez-Paredes & Sánchez-Tornel, 2014).

The use of the most frequent modifiers is visualized in Figure 4. The numbers along the y-axis in Figure 4 refer to the ranked frequencies in Table 2 and thus represent different lexical items for each subcorpus. Particularly the items *so* (rank 1 in TRAWL9 and GiG, rank 2 in TRAWL8) and *very* (rank 2 in TRAWL9 and GiG, rank 1 in TRAWL8) are far more frequent in EL2 than in EL1. After rank 3, the corpora become more similar. This might indicate that *so* and *very* are all-purpose amplifiers for many of the EL2 writers, to the extent that they fit the

description of "lexical teddy bear", i.e. a lexical item that a learner knows well and uses often, sometimes overgeneralizing its contexts of use (Hasselgren, 1994).

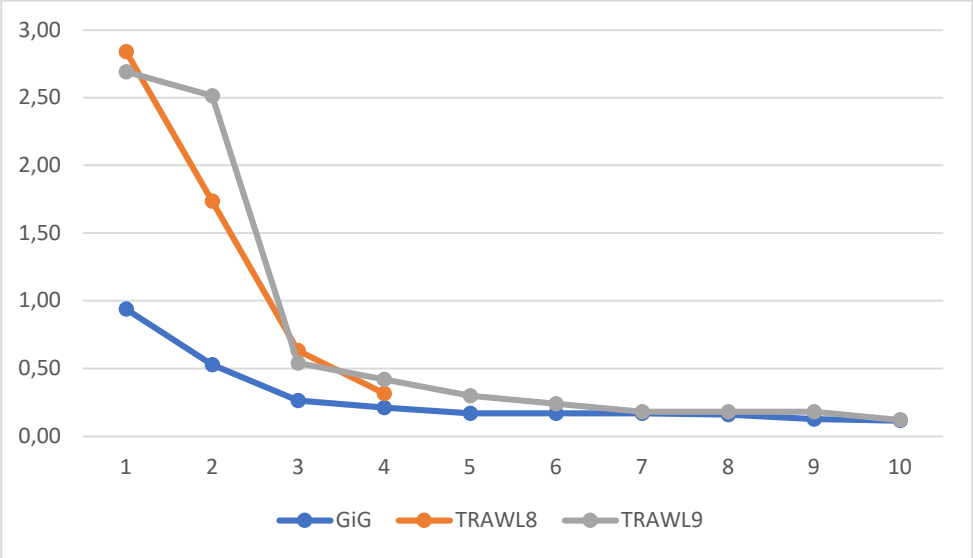

Figure 4: Frequencies per 1,000 words of the top 10 lexical items per corpus

In order to identify patterns, or prefabs (Granger, 1998; Wagner, 2017), the adjectives occurring in AACs also need to be considered. Table 3 shows the two most frequent adverbs in the corpora, *very* and *so,* and the adjectives that co-occur with them at least twice in TRAWL or three times in GiG.[7] Each adjective is followed by a bracketed number showing its (raw) frequency. TRAWL writers, apart from *so* in TRAWL8, use a wider range of adjectives with the most frequent modifiers, which suggests that they may be using *very* and *so* as "general-purpose items" (Granger 1998, p. 151), possibly at the expense of intensifiers that are more specific to the modified item (Hasselgren, 1994, p. 254).

Table 3: So and very and their most frequent adjective heads

	TRAWL8	**TRAWL9**	**GiG**
Adverb	**Adjectives**	**Adjectives**	**Adjectives**
very	*much (2), hard (2), sad (2)*	*scared (4), big (3), hungry (3), nasty (2), positive (2), sorry (2)*	*cold (4), happy (3)*
so	*happy (3)*	*much (5), good (4), many (4), happy (2), kind (2), quiet (2), scared (2)*	*many (16), much (10), fragile (3), happy (3)*

[7] The frequency thresholds differ because of the very different sizes of the corpora, cf. Table 1.

Table 4 reverses the perspective, showing recurrent adjectives that are among the ten most frequent items in at least two of the corpora, and the adverbial modifiers they occur with. Recurrent modifiers are followed by a number in brackets showing how frequent they are. The low number of recurrent adjectives in TRAWL8 probably reflects the small size of this corpus.

Table 4: Recurrent adjectives and their modifiers (raw frequencies)

	TRAWL8		TRAWL9		GiG	
Adjective	N	Modifiers	N	Modifiers	N	Modifiers
bad	2	*really, very*	5	*extremely, less, really, unusually, very*	5	*really (5), very*
big	0	NA	6	*as, just, so, very (3)*	6	*as, fairly, really, so, too, very*
happy	3	*so*	3	*really, so (2)*	7	*as, once, so (3), very (2)*
many	2	*how, too*	4	*so (4)*	21	*how (2), so (16), too (3)*
much	2	*very (2)*	6	*how, so (5)*	12	*how, so (10), too*

The adjectives in Table 4 can all be characterized as "core words" (Hasselgren, 1994). They also denote scalar properties which can be conceptualized "in terms of 'more or less'" (Paradis, 1997, p. 159), and thus form harmonious combinations with scalar modifiers (ibid., p. 160). Among the most frequent adjectives, only *bad* is evaluative. *Bad* and *big* are comparatively more frequent in TRAWL than in GiG, considering corpus size (see Table 1), as is *good*, which is the most frequent adjective in TRAWL9. It occurs 7 times with the modifiers *as, really, so* (4 times), and *very*. By contrast, *good* is found in only three ACCs in GiG, preceded by *not exactly, really* and *so*.

The adverbial modifiers used by the EL2 writers are not much different from those found in GiG with the same adjectives. In the case of *bad*, the modifiers used in TRAWL9 are actually more varied than in GiG, and none of the ACCs appears infelicitous. However, to some extent, intensified core adjectives may be taken to suggest a lack of more nuanced and precise vocabulary. In this respect, examples (13) and (14) from TRAWL9 are interesting.

(13) It is a *very bad* queen in this land. She is evil. (TRAWL9_ P60111_EEFO_4)

(14) The silencer makes it sound *less bad*, but the kid, must be scared for life... (TRAWL9_P60102_Y09_WRST_2)

Example (13) comes from a text with many errors – including the start of the sentence, which has *it is* instead of *there is.* While there is nothing wrong with the ACC *very bad,* the following sentence restates the same meaning with the adjective *evil*. The text continues to spell out the problems with this queen, characterizing her, among other things, as *not so kind*. It thus appears that this pupil uses modified core adjectives rather creatively instead of more precise vocabulary (the same text contains the ACC *very un-normal*) and perhaps does not realize (or does not care) that *very bad* and *evil* are synonymous. In (14), the 'silencer' in question belongs to a gun, and thus *less bad* might have been *less loud* – or *softer*. Again, the ACC with core words may be a strategy to make up for missing vocabulary.

As Tables 3 and 4 indicate, there are few recurrent AACs in the material. With thresholds for recurrence set to three for GiG and two for TRAWL and in at least two texts, only the combinations shown in Table 5 were identified. There is little overlap across the corpora (overlapping ACCs are marked in red). This might be an effect of different writing tasks, yet many of the phrases in Table 5 seem so general that they might fit into a number of different contexts, e.g. *so/too many, very much.* The fact that there is no overlap at all between years 8 and 9 in TRAWL speaks against individual preferences, since these datasets represent the same writers at different stages of their learning. In other words, adverb-adjective combinations – possibly with the exceptions of *so many* and *so much* – do not seem to represent prefabricated units for the young writers (Granger, 1998) and thus do not reflect the idiom principle (Sinclair, 1991).

Table 5. Recurrent AACs in GiG and TRAWL (raw frequencies)

TRAWL8		TRAWL9		GiG	
so happy	3	much better	3	as white (as)	3
very much	2	really sorry	2	even more	3
very sad	2	so good	4	really bad	4
		so kind	2	so fragile	3
		so many	4	so happy	3
		so much	5	so many	16
		too afraid	2	so much	10
		very big	3	so strong	3
		very sorry	2	too late	7
		very scared	4	too many	3
				very cold	4
				very little	3

There is also very little overlap between the AACs listed in Table 5 and the most frequent combinations occurring in the fiction section of the British National Corpus. Of the 16 most frequent combinations identified by Wilhelmsen (2019, p. 18), only *too late* is also found in GiG and *so good* and *much better* in TRAWL9. It should be remembered, however, that even the largest of the corpora investigated here is likely too small for the investigation of collocations outside the core vocabulary. Johansson (1993) makes a similar observation regarding the one-million-word LOB corpus, which he considers "rich enough to show the wide variety of adverb-adjective combinations, but insufficiently large for a proper collocational study" (p. 48).

5. Discussion

This investigation has shown that adverb-adjective combinations are more frequent and more widespread in EL2 narrative writing by lower-secondary school pupils in Norway than in comparable writing from UK schools. This finding agrees with some studies of intensification in L2 writing (e.g. de Haan & van der Haagen, 2013; Lorenz, 1998), but runs counter to others which have found less intensification in L2 than in L1 writing (most clearly Schweinberger, 2020a, since e.g. Granger, 1998 focused on adverbs in *-ly*). However, these studies have investigated university-level writing, mainly in the argumentative genre. The different results could well be due to register, as AACs have been shown to be genre-sensitive even at an intermediate proficiency level (Pérez-Paredes & Díez-Bedmar, 2012). The fact that the present study includes AACs beyond the intensifier + adjective type would not produce this difference, as the intensified type was more frequent in EL2 than in EL1 (Figure 3). However, Wilhelmsen (2019) found more adjective-adverb combinations in Norwegian than in English narrative fiction, so that the greater frequency among Norwegian learners might also reflect L1 influence. Both the genre and the L1 factor could usefully be explored further, using a larger dataset which includes more registers and L1 backgrounds, both of which should be feasible with the combination of the TRAWL and GiG corpora.

As regards the syntactic functions of the modified adjective phrases, the EL1 writing showed a more varied picture than the EL2 writing in TRAWL, especially in producing a higher proportion of attributive phrases and in using postposition of adjectives to some extent. Norwegian and English original fiction are similar in the proportions of attributive vs. predicative position of amplified adjective phrases, according to Wilhelmsen (2019, p. 67), while the proportion of predicative position is somewhat lower in spoken Norwegian (Stratton & Sundquist, 2022); hence the difference should not be due the learners being influenced by their L1. The use of

attributive adjective phrases is linked to noun phrase complexity (see Rørvik, 2022), as such phrases are premodifiers of nouns. Noun phrase complexity has been shown to increase with proficiency (e.g. Bulté & Housen, 2014), which may be a factor in explaining the difference in the use of attributive adjective phrases between the EL1 and the EL2 writers.

The greater variation in EL1 modifier use was even more visible in the semantic analysis where close to 90% of the learners' adverbs were amplifiers compared to 65% in GiG. The proportions of downtoners and comparative constructions were more than twice as high in EL1. On the basis of previous research, amplifiers were expected to be more frequent than downtoners; however, there is nothing to suggest that downtoners are less frequent in Norwegian than in English: in Stratton & Sundquist's (2022) investigation of intensifiers in spoken Norwegian, downtoners account for almost 30% of the intensifiers. Furthermore, Norwegian advanced learners have been found to use more downtoners than EL1 users in their academic writing (Hasselgård, 2015). Hence the difference between EL1 and EL2 usage of modifiers is most likely not due to L1 influence, but possibly to developmental issues and the general proficiency level of the writers.

The choice of lexical items to modify adjectives was similar across the learner groups in the sense that *very, so, too,* and *really* were the most frequent items, as could be expected from previous studies of intensifiers (e.g. Aijmer, 2018; Hendrikx et al., 2019; Ebeling & Hasselgård, 2020; Schweinberger, 2020b; Tagliamonte, 2008; Wilhelmsen, 2019). The concentration on these highly frequent items was stronger in EL2 than in EL1, which had a higher percentage of other modifier types. Again, this can be taken as evidence of the greater variation in AACs in EL1, although the difference in corpus size may be an interfering factor.

There were very few recurrent adjectives in the AACs under study; hence no detailed analysis of these adjectives was attempted (unlike, e.g. Aijmer, 2018 and Lorenz, 1998). Those adjectives that do recur can all be characterized as core vocabulary, with only one of them, *bad,* expressing subjective evaluation. It is surprising that ACCs with *good* are infrequent in the material, but this might be due to the content of narratives that were produced (note, for instance, the negatively loaded adjectives *scared, nasty,* and *sorry* in TRAWL9, Table 3). The adjectives have no discernible preferences for particular modifiers in either corpus, with the exception of *so many* and *so much*, which are the most recurrent combinations in both TRAWL9 and GiG, and which most likely are perceived and used as prefabs (Granger, 1998). None of the recurrent combinations in the learner material seemed to be dissonant. Hence it may be

concluded that the young EL2 writers are relatively proficient users of adverb-adjective combinations, even if they tend to stick to core vocabulary and familiar syntactic and semantic constructions.

6. Concluding remarks

The present study has broken some new ground in focusing on the writing of young learners, as opposed to the bulk of previous contrastive interlanguage studies, which tend to draw on tertiary-level writing. It has uncovered some notable differences in the use of adverb-adjective combinations between young Norwegian learners of English and their EL1-speaking peers represented in the GiG corpus. The main differences relate to frequency and dispersion of AACs and to variability within the combination. The learners use a higher number of AACs in a greater proportion of their texts, and a greater proportion of their adjectives are modified by an adverb. By contrast, native speakers use a greater repertoire of syntactic constructions and semantic meaning categories. The EL1 users also display more lexical variation with the three most frequent modifiers accounting for a smaller share of the total number of AACs. Both groups seem to produce most of their ACCs according to the open-choice rather than the idiom principle, as indicated by the low numbers of recurrent phrases.

An important limitation of the study is the small size of the corpora used. They are clearly insufficient for studying lexical choice outside the most frequent items and for showing any collocational patterns. To learn more about the lexical repertoire of young writers in the area of adjective modification, the material needs to be expanded, preferably also to include more registers of writing, since AACs have been shown to be register-sensitive (Pérez-Paredes & Díez-Bedmar, 2012). The full TRAWL corpus should provide ample data for such a venture. It might further be instructive to look more closely at AACs in relation to those adjectives that are not modified in this way, although this, too, would require more material as well as more precise POS-tagging.

The study did not uncover particular learner problems with adverb-adjective combinations in terms of errors. This could be due to the structural similarity between the learners' L1 and the target language, which facilitates positive transfer (Ringbom, 2007). However, the issue of lexical and functional variation might be worth taking into the classroom. A potential application arising from the present study might be to introduce Norwegian learners to some of the AAC types that were more frequent in the GiG material to make them aware of combinatorial possibilities beyond their lexicogrammatical teddy bears.

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Corpora

Growth in Grammar (GiG, EL1): https://education.exeter.ac.uk/research/centres/writing/projects/growthingrammar/

Tracking Written Learner Language (TRAWL, EL2): https://tekstlab.uio.no/trawl