

# Semantic Shifts Displayed by Adjectives Accompanying Abstract Nouns

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## Abstract

The research is devoted to semantic changes undergone by adjectives accompanying abstract nouns in English and Russian. The article is aimed at proving that such adjectives lose their concrete lexical meaning and become intensifiers, that is undergo delexicalization. The nouns themselves serve as units of both lexical and syntactic context suppressing the elements of concrete meaning and enhancing the intensifying meaning. As a result of this process, synonymous relationship develops between adjectives which are not synonyms in other contexts. The process runs parallel in the two languages, with similar lexical sources, which makes it possible to assume that it is part of a general trend of semantic evolution from concrete to more abstract meanings.

**Keywords:** lexical meaning, context, semantic evolution, intensifier, adjective, abstract noun

## 1. Introduction

The purpose of the article is to consider adjectives accompanying abstract nouns which are understood as nouns having no material denotate, and denoting qualities, actions and states of the objects (Khokhlova, 2014), (Savelyev, 1985). For the purpose of the present research, abstract nouns can be divided into gradable and ungradable. For example, the word *influence* can be considered gradable, because influence can be weak or strong. On the other hand, such noun as *response* or *murder* can be considered ungradable, because responses can't be bigger or smaller. (Note 2)

The study is conducted in the framework of the theory of intensifiers as the author will be trying to prove that some adjectives accompanying abstract nouns lose their original meaning and are used to strengthen the meaning of the noun, that is become intensifiers.

The research will focus on intensifiers with noun heads (*dramatic changes, tough sanctions, острая дискуссия* (sharp discussion(note 2)), *тяжелые бои* (heavy fighting))

Previous research on intensifiers has been focusing primarily on phrases with adjectival or verbal heads. (Su, 2016; Schweinberger, 2021); it has been noted that some lexical units undergo delexicalization and become purely expressive indicators. Intensifiers are considered as lexemes undergoing the process of delexicalization, but preserving, at least partially, their lexical meaning. (Berestnev & Vasilieva, 2016). The process of delexicalization and subsequent grammaticalization has been considered for various syntactic structures. (Traugott, 2017; Sallier, 2020)

Intensifiers are subject to permanent renewal, old ones being discarded and new ones appearing. (Tagliomonte, 2008)

The research also relies on the theory of lexical and syntactic context formulated by N. Amosova of St. Petersburg (then Leningrad) university. (Amosova, 1968: 47-51). The scholar distinguishes lexical and syntactic context, the former being a lexeme contributing to the realization of one of several meanings of a word and the latter understood as a structure helping to realize the meaning. Such syntactic structures contributing to the realization of a certain meaning are defined as the indicative minimum. The role of syntactic context in semantic change has been described on the material of verbs governing the infinitive (Sallier, 2020).

## 2. Methods

The research is based on the material collected from English corpora (COCA, BNC and the Time Magazine Corpus (TMC); Russian National Corpus (RNC) was used as a source for Russian examples. Examples picked by the author from various authentic sources, such as media, scholastic and scientific texts and fiction were also used. A number of abstract nouns such as *blow*, *injury*, *sanction*, *condition*, *crime*, *murder*, and their Russian equivalents have been studied. The adjectives accompanying them were analyzed and the dictionary meaning was compared to the meaning in the actual examples. Questionnaires were offered to native speakers of English and Russian, requesting the respondents to substitute the word studied with a synonym. The study includes comparative analysis of English and Russian material.

## 3. Results

The results of the research were similar for English and Russian. The adjectives accompanying abstract nouns are always used in their figurative meaning and under some conditions lose their meaning completely, becoming delexicalized intensifiers. Lexical units which are not synonyms in other contexts become synonyms when accompanying an abstract noun.

## 4. Discussion

### 4.1 The Semantic Evolution of Adjectives in English

Consider the examples:

- 1) She was struggling with a **heavy** suitcase. (OED)
- 2) ...you could list your hobbies as eating**heavy** food. (TMC)
- 3) ...arteries with the rhythms of her native Bahia, a region of Brazil with a **heavy** African influence. (TMC)
- 4) Researchers have found that **heavy** pa cifier use by infants older than six months increases the risk of ear infections – (TMC)
- 5) ...sales tax is a steep 13%, and **heavy** import duties are levied on some assets, (TMC)

In (1) the adjective *heavy* bears direct physical meaning: weighing a lot; difficult to lift or move (OED) In (2) the adjective denotes the quality of food rather than its actual weight; in (3) and (4) *heavy* has no physical meaning because the nouns accompanied are not physical entities. The phrase *heavy African influence* means 'strong influence (a replacement suggested by an informant). The same informant suggested "too much" for the replacement of "heavy" in (4) and "substantial" in (5). So, in (3) (4) and (5) the adjective intensifies the meaning of the quality (3) action (4) and the amount of money in (5), becoming a delexicalized intensifier. The abstract meaning of the nouns *influence*, *use* and *finer* precludes the realization of the concrete meaning of the adjective *heavy*.

The material studied contains other phrases where the adjective is used as an intensifier: *heavy fines*, *heavy investment heavy toll*, *heavy casualties*, *heavy fighting*.

The examples show that the adjective *heavy* undergoes a semantic evolution from concrete, physical meaning to an abstract meaning of intensifying the nouns denoting action, process or condition. The abstract character of the nouns makes the realization of the physical meaning impossible, so the noun becomes the lexical context generating the abstract meaning of the adjective.

Some other adjectives display a similar semantic change. See the examples:

- 6) Robert Frost's poetry is essentially **dramatic**. It is inevitable for him some day to write a full length play.
- 7) In his opinion Argentina is still a member of the League, despite her **dramatic** withdrawal from the deliberations of the Assembly three years ago. (TMC)
- 8) The broadcasting landscape has undergone **dramatic** change in the past two decades. (unesdoc.unesco.org)
- 9) The ordinance of Syracuse University which prevents students unable to swim from graduating has at last achieved **dramatic** importance. (TMC)

The Oxford dictionary gives the first definition of the adjective *dramatic* as "sudden, very great and often surprising" where "very great" demonstrates the intensifying character of the adjective. The second meaning is "exciting and

impressive”; the initial meaning “connected with the theatre or plays” is presented as the third one. Turning to the examples presented, the original meaning can be seen in (6) and is reinforced by the word *play* in the next sentence; in (7) the adjective can be understood as “exciting and impressive”, presenting the event as a spectacular political drama. (8) and (9), however, demonstrate the intensifying meaning. As to (8), the materials of the resource are published both in English and Russian and the Russian version contains «глубокие изменения» (deep changes), so an intensifier corresponds to another intensifier with identical function but different semantic history. In (9), the adjective was replaced by the informant by “substantial”, another intensifying adjective.

The examples quoted show that adjectives accompanying abstract nouns undergo a semantic evolution, losing their initial concrete meaning and becoming abstract intensifiers. Other adjectives display a similar tendency. See the examples:

- 10) These conditions were expected to meet **stiff** resistance in the Legislative Assembly. (COCA)
- 11) Proposal to increase the purchase and running cost of cars two years ago ran into **stiff** opposition. (TMC)
- 12) Oil spillages or leakage of other hazardous materials will be punishable with **stiff** fines or the imprisonment of company executives. (TMC)
- 13) That's a lot of money back then. That's **serious** money and that's a lot of land. (COCA)
- 14) the present crisis is the most **profound** one in our entire national history: more **profound** than either World War I or II, more **profound** than even the Civil War (TMC)
- 15) ...the prospect of horrendous traffic jams and an **acute** shortage of hotel rooms. (TMC)
- 16) Congressional leaders... have threatened **tough** trade sanctions against Japan unless it opens its markets further. (TMC)

The adjective *stiff* in (10) and (11) was replaced by *strong* by an informant; in (12) the informant used the word *hefty*, the dictionary definition of which includes “an amount of money larger than usual or expected”, which confirms the intensifying character of *stiff*; in (13) *serious money* means a lot of money which is confirmed by *a lot* in the previous sentence; in (14) the intensifying character of *profound* is reinforced by an allusion to major crises in the history of the USA; in (15) the intensifying nature of *acute* is reinforced by the adjective *horrendous*, also an intensifier.

It is interesting to note that in texts abstract nouns accompanied by intensifying adjectives outnumber those accompanied by an adjective diminishing its meaning; thus the analysis of the noun *damage* in the COCA registered such phrases as *extensive damage*, *severe damage*, *heavy damage*, *massive damage*, *significant damage*. The phrase “*slight damage*” has yielded three examples out of 500 offered.

It is also noteworthy that adjectives accompanying abstract nouns become synonymous in this context, though they are not synonyms in other contexts. See the examples:

- 17) The National Union of Mineworkers also had to pay **heavy** fines and suffer sequestration. (BNC)
- 18) The **stiff** fines imposed on those caught driving with worn tyres were designed purely to reduce car ownership (BNC)
- 19) He is called upon both to defend his faith against **stiff** opposition and to spread it among his friends.
- 20) The Violence Against Women Act, the once broadly bipartisan 1994 legislation that now faces **fierce** opposition from conservatives.

*Heavy* and *stiff* in (17) and (18) are synonymous in these sentences, both of them referring to large sums of money. In other contexts, however, they have different meanings, the first one referring to weight and the second defined as “difficult to bend or move” by the Oxford English dictionary.

The same synonymous relationship is displayed between the adjectives *stiff* and *fierce* in (19) and (20), both being replaced by *strong* by the informants.

The adjective *fierce* deserves special analysis. *Fierce* is defined by OED as “angry and aggressive in a way that is frightening”.

It must be noted that *fierce* collocates mostly with nouns denoting controversy, conflict or violence. In phrases such as *fierce attack*, *fierce and intense competition* *fierce* controversy *fierce artillery duels* (all taken from BNC), the adjective retains its original meaning intensifying at the same time the sense of violence or controversy in the noun accompanied. It can be concluded therefore that in such phrases *fierce* is a motivated intensifier, boosting the

meaning of the noun by its own lexical meaning. In a phrase *fierce love* (BNC), however the adjective *fierce* is less motivated and can just be read as “strong love”.

Comparing (19) and (20) it can be seen that *fierce* displays a higher motivation than *stiff*, that is intensifiers retain their initial meanings.

The examples quoted make it possible to conclude that adjectives accompanying abstract nouns either completely lose their initial meaning (*heavy*, *stiff*, *dramatic*, *drastic*, *acute*, *serious*) serving as an intensifier or reinforce the meaning of the head noun, combining the intensifying role with its lexical meaning (*fierce*). The motivation in the first group, displaying a substantial loss of lexical meaning is weaker than that of the second group.

Adjectives accompanying abstract nouns display synonymous relationship in this syntactic position, though they are not synonyms in other contexts.

#### 4.2 The Semantic Evolution of Adjectives in Russian

The study of Russian adjectives accompanying abstract nouns will focus on such adjectives as *острый* (sharp, acute), *жесткий* (tough), *бешеный* (mad, crazy), *глубокий* (deep, profound) *искренний*, *зверский*. See the examples:

- 21) Все страны пытались как-то поддержать свои экономики в рамках **жесткого** кризиса, спровоцированного пандемией COVID-19. All countries tried to somehow support their economies as part of the **severe** crisis provoked by the COVID-19 pandemic (RIA novosti 27.12.2021)
- 22) Это вызвало **глубокое** негодование самого претендовавшего на второй срок президента и его сторонников This caused **deep** resentment of the president himself and his supporters. (RNC)
- 23) Многогранное дарование и огромная работоспособность артиста снискали **глубокое** уважение профессионалов и всенародную любовь. The artist's multifaceted talent and enormous capacity for work have won the **deep** respect of professionals and popular love. (RNC)
- 24) «Существует **острая** необходимость создания новых антибиотиков, потому что старые уже не работают из-за резистентности. “There is an **urgent** need to create new antibiotics, because the old ones no longer work due to resistance. (RNC)
- 25) Основная проблема для властей республики - **острая** нехватка технологий, компетенций и кадров. The main problem for the authorities of the republic is an **acute** shortage of technologies, competencies and personnel. (RNC)
- 26) Озеров... написал несколько трагедий в духе классицизма, имевших **бешеный** успех на столичной сцене. Ozerov.....wrote several tragedies in the spirit of classicism, which were wildly successful on the capital's stage. (RNC)
- 27) Таня, вот тебе **бешеный** оклад, ты молодец, извини, раньше не мог...“Tanya, here’s a crazy / big salary for you, well done, I’m sorry, I couldn’t before ...”. (RNC)

In (21) the intensifying meaning is confirmed by the GOOGLE translation. The adjective *severe* supplied by the machine is defined as “extremely bad or serious”, *extremely* carrying an intensifying sense. In (22) and (23) the informants replaced *глубокое* by *сильное* (strong) in (22) and *большое* (big, great) in (23). The intensifying nature of the adjective is also confirmed by the adjective *deep*, offered by the GOOGLE. The English adjective itself serves as an intensifier and is used in such phrases as *deep trouble*, *deep recession*, *deep unease*, *deep depression*. (all the examples taken from the TMC). *Острая* in (24) and (25) is very close in meaning to English *acute* (cf.ex.15) and was replaced by *сильная* (strong) by an informant. *Бешеный* in (26) and (27) was replaced by *большой* (big), *огромный* (very big) in both examples. The intensifying function of the adjective is illustrated by the phrase **wildly** successful offered by the GOOGLE and defined by the OED as “extremely; very”.

As was shown on English examples (cf. ex. 17-20), adjectives that are far from synonymous in other contexts become synonyms when accompanying an abstract noun. See the examples:

- 28) К нам пошли **серьезные деньги** — по миллиарду долларов в месяц. **Serious** money came to us - a billion dollars a month. (RNC)
- 29) А в это время хлопковые миллиарды расходились по рукам, **бешеные** деньги задавали работу следователю Гдяну на многие годы. Meanwhile, cotton billions were going from hand to hand, **big** money assigned the work of the investigator Gdlyan for many years. (RNC)

The adjectives *бешеные* and *серьезные* are not synonyms, the first meaning “mad, crazy” the second one “serious”. In this context, however, both adjectives mean “big money”, as is shown by the google translation.

Among the lexemes serving as intensifiers the adjective *зверский*, *зверская*, *зверское* deserves special analysis which can illustrate the process of semantic evolution. Literally it means beastly, animal-like (*зверь* - animal) but is used exclusively in its figurative meaning: brutal; atrocious; awful. The national corpus yielded no examples of the adjective used in its original “animal-like” meaning.

Compare the examples:

- 30) **Зверское** обращение с пленными, массовые убийства мирных жителей, откровенный грабеж оккупированных территорий давно уже показали истинное лицо нацистов. The **brutal** treatment of prisoners, the mass murder of civilians, the outright robbery of the occupied territories have long shown the true face of the Nazis. (RNC)

The noun *обращение* (treatment) carries no meaning of brutality, which is expressed by the adjective *зверское* (brutal) and supported by the phrases *массовые убийства* (massacres) and *грабеж* (robbery).

- 31) Еще хорошо помнились **зверское** раскулачивание, террор, голод. I also well remembered the brutal dekulakization, terror, famine. (RNC)

Within the sentence, the brutality of the action is illustrated by the words *террор* (terror) and *голод* (famine).

Dekulakization is described in the Wikipedia as “the Soviet campaign of political repressions, including arrests, deportations, or executions of millions of kulaks (prosperous peasants)” in which the words *arrests*, *deportations*, *executions* testify to brutality.

- 32) От запаха пирога во мне проснулся **зверский** аппетит. From the smell of the pie, a **brutal** appetite woke up in me. (RNC)
- 33) Кашлял надсадно, стоял у стола, согнувшись, не мог дыханье восстановить. **Зверский** бронхит, каждую зиму. He coughed hoarsely, stood at the table, bent over, could not restore his breath. **Brutal** bronchitis, every winter. (RNC)

In (32) the adjective carries no element of brutality, because there is no brutal agent and is a pure intensifier. In (33) *зверский* doesn't refer to the action by another persons as in (30) and (31), but shows the severity of the disease.

So the semantic shift is as follows: *animal like – brutal -strong*.

In numerous cases the adjective *зверский* is attached to ungradable nouns that can't be intensified:

- 34) Арестован 30-летний мужчина, совершивший **зверское** убийство четырех человек. A 30-year-old man was arrested for the **brutal** murder of four people. (RNC)
- 35) **Зверское** избивание корреспондента газеты «Коммерсантъ» вызвало широкий резонанс в обществе и профессиональной среде. The **brutal** beating of a Kommersant correspondent caused a wide resonance in society and the professional community. (RNC)

The noun *убийство* (murder) is ungradable, so it can't be intensified. Murder is brutal by definition, so the adjective is semantically superfluous, bearing no information; the same is the case in (34) where the noun *избивание* (beating) means an action that can't be but brutal.

#### 4.3 Lexical Sources of the Intensifiers

Although adjectives accompanying abstract nouns may have various original meanings, the research made it possible to single out some lexical groups of adjectives becoming intensifiers when accompanying abstract nouns: adjectives with tactile meanings: *acute*, *sharp*, *tough*, *tight*, *stiff*, Russian *жесткий* (tough) *острый* (acute); adjective denoting space (*deep*, *profound*, Russian *глубокий* (deep)); adjectives denoting weight and size (*heavy*, Russian *тяжелый*)

There are also parallel phrases in English and Russian, such as: *profound changes* – *глубокие изменения*; *tough sanctions* - *жесткие санкции*; *acute shortage* - *острая нехватка*; *serious money* - *серьезные деньги*. This tendency is enhanced by active and permanent interaction between the two languages in diplomatic, cultural and social spheres, and also by the tendency of interpreters and translators to translate literally.

#### 4.4 The Use of the Regular Semantic Shift in the Language Teaching Process

The semantic uniformity of adjectives accompanying abstract nouns can serve as an instrument for stimulating contextual guessing in reading exercises. The student is encouraged to recognize the adjective as an intensifier in the

language studied and to find a suitable intensifier in their native language. This technique, as the author's experience has shown, makes reading faster and more attractive. The student doesn't have to look up every word in the dictionary, or if he/she does, he/she knows what to look for.

## 5. Conclusions

The research conducted makes it possible to draw the following conclusions:

- The semantic evolution of the adjectives studied is a systemic diachronic process, which is confirmed by parallel semantic shifts in English and Russian.
- Adjectives accompanying abstract nouns lose their original lexical meaning and become intensifiers. The abstract noun is a contextual unit precluding the realization of a concrete physical meaning of the adjective and invoking in it a more abstract intensifying meaning.
- The parallel nature of the semantic shift is illustrated by similar lexical sources of the intensifiers and the existence of parallel phrases.
- This partial delexicalization results in the appearance in both languages of synonymous relationship between lexemes bearing different meanings in other contexts.
- Complete delexicalization of the adjectives is prevented by the existence of other contexts where the adjectives preserve their lexical meaning.
- The systemic character of the semantic shift described and the parallels between Russian and English show this process to be a part of more general semantic trend -the evolution from concrete to abstract meanings.

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## DICTIONARIES

1. Cambridge English Dictionary <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/>
2. Oxford English dictionary <https://www.oed.com/>
3. Большой академический словарь русского языка [https://rusneb.ru/catalog/000199\\_000009\\_002695674/](https://rusneb.ru/catalog/000199_000009_002695674/)

## SOURCES OF EXAMPLES

1. British National Corpus (BNC) <https://www.english-corpora.org/bnc/>
2. Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) <https://www.english-corpora.org/coca/>
3. Time magazine corpus (TMC) <https://www.english-corpora.org/TMC/>
4. RIA.RU (<https://ria.ru/>)
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6. Unesdoc.unesco (<https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark>)

## Notes

Note 1. The concept of gradability has been elaborated for adjectives (Schweinberger 2021) but not, to the author's knowledge, for abstract nouns.

Note 2. All the translations from Russian into English were performed by the Google translator, to avoid subjectivity.

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