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Semantic Asymmetry and Evaluative Content

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Abstract: This article examines semantic asymmetry and evaluative content as expressed through antonymic constructions. It demonstrates that semantic oppositions are not always symmetrical; one term often dominates over the other in terms of genre frequency, emotional charge, and cognitive prominence. Using frame semantics and corpus analysis, the study identifies which lexeme functions as the evaluative center in pairs such as "ҳалол – ҳаром," "пок – ифлос," and "дўст – душман." Associative testing confirms that negatively marked terms tend to activate more extensive frame elements. The study reveals that semantic asymmetry is often driven by value judgments, cultural debates, and stereotypical reasoning.

Keywords: semantic asymmetry, evaluative function, cognitive centrality, frame semantics, corpus analysis, antonymic constructions, evaluative load.

INTRODUCTION

Semantic asymmetry refers to the cognitive imbalance in meaning and activation between antonymic units. While traditional linguistics has often viewed antonyms as equally opposed in meaning, cognitive linguistics regards this equality as functional rather than absolute. That is, in pairs such as "яхши – ёмон," "ҳалол– ҳаром," or "мард – номард," even though the words are formally opposed, their contextual force, emotional charge, and evaluative function are not proportionate. This disparity necessitates the study of semantic asymmetry, as it helps to uncover the dichotomous evaluative models operating in human cognition [1, p. 119]. In some antonymic pairs, one lexeme often assumes a central role with stronger emotional and cognitive intensity. For example, in the pair "дўст – душман," the word "душман" is frequently observed to carry more semantic energy. It forms a field of meaning associated with threat, rejection, and negativity, while "дўст" appears as a calmer, more neutral, or aspirational concept. This imbalance is clearly connected to internalized cognitive and evaluative models [2, p. 87].

Semantic asymmetry also manifests in the relative frequency of lexical usage. In pedagogical, religious, or journalistic texts, negatively charged terms are more prominent. Words like "қора," "ифлос," "гуноҳ," and "ахмоқ" tend to attract attention due to their intense evaluative nature, whereas their positive counterparts – "оқ," "пок," "муқаддас," "ақлли" – are often used passively or less frequently [3, p. 65]. Such asymmetry reflects the influence of human experience, cultural codes, and psychological needs, shaping the way each term is cognitively

received. As A.A. Potebnya noted, a word is not merely a signifier but also a moral and evaluative instrument that modifies perception [4, p. 207].

This article investigates semantic asymmetry as a mechanism of cognitive evaluation. It explores which word in an antonymic pair carries stronger evaluative content, which term is more contextually active, and how cultural and moral factors contribute to this imbalance. The objective is to analyze semantic asymmetry in the Uzbek language through cognitive and functional lenses. The study employs frame modeling, corpus analysis, and associative testing, demonstrating how meaning is activated not just in the lexicon, but in the mental dynamics of language use [5, p. 58].

METHODOLOGY

To analyze semantic asymmetry scientifically, this study employed a combination of cognitive and empirical methods. The primary theoretical foundation is Charles Fillmore's theory of frame semantics, which posits that word meaning emerges not only through lexical definition but also through roles within a structured conceptual frame [1, p. 52]. This approach makes it possible to examine evaluative functions, emotional centrality, and conceptual positioning within antonymic pairs. A secondary yet crucial perspective is cognitive evaluative semantics. As discussed by Y.D. Apresyan and N.D. Arutyunova, lexical items are not purely descriptive; they often carry evaluative content, which is enacted through multiple conceptual mechanisms in language [2, p. 134; 3, p. 188]. This is especially evident in lexemes with ethical or psychological dimensions.

In the initial stage of the study, antonymic pairs were selected from Uzbek literary, journalistic, and religious texts. The selection included semantic domains such as "moral" (e.g., "ҳалол – ҳаром"), "psychological" ("умид – ноумид"), "social" ("дўст – душман"), and "aesthetic" ("чиройли – хунук"). Selection criteria included national relevance, corpus frequency, and evaluative function. In the second phase, corpus analysis was performed using the Uzbek National Corpus. Each antonymic pair was examined across genres. For instance, "мард – номард" frequently appeared in proverbs, stories, and educational discourse, while "гуноҳ – савоб" was prominent in religious texts. Each word's contextual activation was measured through frequency and genre-based centrality [4, p. 118]. The third phase involved an associative survey. A group of 40 respondents – linguists and philologists—was presented with 25 antonymic pairs. They were asked to indicate which word in each pair they perceived as stronger, more emotional, and more impactful. In the pair "ахлоқли – ахлоқсиз," 85% of respondents identified "ахлоқсиз" as the more cognitively active term. These results highlight the role of subjective cognition in identifying central lexemes [5, p. 102]. In the fourth phase, semantic frame modeling was applied. Each pair was reconstructed as a cognitive frame, recording its evaluative load, activation potential, cultural associations, and contextual roles. For instance, the word "номард" was linked to connotations such as "хаинлик," "фириб," and "ишончсизлик," while "мард" was associated with "қаҳрамон" and "ғурур," but exhibited less cognitive spread in usage [6, p. 91].

These methodological stages demonstrate that cognitive centrality is not only a lexical feature but also a function of context, evaluation, and social activation. Each word's role in the psychological and moral systems of consciousness was clarified through corpus data, associative feedback, and frame-based modeling. This multi-method approach allowed for a comprehensive and evidence-based evaluation of semantic asymmetry.

RESULTS

The conducted analysis confirmed that semantic asymmetry is a fundamental structural feature of antonymic pairs. Based on the analysis of over 100 Uzbek antonym pairs, including corpus data and associative surveys, it was evident that one word often assumes a dominant evaluative and cognitive role. This was particularly apparent in pairs like "чиройли – хунук," "ахлоқли – ахлоқсиз," and "дўст – душман." For example, "хунук" showed higher metaphorical usage and negative connotation, positioning it as the cognitively central term.

Corpus findings demonstrated that words with negative semantic load had greater genre-based frequency. In the pair "аҳмоқ – ақлли," the word "аҳмоқ" appeared more frequently in publicistic, colloquial, and literary genres, while "ақлли" maintained a passive role. This confirms that evaluative salience depends on genre-specific dynamics [1, p. 88]. In the associative survey, 68% of participants chose "ёмон," "қора," and "ифлос" as the more emotionally salient and memorable words. Participants described them as "more quickly recalled," "anchored in memory," and "frequently used in metaphor." These results underscore the emotional and stereotypical basis of semantic asymmetry [2, p. 76].

Frame modeling showed that "ахлоқсиз" was centrally associated with terms like "гуноҳ," "наҳс," and "қоралик," while "ахлоқли" was linked to "тарбия," "инсоф," and "одоб," but demonstrated less cognitive spread and contextual activation [3, p. 91]. In some pairs, asymmetry was sharply evident depending on context. For example, "номард" was used twice as frequently as "мард" in pedagogical, political, and literary discourse. This illustrates the role of evaluative asymmetry in structuring textual meaning [4, p. 59].

Several other antonymic pairs exhibited asymmetry tied to cultural codes. In the pair "ҳалол – ҳаром," the term "ҳаром" was consistently activated in religious, legal, and moral discourse, while "ҳалол" played a secondary, often reactive role [5, p. 113].

It was also found that central terms often appeared in proverbs, aphorisms, and figurative expressions. Expressions such as "қора кун," "ифлос ният," and "ахмоқлик қилмоқ" contained central lexemes, while their counterparts were rarely present. This suggests that semantic centrality is reinforced not only by meaning but also through phraseological density [6, p. 64]. Additionally, in certain pairs – such as "пок – ифлос," "яхши – ёмон," and "савоб – гуноҳ" – contextual centralization was influenced not only by genre but also by audience, authorial intent, and narrative style. This demonstrates that semantic asymmetry is active not only in lexical contrast but also in discursive dynamics [7, p. 106].

DISCUSSION

The findings of the study indicate that semantic asymmetry in antonymic pairs can be explained through evaluative models in cognition, emotional connotations, and culturally embedded stereotypes. The semantic structure of antonyms does not solely reflect binary opposition; it also varies significantly in terms of activation, emotional impact, and contextual role. The fact that negatively connoted words often occupy the cognitively central position highlights their weight in cultural discourse, education, and religious communication.

Semantic asymmetry emerged not merely as a lexical contrast but as a dynamic activation model. This activation was frequently associated with human needs, concern, protective mechanisms, and memory functions. Words such as "ахлоқсиз" or "душман" attract attention quickly, participate actively in metaphors, and serve as rhetorical focal points. These observations align with the theory of evaluative conceptual metaphors by Lakoff and Johnson, which states that certain words trigger predefined mental scenarios [1, p. 127]. The asymmetry also persists in proverbs, metaphors, and everyday expressions. In phrases like "қора кун," "наҳс инсон," or "ифлос ният," central lexemes are prominently featured, while their antonyms appear only to support contrast. This supports the idea of cognitive centrality within phraseological units. Peripheral terms tend to function passively and lack substantial semantic energy.

Genre-based analysis showed that semantic asymmetry is particularly evident in publicistic, pedagogical, and religious genres. In the pair "гуноҳ – савоб," the word "гуноҳ" frequently occupies the central position, drawing discursive focus, while "савоб" is activated mainly in response to the negative term. This demonstrates how evaluative load is unequally distributed across discourse types [2, p. 91]. Associative survey results confirmed that negative terms leave a stronger cognitive trace. These words are more memorable and are often associated with fear,

anxiety, and discomfort. Lexemes like "ёмон," "қора," "ифлос," and "ахмоқ" function as central cognitive elements due to their emotional intensity. Moreover, they are closely tied to the most active stereotypes in the speaker's worldview [3, p. 76].

Frame modeling revealed that central lexemes typically encompass broader semantic domains, evaluative intensity, and cultural associations. For example, the term "номард" was embedded within a frame that included "хаинлик," "ишончсизлик," and "ахлоқсизлик," while "мард" was primarily linked with "шафқат" and "фидоийлик," displaying a more limited conceptual scope [4, p. 64].

The study also found that semantic centrality is influenced by multiple factors—genre, target audience, discursive purpose, and emotional tone. Consequently, semantic asymmetry cannot be fully understood through grammatical or lexical theory alone; it must also be interpreted through cognitive, psychological, and sociocultural frameworks. Furthermore, it became evident that Uzbek antonymic pairs reflect not only meaning but also national worldviews, ethical systems, and cultural codes. For instance, in pairs like "ҳалол – ҳаром" or "обод – вайрон," the terms "ҳаром" and "вайрон" frequently appear in metaphors, didactic discourse, and religious statements as cognitively central elements. This provides direct evidence of cultural semantic asymmetry [5, p. 106].

Based on these insights, we can conclude that semantic asymmetry is not a static feature of antonymy but a dynamic and active cognitive model. Its analysis is essential for research in lexical semantics, cognitive linguistics, and educational discourse.

CONCLUSION

This study has provided clear evidence of semantic asymmetry within antonymic pairs. While such pairs may appear lexically balanced, their contextual activation, evaluative intensity, and cognitive prominence differ significantly. Negative terms, in particular, were shown to dominate in emotional impact, associative strength, and frame expansion. These differences are rooted in cognitive mechanisms shaped by dichotomous evaluative models within human consciousness. The findings demonstrate that semantic asymmetry is a key parameter for understanding how meanings are activated, evaluated, and prioritized in discourse. Antonyms function not merely as lexical opposites but as cognitive tools that perform moral, emotional, and social roles. Through them, the speaker's worldview, value system, and cognitive positioning become evident. This research also confirmed the effectiveness of combining frame analysis, corpus data, and associative testing to identify semantic asymmetry. Such an integrated approach enables a precise evaluation of lexical centrality, the uncovering of evaluative functions, and the reconstruction of meaning hierarchies in the speaker's mind.

In conclusion, semantic asymmetry should be treated as a distinct cognitive model within both theoretical and applied linguistics. Its implications extend beyond lexicology into education, translation, media, and ethical discourse, making it a critical focus for future linguistic inquiry.

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