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THE ROLE OF GRADUONYMY IN THE LEXICAL AND SEMANTIC LEVELS OF ENGLISH AND UZBEK: A PSYCHOLINGUISTIC VIEW

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT:
	This article explores the role of gradience in the lexical and semantic levels of English and Uzbek from a psycholinguistic perspective. It examines how words in both languages exhibit gradational meaning rather than fixed, categorical interpretations. Lexical gradience is illustrated through examples like adjectives describing height or speed, which vary depending on context. Similarly, semantic gradience is discussed in terms of polysemy and context-dependent meanings. The article also integrates psycholinguistic insights on how speakers process gradient meanings, using cognitive theories such as prototype theory and categorization. By comparing English and Uzbek, the paper highlights the flexible, context-sensitive nature of meaning in both languages.

INTRODUCTION. Language, as a dynamic and living entity, has always been a topic of great interest in linguistics, particularly when viewed through the lens of psycholinguistics. One of the most intriguing aspects of language is the phenomenon of *gradience* — the subtle, continuous variations that exist within words, phrases, and meanings. Gradience in language refers to the way in which linguistic items (such as words, phrases, and meanings) exhibit a spectrum of variations rather than rigid categories. In both English and Uzbek, gradience plays a crucial role in the formation and interpretation of meaning, affecting lexical and semantic structures in complex ways. This article delves into the role of gradience in the lexical and semantic levels of English and Uzbek from a psycholinguistic perspective.

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At the lexical level, gradience refers to the range of meanings and nuances that a single word can carry. In both English and Uzbek, words often do not have one fixed meaning but can shift depending on context, usage, and speaker intent. This contrasts with rigid lexical categories where a word can only mean one thing at all times [1].

1.   English lexical gradience: In English, words like *"tall"* or *"fast"* are prime examples of gradient terms. These adjectives do not possess a binary quality; instead, there is a range. For instance, one can be *"taller"* or *"slightly tall"*, and the context determines the exact degree of the quality being described. A person who is 6 feet tall is considered tall, but a person who is 6 feet 2 inches might be *"taller"* — demonstrating the continuous nature of these adjectives.

Moreover, words such as *"rich"* or *"intelligent"* also exhibit lexical gradience. The lexical meaning of these adjectives is influenced by degree, context, and comparison. An individual might be considered "more intelligent" based on various scales, but the line between being *"intelligent"* and *"extremely intelligent"* is not rigid — it shifts continuously.

2.   Uzbek lexical gradience: Similarly, the Uzbek language contains lexical items that reflect gradience. Words like *"baland"* (tall) or *"tez"* (fast) are not absolute; they imply different degrees depending on context. The use of suffixes like *"-roq"* (comparative) or *"-cha"* (diminutive) further emphasize this gradient nature. For instance, the word *"balandroq"* (slightly taller) indicates a gradation of height, demonstrating how Uzbek, like English, accommodates nuanced variations in meaning at the lexical level.

Furthermore, in the Uzbek language, adjectives related to emotions or qualities, such as *"boy"* (rich), also show gradient meaning. The word can refer to different levels of wealth, from relatively well-off to extremely wealthy. As in English, there is no absolute benchmark — the concept of *richness* is fluid. Moving beyond the individual words, gradience plays a critical role at the semantic level, influencing how concepts are understood, categorized, and processed [2].

1.   English semantic gradience: Semantically, English is rich in terms of polysemy (words with multiple meanings) and vagueness, which contributes to the gradient nature of meaning. For example, the word *"bank"* can refer to a financial institution, the side of a river, or a place to store something (like a *"blood bank"*). These meanings do not exist in a binary opposition but rather lie along a spectrum, with contextual clues guiding the interpretation. Thus, the semantic meaning of *"bank"* in each context involves a gradational shift.

In English, *"category boundaries"* are not always clear-cut. The distinction between what constitutes a *"dog"* and what constitutes a *"cat"* is flexible. For instance, in categories like animals or colors, there are sometimes intermediate or borderline cases, such as *"cat-dog"* hybrids or shades of color like *"pink"* or *"violet"* that are neither clearly one color nor the other. These gradational boundaries reflect the way people categorize and conceptualize the world around them.

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2. Uzbek semantic gradience: Similarly, in Uzbek, semantic gradience influences the categorization of words. For instance, words like *"ko'p"* (many) and *"kam"* (few) describe quantities in a gradient manner. The meaning of *"many"* is not fixed and depends on the context. What may be considered *"many"* in one situation could be *"few"* in another. This gradience is especially important in conversational contexts where speakers express approximate amounts or degrees of something.

Additionally, polysemy in Uzbek creates flexible semantic interpretations. For example, *"yuz"* can refer to the *"face"* or *"surface"* (as in the surface of an object), depending on the context. Just like in English, these words' meanings fluctuate based on pragmatic considerations and contextual needs. The gradient nature of these words suggests that meaning in Uzbek is similarly fluid and context-dependent. From a psycholinguistic perspective, understanding how speakers process gradient meaning in English and Uzbek involves exploring how they perceive, categorize, and retrieve information about language [3].

1. Cognitive Processing of Lexical Gradience: In both languages, speakers utilize cognitive processes such as *conceptual blending* and *prototype theory* to navigate lexical gradience. Prototype theory, proposed by Eleanor Rosch, suggests that words do not represent a fixed set of features but rather a central tendency or prototype. For example, the concept of *"bird"* may have a prototype (e.g., a robin), and variations (e.g., penguins) are considered "fuzzy" members of the category. The same theory applies to lexical items like *"tall"* in both English and Uzbek, where speakers cognitively categorize people based on a prototype of height.

2. Semantic Categorization: Semantic gradience in both languages challenges the rigid categorization of meanings. Studies show that individuals do not always rely on precise definitions but on flexible categories, often using context and cognitive heuristics to arrive at meaning. For instance, when hearing the word *"rich"*, listeners in both English and Uzbek might retrieve various categories of wealth, each defined by different thresholds. This flexible categorization process demonstrates the importance of gradient meaning in real-time language processing.

In both English and Uzbek, the role of gradience in the lexical and semantic levels reflects the dynamic and context-sensitive nature of language. Lexical items in both languages exhibit continuous variations, where meaning is not fixed but changes depending on context, comparison, and degree. Semantically, words often carry multiple meanings that lie on a spectrum, influenced by pragmatic and cognitive factors. From a psycholinguistic viewpoint, this gradience challenges traditional notions of fixed, categorical meaning and underscores the importance of flexibility and context in language processing. Understanding how speakers of both English and Uzbek process these gradient forms offers valuable insights into the nature of cognition, categorization, and meaning in human language [4].

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Methodology. This study employs a qualitative, comparative approach to explore the role of gradience in the lexical and semantic levels of English and Uzbek. The methodology integrates psycholinguistic theory with linguistic analysis to investigate how speakers of both languages process and interpret gradient meanings.

Data for this study were gathered through a combination of corpus analysis, linguistic surveys, and psycholinguistic experiments. The corpus analysis involved reviewing texts from various domains, including fiction, academic writing, and conversational speech, to identify lexical and semantic items exhibiting gradience. The surveys and experiments were designed to gather native speakers' intuitions about the meaning and interpretation of gradient words and phrases in both English and Uzbek [5].

- Corpus Analysis: A selection of texts in both English and Uzbek was analyzed to identify adjectives, nouns, and verbs with gradient meanings. Examples included words such as *"tall"*, *"fast"*, *"rich"*, and their corresponding forms in Uzbek (e.g., *"baland"*, *"tez"*, *"boy"*).

- Surveys: Native speakers of both English and Uzbek were surveyed to assess their understanding and use of gradient words in different contexts. Participants rated the degree of meaning in words like *"intelligent"* or *"wealthy"*, focusing on how they perceive variation in meaning depending on context.

- Psycholinguistic Experiments: To explore the cognitive processing of gradient meaning, participants in both languages were presented with sentences containing gradient terms and asked to make rapid semantic judgments. This allowed for the collection of data on how quickly and accurately speakers interpret gradient words in both languages.

A detailed linguistic analysis was conducted to categorize words that exhibit gradience at both the lexical and semantic levels. The analysis focused on the following:

- Lexical Gradience: The study identified adjective-noun combinations, comparative forms, and other lexical items that carry varying degrees of meaning. These items were categorized based on their syntactic roles and contextual usage.

- Semantic Gradience: The study examined the polysemy of key terms, where one word can have multiple meanings based on context. For example, in English, *"bank"* can refer to a financial institution or the side of a river, while in Uzbek, *"yuz"* can mean both *"face"* and *"surface"*. The analysis focused on identifying these gradations and how meaning shifts in response to different contexts.

To interpret the data from a psycholinguistic perspective, the study was grounded in *prototype theory* and *categorization* theory. Prototype theory posits that categories are not rigidly defined but rather are represented by prototypes, with various members of a category having varying degrees of membership. This theory was used to understand how speakers of both languages categorize and process gradient meanings [6].

- Prototype Theory: The study looked at how native speakers identify prototypes for gradient categories (e.g., the prototype of *"tall"* as someone of average height, with variations in interpretation depending on the context).

- Cognitive Heuristics: The research also explored how speakers use cognitive shortcuts (heuristics) to make judgments about meaning in context. These shortcuts allow individuals to interpret gradient terms in ways that are contextually appropriate but not necessarily rigid or fixed.

The data were then compared across both languages to highlight similarities and differences in how gradient meanings are processed. This comparative analysis examined how lexical and semantic gradience manifest in English and Uzbek and how psycholinguistic principles of meaning interpretation apply to each language. Particular attention was given to:

- The use of gradient adjectives and their comparative forms in both languages.

- The role of polysemy and context-dependent meanings in both languages.

- The cognitive processes involved in interpreting gradient terms and how they differ in terms of speed and accuracy between the two language groups.

Discussion and results. The results of the study provided valuable insights into how gradience operates in both English and Uzbek at the lexical and semantic levels. Data was collected from native speakers of both languages through surveys, psycholinguistic experiments, and corpus analysis. Below are the key findings:

The lexical analysis revealed that words like *"tall"*, *"fast"*, and *"rich"* exhibit significant gradience in their usage. For example, when asked to rate the degree of *"tallness"* in various contexts, English speakers consistently demonstrated variability in their responses, indicating a continuous spectrum of height. The comparative forms (e.g., *"taller"*, *"slightly taller"*) also revealed how English speakers adjust meaning based on context. Survey responses from native English speakers showed that adjectives such as *"fast"* or *"rich"* were context-dependent. For instance, one speaker might consider a person with an income of $100,000 to be *"rich"*, while another might reserve the term for someone with a net worth in the millions. Similarly, *"fast"* was rated differently when describing a car versus a human runner [7,8].

In Uzbek, words like *"baland"* (tall) and *"tez"* (fast) exhibited similar gradience. Survey participants indicated that the concept of *"tallness"* in Uzbek, like in English, varies significantly depending on the specific context (e.g., height of a person, a building, or a tree). Additionally, the use of suffixes like *"-roq"* (comparative) or *"-cha"* (diminutive) to indicate gradation further emphasized the fluid nature of lexical meaning in Uzbek. The use of comparative forms (e.g., *"balandroq"*, *"tezroq"*) allowed speakers to express varying degrees of meaning. The semantic analysis revealed significant polysemy in terms like *"bank"*, *"light"*, and *"date"*. These words were found to have varying interpretations based on context. For example, *"bank"* could refer to a financial institution, the side of a river, or a

place where something is stored. English speakers demonstrated a high degree of flexibility in interpreting these words based on contextual cues. The degree of polysemy was consistent with the principle of semantic gradience, where meaning is not fixed but rather shifts depending on the situation [9].

Similar results were found in Uzbek, where words like *"yuz"* (face) and *"yuz"* (surface) exhibited polysemy. The multiple meanings of the same word were context-dependent, reflecting the gradient nature of meaning. Survey respondents in Uzbek also demonstrated the same flexibility in interpretation, where polysemous words could shift in meaning depending on the context (e.g., whether *"yuz"* referred to a person's face or the surface of an object). Furthermore, the way speakers used adjectives like *"boy"* (rich) or *"kam"* (few) also highlighted the flexible semantic nature of these words, which changed depending on the degree or quantity involved.

Psycholinguistic experiments conducted to assess cognitive processing of gradient meaning showed that both English and Uzbek speakers used similar strategies in interpreting gradient terms. Response times were slightly faster when words were used in familiar contexts (e.g., *"rich"* used to describe a wealthy individual) and slower when words appeared in less familiar, ambiguous contexts (e.g., *"rich"* used to describe someone with a modest income but with significant investments). This suggested that both groups rely on prototype categories and cognitive heuristics to interpret meaning efficiently. Interestingly, both English and Uzbek speakers showed a higher accuracy in interpreting words with fewer degrees of meaning (e.g., *"rich"* when referring to a very wealthy person). However, when the meanings were more ambiguous (e.g., *"rich"* in a relative sense), the cognitive processing became more complex, with longer response times and greater variability in interpretation [10].

The findings of this study support the hypothesis that gradience plays a significant role in both the lexical and semantic levels of English and Uzbek. The results emphasize the importance of context in determining meaning and highlight the flexibility of language in both languages. At the lexical level, the study confirms that both English and Uzbek use gradient adjectives to convey degrees of meaning, rather than fixed, binary categories. This variability in interpretation suggests that language is inherently flexible and that speakers rely on context to determine the appropriate degree of meaning. The use of comparative forms and modifiers further enhances this flexibility. These findings are consistent with previous studies on gradience, such as those by Rosch (1975), who argued that categories in language (and cognition) are based on prototypes and can extend across a spectrum rather than being rigidly defined [11].

At the semantic level, both languages exhibit polysemy and context-dependent meanings, reinforcing the idea that words often have multiple meanings that are activated based on context. This aligns with cognitive theories like prototype theory (Rosch, 1975) and Lakoff's (1987) work on categories, which argue that words and concepts are understood in terms of

fuzzy boundaries rather than fixed definitions. In both English and Uzbek, words like *"bank"* and *"yuz"* illustrate the gradient nature of meaning, where the same word can take on multiple meanings depending on its use in different contexts. The psycholinguistic experiments further show that speakers of both languages process gradient meaning using cognitive shortcuts such as prototypes and heuristics. This suggests that even when words have multiple interpretations, speakers can rapidly categorize and interpret them based on their mental prototypes. The slower response times in ambiguous contexts suggest that when words deviate from their prototypical meanings, the cognitive processing becomes more effortful, requiring additional mental resources to reconcile the multiple possible interpretations. Comparing English and Uzbek provides a rich understanding of how gradience operates across languages. Despite differences in syntax and morphology, both languages exhibit similar patterns of lexical and semantic gradience. The use of comparative and diminutive forms in Uzbek further illustrates the flexibility of meaning, akin to the way English speakers use comparative adjectives. This suggests that the phenomenon of gradience is universal and not bound to any single language [12].

Psycholinguistic experiments revealed that speakers of both English and Uzbek process these gradient meanings by relying on cognitive shortcuts like prototypes and heuristics. These cognitive mechanisms help speakers rapidly interpret words, though meaning becomes more ambiguous and processing becomes more effortful when the word's meaning deviates from its prototype. This flexibility in meaning underscores the dynamic nature of language and highlights the cognitive adaptability of speakers. The comparative analysis between English and Uzbek has shown that while the specific linguistic structures may differ, the underlying cognitive processes and the role of context in interpreting gradient meanings are strikingly similar. Both languages rely on a flexible, context-sensitive approach to meaning, which allows speakers to navigate the fluidity of language in real-time communication.

Conclusion. This study has explored the role of gradience in the lexical and semantic levels of both English and Uzbek, offering a psycholinguistic perspective on how meaning is constructed and interpreted. The findings confirm that gradience is a significant and universal phenomenon in both languages, with words often exhibiting a spectrum of meanings rather than fixed, categorical interpretations. Lexical items such as adjectives and nouns in both English and Uzbek demonstrate variability depending on context, degree, and comparison, while polysemy and context-dependent meanings further exemplify the semantic gradience present in both languages. The study emphasizes the importance of context and cognitive flexibility in the interpretation of gradient meanings, providing further insight into how languages manage variability in meaning at both lexical and semantic levels. Future research could expand on these findings by examining other languages and exploring the influence of cultural factors on the processing of gradient meaning.

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