

The Semantic Domains of Intensification: A Cross-Language Perspective

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Intensification

A linguistic process that involves scaling upward the force of the utterance.

It conveys attitudinal and emotive meanings on the part of the speaker.

There are different ways to intensify one's speech, e.g.

- It's **HUGE**.
- This is **really, really** interesting.
- This is **bloody** crazy!

Semantic change of intensifiers

Intensifiers generally start their life having semantic meaning, which gradually become lost after some time of use (> grammaticalization).

Example *very* (from Old English *verray*, meaning 'true')

For some intensifiers, e.g. *absolutely*, *extremely*, the process is not yet complete.

The data

A translation corpus of 12 English and Thai novels, with over 1.3 million words (English).

Three intensifiers in English *very*, *so*, and *really*, and their translations into Thai were examined.

131 lexical words and expressions in Thai were found to correspond to these three intensifiers.

From the data, expressions of intensification in Thai are found to be metaphorical in nature; their meaning involves the transfer from another semantic field.

From Thai, we would like to see whether it is the same in other languages e.g. English, French, Chinese, and Korean. Examples in Chinese and Korean are provided by my research assistant, Ms. Thipsurang Vongsasurarit.

Findings

Intensifying expressions and lexes are generally derived from the human senses: visual, auditory, olfactory, gustatory, tactile, and mental perceptions.

In this research, intensifiers are found to be derived from the visual, tactile, and mental spheres rather than olfactory, gustatory, and auditory spheres.

The visual sphere

- The domain of quantity and number**
- The domain of boundary and beyond**

The visual sphere

The domain of quantity and number

Humans are generally intrigued by large quantity and enormous size. Thus, quantity terms become a source of intensifying expressions:

ENG: dozens, scores hundreds, thousands, millions, much, loads, heaps, tons

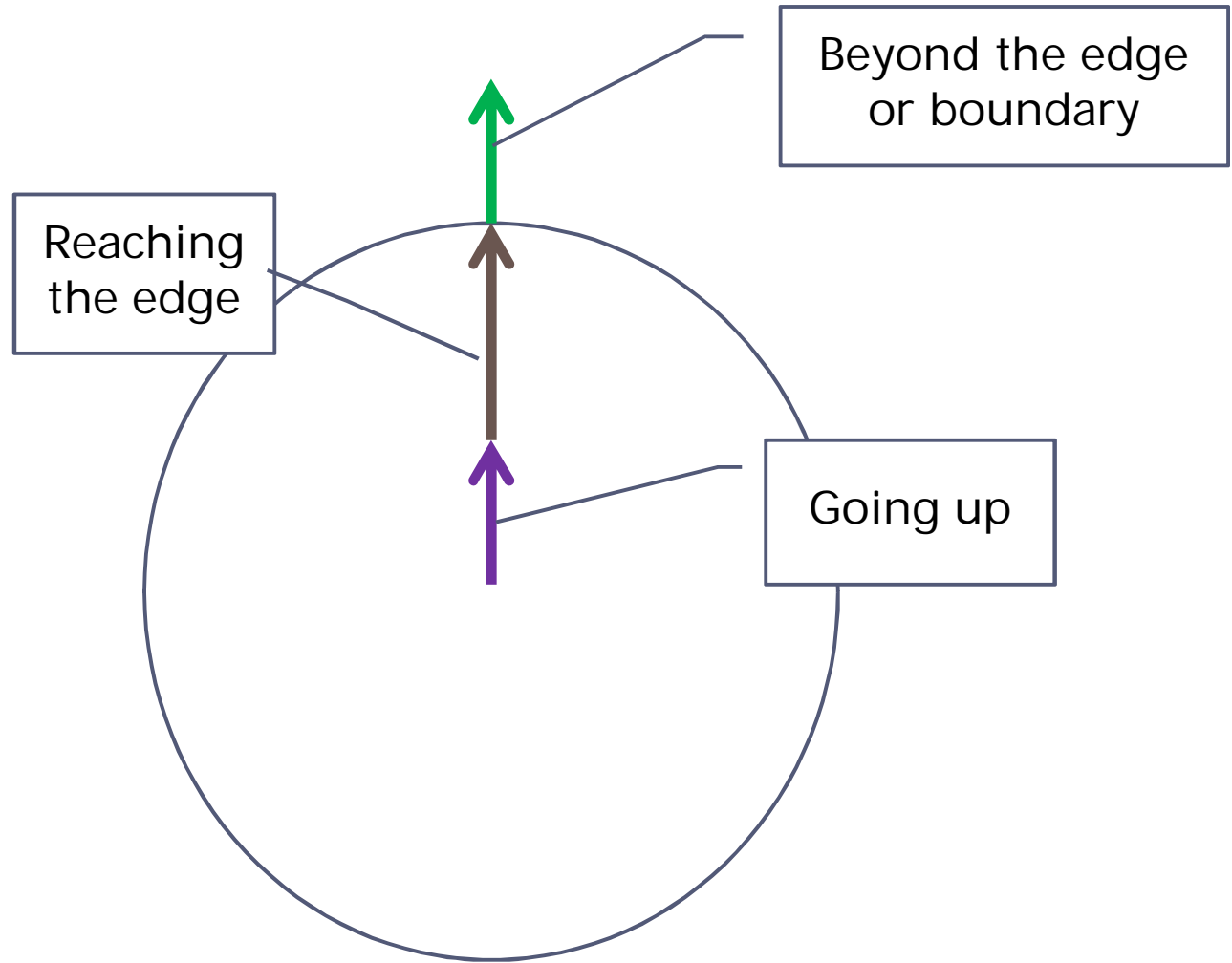
FR: /boku/ 'much' (beaucoup),
/kɔ̃siderabləmã/ 'considerably' (considérablement),
/abɔ̃damã/ 'abundantly' (abondamment)

TH: /mâ:k/ 'much' (มาก), /mâ:kma:j/ 'a lot' (มากมาย), /sǎ:n/ 'hundred thousands' (แสน)

CH: /qiānwàn/ 'thousand-myriad' (千万),
/duō/ 'a lot of' (多)

KR: /ma: ni:/ 'plenty' (많이),
/tɕʰun bun hi:/ 'enough' (충분히)

The domain of boundary and beyond



The visual sphere

Reaching the edge

ENG: brimming with, fully, totally, wholly, completely, entirely, ultimately

FR: /ãn- avwar ase/ 'to have enough' (en avoir assez),
/ãn- avwar læ bɔl/ 'to have a bowl full of it' (en avoir ras le bol)

TH: /sùt/ 'edge' (สุด, ที่สุด, สุดยอด, สุดขีด, ถึงขีดสุด),
/pìam/ 'full' (เปี่ยม), /tem thî:/ 'fully' (เต็มที)

CH: /wánquán/ 'entirely' (完全)

KR: /wan tɕʰʌn hi:/ 'fully' (완전히)

The visual sphere

Going beyond the edge or the boundary

ENG: excessively, exceedingly, overwhelmingly

FR: /ɛksɛsivmã/ 'excessively' (excessivement)

TH: /lǎ: a kǎn/ 'excessively' (เหลือเกิน),

/jà: ng lón lǎ: a/ 'spilling over' (อย่างล้นเหลือ),

/kǎ: n paj/ 'too much' (เกินไป),

/lǎ: j/ 'beyond' (เลย)

CH: /tài/ 'excessively' (太)

KR: /nɯ: mu:/ 'excessively' (너무)

The tactile sphere

- The domain of weight**
- The domain of height**
- The domain of force and action**

The tactile sphere

The domain of weight

If something is heavy, there is a large amount of it.

ENG: heavily

FR: /lurdəmã/ 'heavily' (lourdement)

TH: /nàk/ 'heavy' (หนัก, อย่างหนัก, ขนาดหนัก, หนักหนา)

KR: /mu: kɭb ge/ 'heavily' (무겁게),
/kw ge/ 'heavily' (크게)

The tactile sphere

The domain of height

ENG: highly

FR: /otmã/ 'highly' (hauteinent)

TH: /sũ:ng/ 'high' (สูง, อย่างสูง)

CH: /gāodù/ 'highly' (高度)

KR: /no:p ge/ 'highly' (높게),
/kw ge/ 'highly' (크게)

The tactile sphere

The domain of powerful force and action

ENG: powerfully, forcefully, blasted (as in 'a *blasted* idiot'), crashing (as in 'a *crashing* bore')

FR: /fɔʁtemã/ 'with force' (fortement)

TH: /jà:ŋ rɛŋŋ/ 'forcefully' (อย่างแรง, อย่างรุนแรง),
/rab̀ɔ̀t/ 'explode' (ระเบิด)

CH: /qiángdà de/ 'powerfully' (强大地)

KR: /kaŋ ha: ge/ 'strongly' (강하게)

The mental sphere

- The domain of truth, authenticity, and certainty**
- The domain of rejection**
- The domain of disbelief**
- The domain of valuing (positive and negative)**

The mental sphere

The domain of truth, authenticity, and certainty

☞ Citing the truth of the matter adds intensity to the utterance.

ENG: very, truly, really, certainly

FR: /vʁemɑ̃/ 'true' (vraiment)

TH: /ciŋ/ 'true' (จริง, จริง ๆ, อย่างแท้จริง, โดยแท้, ไม่มีผิด)

CH: /zhēn/ 'really' (真),
/quèshí/ 'really' (确实)

KR: /tɕʰʌŋ mal/ 'really' (정말),
/bun mjʌŋ hi/ 'certainly' (분명히)

The mental sphere

The domain of rejection

A number of intensifying words is found to originate in the domains that trigger fear and disgust, such as death, insanity, pain, as well as taboo topics (e.g. sex, excrement, epidemic, disaster, religion)

ENG: dead, to death, deadly, fatally, suicidal, madly, painfully

FR: /a muRi:R/ 'to death' (à mourir), /mɔRtelmã/ 'mortally' (mortellement), /fɔlmã/ 'madly' (follement)

TH: /ca ta:j/ 'to death' (จะตาย, แทบตาย, บรรลัย), /pen bâ:/ 'crazily' (เป็นบ้า), /ca bâ: ta:j tɕʰák/ 'will go crazy and die convulsing' (จะบ้าตายชัก), /sǎ:hàt/ 'critically' (สาหัส), /ta:j hà:/ 'die of plague' (ตายห่า), /tɕʰíp hâaj/ 'disaster' (ฉิบหาย)

CH: /sǐ le/ 'dead' (死了)

KR: /tɕuk ges ta/ 'to death' (죽겠다), /mi tɕi: ge/ 'crazily' (미치게)

The mental sphere

The domain of disbelief

'loss for words' 'beyond explanation'

ENG: unbelievably, indescribable, unspeakable

FR: /ẽkrwajabl̃mã/ 'unbelievable' (incroyablement)

TH: /mâj nâ chũ:a/ 'unbelievable' (ไม่น่าเชื่อ) ,
/sùt ca klà:w/ 'cannot' be spoken' (พูด/เหลือจะกล่าว),
/kǎ:n ca banja:j/ 'indescribable' (เกินจะบรรยาย),
/jà:ŋ b̀: k mâj tù:k/ 'lost for words' (อย่างบอกไม่ถูก)

KR: /mal ro: pjo: hɯn has su: ølp swɯl man kwɯm/
'indescribably' (말로 표현할 수 없을 만큼)

The mental sphere

The domain of valuing -- positive valuing

ENG: well, magnificently, excellently

FR: /bjẽ/ 'good' (bien),
/admirabləmã/ 'admirably' (admirablement),
/fabyløzmã/ 'fabulously' (fabuleusement)

TH: /jà:ŋ di:/ 'good' (अच्छดี, เป็น अच्छดี),
/nâ du:/ 'worth seeing' (น่าดู)

CH: /hǎo/ 'well' (好)

KR: /tɕal/ 'well' (잘)

The mental sphere

The domain of valuing - Negative valuing

ENG: badly, unbearably, awfully, terribly, horribly

FR: /afɾøzmã/ 'dreadfully' (affreusement),
/abɔminabləmã/ 'frightfully' (abominablement),
/efɾwajabləmã/ 'awfully' (effroyablement)

TH: /jêɯ/ 'bad' (แย่, ๖๖๖)

CH: /sǐ le/ 'unbearably' (死了)

KR: /øʌm tɕʰʌŋ/ 'badly' (엄청)

Conclusion

- Intensifying lexes seem to revolve around the bodily experiences, especially the visual, tactile, and mental perceptions.

- More evidence should be gathered to see whether other Southeast Asian languages share these semantic domains of intensification.

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