

ANTONYMY IN GRADUONYMIC SERIES: A SEMANTIC STUDY OF GRADUAL OPPOSITION IN THE UZBEK LANGUAGE

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Abstract

This paper explores how antonymic relationships operate within scalar lexical sets, focusing on the phenomenon of graduonymy in the Uzbek language. While antonymy is typically understood as the opposition between two poles, many lexical fields in Uzbek reflect gradational meaning, forming ordered series such as *kichik–o‘rtacha–katta* (small–medium–large) or *sovuq–salqin–issiq–jazirama* (cold–cool–hot–scorching). These gradual oppositions complicate the traditional binary view of antonymy by introducing intermediate stages of meaning. Through semantic analysis of Uzbek adjectives and intensifiers, this study examines how scalar antonymic sets function in discourse, what their cognitive structures reveal about meaning organization, and how fuzzy boundaries affect their communicative use. The paper also considers implications for antonym typology and lexicographic treatment of non-binary oppositions in Uzbek.

Keywords: Uzbek language; antonymy; graduonymy; scalar semantics; lexical opposition; semantic scale; fuzzy boundaries.

1. Introduction

Antonymy is one of the most recognizable and intuitive types of lexical relation, commonly understood as the opposition between two contrasting meanings—such as *katta* (big) and *kichik* (small), or *issiq* (hot) and *sovuq* (cold). However, everyday language use reveals that such pairs are not always experienced or used in strict binary terms. Many oppositional concepts are better represented as points along a semantic scale, allowing for varying degrees of intensity or quantity. Words like *o‘rtacha* (medium), *sal sovuq* (a bit cold), or *juda issiq* (very hot) indicate that speakers conceptualize contrast in gradual, not absolute, terms.

This scalarity—referred to as graduonymy—challenges the binary foundations of classical antonymy and reveals a more nuanced organization of meaning. Uzbek, like many languages, contains numerous examples of graduonymic antonym pairs where meaning lies not in direct opposition but in relational distance along a spectrum. This article examines how antonyms function within such lexical scales in Uzbek, what types of gradational structures are most common, and how intermediate terms influence our understanding of opposition and semantic boundaries.

2. Theoretical Background

Traditional treatments of antonymy, such as those by Cruse (1986), distinguish between gradable and complementary antonyms. Gradable antonyms (e.g., *katta–kichik*) are defined by the possibility of intermediate values, whereas complementary antonyms (e.g., *tirik–o‘lik*) admit no middle ground. However, scholars such as Apresyan (1995) and Lehrer (1985) note that in actual language use, gradable antonyms often exist within semantic chains, where multiple degrees of a quality are lexicalized. These chains are called graduonymic series—sets of related terms that express varying intensity of a property.

In Uzbek linguistics, M. Rahmatullayeva (2004) and Yo. Tadjiev (1992) have described scalar meaning in adjectives and adverbs, though not always with reference to antonym structures. Nevertheless, many lexical oppositions in Uzbek involve non-binary gradation, and understanding how these work can expand current typologies of antonymy.

3. Scalar Series in Uzbek: Examples and Structure

In Uzbek, many antonymic pairs are not strictly binary but unfold along a scalar continuum, giving rise to what linguists call *graduonymic structures*. These are lexical series in which two opposing terms—traditionally antonyms—are connected through one or more intermediate degrees. Rather than marking sharp oppositions, these terms create graded semantic fields that allow for greater precision and subtlety in meaning.

For instance, consider the domain of size. While *kichik* (small) and *katta* (large) clearly function as antonyms, the term *o'rtacha* (medium) serves to mediate between them, creating a more flexible scale: *kichik – o'rtacha – katta*. Similarly, in expressions of temperature, Uzbek offers a far more textured gradation than a simple *sovuq–issiq* (cold–hot) binary. Words like *salqin* (cool), *iliq* (warm), and *jazirama* (scorching) interpose additional steps along the continuum, forming a scale such as *sovuq – salqin – iliq – issiq – jazirama*. These intermediate terms are not merely fillers but carry their own cultural and contextual nuances, often linked to climate, emotion, or seasonality.

The same principle applies across various semantic domains. In the realm of weight, for example, *yengil – o'rtacha – og'ir* (light – medium – heavy) provides a structured spectrum of physical mass. In brightness, the progression *xira – yorug' – charog'on* (dim – bright – radiant) captures shifts in visual intensity, relevant in both literal and metaphorical uses. Even emotional states form such chains: *xafa – befarq – xursand* (sad – indifferent – happy). Here, *befarq* (indifferent) does not merely stand between two emotional extremes but suggests a culturally meaningful absence of affect—neither joy nor sadness, but a kind of withdrawal or neutrality often marked in Uzbek discourse.

These scalar sequences reveal that antonymy in Uzbek is often multi-leveled, where polar opposites act as anchors in a broader conceptual gradient. This reflects a cognitive orientation toward nuance rather than binary categorization, suggesting that Uzbek speakers perceive and linguistically represent many aspects of experience as continuous rather than discrete. Thus, antonymy in this context is not just oppositional, but relational and gradational, embedded in semantic hierarchies that mirror everyday perception and cultural expression.

4. Fuzzy Boundaries and Semantic Ambiguity

One of the key features of graduonymic antonymy is the presence of fuzzy boundaries—areas where speakers may disagree about whether one term ends and the next begins. For instance, at what temperature does *salqin* become *iliq*? Is *katta* always the opposite of *kichik*, or does *o'rtacha* cancel the contrast in certain contexts?

These ambiguities are not problematic in everyday communication, as speakers rely on contextual cues to interpret meaning. However, they do challenge strict dictionary definitions and raise questions about how opposition is encoded in the lexicon. Moreover, the fact that speakers often intensify scalar antonyms (e.g., *juda issiq*, *sal sovuq*) reveals that contrast is often gradient, not categorical.

Such fuzziness supports the view that antonymy, especially of the gradable type, is not binary by nature but cognitively relative and context-dependent.

5. Functional and Discursive Implications

The use of graduonymic antonyms in Uzbek also reflects a speaker's communicative intent. For example, saying *u juda katta odam* ("he is a very big person") can refer literally to size, but also imply authority or prestige, depending on tone and context. Choosing *o'rtacha* instead of *kichik* or *katta* can signal neutrality, politeness, or vagueness.

In storytelling, speakers often shift between terms in a scale to build intensity, as in: *avval sal sovuq edi, keyin iliqlashdi, endi juda issiq* ("first it was a bit cold, then it got warmer, now it's very hot"). Here, meaning evolves gradually, and opposition arises through narrative progression rather than static contrast.

Thus, graduonymic antonymy enables speakers to express fine-grained meaning, balancing precision and emotional subtlety. This makes it a highly functional tool in descriptive, evaluative, and narrative discourse.

6. Conclusion

While antonymy is often taught and understood as a binary semantic relation, many oppositional concepts in Uzbek function within graduonymic scales, where meaning unfolds along a continuum rather than at two poles. Scalar antonymic sets like *kichik–o'rtacha–katta* or *sovuq–salqin–issiq–jazirama* demonstrate that opposition in natural language is often relational, fuzzy, and context-sensitive.

Understanding how antonyms operate within these scales enriches our grasp of lexical semantics and highlights the flexibility of meaning in real-world language use. For Uzbek, where semantic nuance is frequently encoded in adjectives and adverbs, this approach invites further study into how speakers construct meaning not only through contrast, but through gradation.

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