

TYPOLOGICAL PROBLEMS OF THE LEXICAL LEVEL

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Abstract

Lexical typology studies similarities and differences in the vocabulary systems of languages and investigates how different languages organize and express meanings through lexical units. The lexical level is one of the most complex areas of typological research because languages differ considerably in the ways they categorize objects, actions, qualities, emotions, spatial relations, and cultural concepts. This article examines the main problems of lexical typology, including lexical equivalence, semantic categorization, polysemy, synonymy, lexical gaps, cultural specificity, and the relationship between language and conceptualization. Examples from English and Uzbek are used to demonstrate how similar concepts may be represented differently in different linguistic systems.

Keywords: Lexical typology, lexical level, semantic typology, lexical equivalence, polysemy, synonymy, lexical gaps, semantic field, language comparison.

Introduction

Linguistic typology studies languages through the comparison of their structural and functional characteristics. While phonological, morphological, and syntactic typology focus on sound systems, word structure, and sentence organization, **lexical typology** investigates the vocabulary systems of languages.

The lexical level presents particular difficulties because vocabulary is closely connected with culture, social experience, cognition, history, and the environment of a language community. Two languages may describe the same reality through different lexical structures. Therefore, lexical typology is concerned not only with words themselves but also with the semantic categories and conceptual systems underlying them.

According to lexical typological studies, languages differ in the way they divide semantic space into lexical units. A concept expressed by one word in one language may require a phrase or several words in another language.¹

Lexical typology can be defined as the comparative study of how languages encode meanings through lexical units. Its main purpose is to identify universal and language-specific principles of lexical organization.

The lexical system of a language includes nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, phraseological units, semantic fields, synonymic groups, antonymic relations, and other lexical-semantic structures.

¹ Comrie, B. (1989). *Language Universals and Linguistic Typology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.



One of the main questions of lexical typology is:

How do different languages lexicalize the same concept?

For example, English uses the general verb **to wear** in expressions such as:

wear a dress;

wear shoes;

wear glasses;

wear a hat.

Uzbek, however, may use different verbs depending on the object:

ko‘ylak kiymoq;

oyoq kiyim kiymoq;

ko‘zoynak taqmoq;

shlyapa kiymoq.

This example shows that English uses one relatively general lexical unit, whereas Uzbek differentiates between several lexical combinations.

Such differences are central to lexical typology.

One of the most important typological problems at the lexical level is **lexical equivalence**.

Words in two languages rarely correspond completely in meaning, stylistic use, emotional value, and cultural associations. A dictionary equivalent may represent only the closest meaning rather than full semantic identity.

For example: **English:** home **Uzbek:** uy

At first sight, these words seem equivalent. However, home can express not only a physical place but also emotional attachment, belonging, and family environment.

Compare:

I miss home.

The Uzbek translation may be:

Uyimni sog‘indim.

However, depending on context, it can also mean:

Vatanimni sog‘indim or oilamni sog‘indim.

Thus, one English lexical unit may correspond to several Uzbek lexical meanings.

This demonstrates that complete lexical equivalence is relatively rare.

Another important problem is the way languages divide reality into semantic categories.²

Different languages may classify the same objects or phenomena differently. This process is known as **lexical categorization**.

A clear example can be observed in kinship terminology.

English uses the word:

uncle

for both:

father's brother;

mother's brother.

² Evans, N. (2010). *Dying Words: Endangered Languages and What They Have to Tell Us*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.



Uzbek distinguishes these relations:

amaki — father's brother;

tog'a — mother's brother.

Similarly, English uses **aunt**, while Uzbek distinguishes:

amma — father's sister;

xola — mother's sister.

This difference demonstrates that Uzbek lexicalizes kinship relations in greater detail than English.

The distinction can be represented as:

English:

uncle → one general lexical category

Uzbek:

uncle → amaki / tog'a

Therefore, languages differ in the degree of **semantic specification** encoded in lexical units.

Polysemy refers to the existence of several related meanings within one word.

Polysemy is universal, but languages do not always develop the same polysemantic structures.

For example, the English word **head** can mean:

1. **a body part;**
2. **a leader;**
3. **the top of something;**
4. **the front of a line or group.**

Examples:

the head of a person

the head of the department

the head of the table

Uzbek uses the word bosh in many similar contexts:

bosh — body part

bo'lim boshlig'i — head of a department

stolning boshi — head/end of a table

This shows a certain typological similarity between English and Uzbek. Both languages extend the meaning of the body-part term metaphorically to concepts of leadership and upper position. However, polysemantic networks are not always identical across languages.

Therefore, typological analysis must identify not only individual meanings but also the semantic relationships among them.³

Synonymy is another important problem at the lexical level.

Languages often contain several words expressing similar concepts, but the number and semantic shades of synonyms may differ.

³ Koch, P. (2001). Lexical typology from a cognitive and linguistic point of view. In M. Haspelmath et al. (Eds.), *Language Typology and Language Universals*. Berlin: De Gruyter.



Consider the English words:

beautiful, pretty, attractive, lovely, gorgeous

Uzbek equivalents may include:

chiroyli, go‘zal, ko‘rkam, jozibali, husnli

Although these words belong to the same general semantic field, they are not completely interchangeable.

For example:

beautiful and **go‘zal** may express a strong aesthetic evaluation, whereas **pretty** is usually weaker and may be associated with delicacy or attractiveness.

Thus, synonymic systems should be compared according to:

- semantic intensity;
- stylistic colouring;
- emotional connotation;
- frequency;
- contextual use.

One of the most interesting problems in lexical typology is the existence of **lexical gaps**.

A lexical gap occurs when a concept has a specific lexical unit in one language but has no direct one-word equivalent in another language.

For example, Uzbek has the culturally significant word:

mahalla

English does not have a complete lexical equivalent. Depending on context, it may be translated as:

- neighbourhood,
- local community,
- community institution.

However, none of these expressions fully represents the cultural and social meaning of mahalla. Similarly, English words may contain concepts that require descriptive translation in Uzbek. The existence of lexical gaps demonstrates the close relationship between vocabulary and culture.

Vocabulary is strongly influenced by the social and cultural environment in which a language develops.

Languages create words for concepts that are important to their speakers.

For example, Uzbek contains culturally significant lexical units such as:

- mahalla,
- hashar,
- oqsoqol,
- sumalak.

These words represent not only objects or activities but also aspects of Uzbek social and cultural life.

English also contains culturally specific lexical items such as:

- pub,
- boxing
- day,



county,

Thanksgiving in particular varieties and cultural contexts.

Such lexical units are difficult to translate because their meanings contain cultural knowledge.

Therefore, lexical typology must examine both **linguistic meaning** and **cultural meaning**.

Lexical units can also be analyzed through semantic fields.

A semantic field is a group of words united by a common conceptual domain.

For example, the semantic field of **movement** in English includes:

walk, run, crawl, jump, swim, fly, climb.

Uzbek includes:

yurmoq, yugurmoq, emaklamoq, sakramoq, suzmoq, uchmoq, tirmashmoq.

At first sight, many of these words are equivalent.

However, typological analysis reveals differences in semantic range and collocational usage.

Languages may divide the same semantic field into different numbers of lexical categories.

This problem has been widely investigated in lexical typology, especially in domains such as:

colour;

movement;

perception;

body parts;

kinship;

emotions;

spatial relations;

cooking;

clothing.

One important area of lexical typology concerns the way languages encode events in verbs.

He **ran into** the house.

The verb ran expresses the **manner of movement**, while into expresses the direction.⁴

Other languages may express the direction primarily through the verb.

This difference demonstrates that languages can organize event information differently within lexical and grammatical structures.

Leonard Talmy's research on motion events has shown that languages vary in the way they lexicalize:

motion;

manner;

path;

cause;

direction.

Thus, lexical typology is closely connected with both semantics and syntax.

The analysis of English and Uzbek shows several important typological differences.

⁴ Lehrer, A. (1974). Semantic Fields and Lexical Structure. Amsterdam: North-Holland.



Feature	English	Uzbek
Kinship terms	More generalized in some areas	More differentiated
Clothing expressions	Often uses the general verb wear	Uses several verbs and combinations
Cultural vocabulary	Contains English-specific concepts	Contains Uzbek-specific concepts
Polysemy	Highly developed	Highly developed
Lexical gaps	Present	Present
Semantic fields	Structured according to English conceptual patterns	Structured according to Uzbek conceptual patterns

This comparison demonstrates that lexical systems are neither completely identical nor completely different.

Some lexical-semantic patterns may be universal, while others are influenced by cultural, historical, and cognitive factors.

The principal problems of lexical typology may therefore be summarized as follows:

1. determining reliable lexical equivalents across languages;
2. distinguishing universal meanings from culture-specific meanings;
3. analysing lexical gaps;
4. comparing polysemantic structures;
5. identifying differences in semantic categorization;
6. studying synonymic and antonymic relations;
7. determining the structure of semantic fields;
8. examining metaphorical extensions of lexical meaning;
9. explaining culturally specific vocabulary;

These problems show why lexical typology is more complex than a simple comparison of dictionary meanings.

The lexical level is one of the most complicated areas of linguistic typology because vocabulary reflects not only linguistic structure but also cognition, culture, history, and social experience. Lexical typology investigates how languages categorize reality and encode similar concepts through different lexical means.

The comparative analysis of English and Uzbek demonstrates that languages may differ considerably in lexical categorization. English may use a general lexical unit where Uzbek employs several more specific words, as illustrated by the kinship terms uncle – amaki/tog‘a. Languages also differ in polysemy, synonymy, semantic fields, cultural vocabulary, and lexicalization patterns.

At the same time, certain semantic processes, such as metaphorical extension and polysemy, occur across many languages and may reveal universal cognitive tendencies.

Therefore, the main task of lexical typology is not merely to compare words but to identify the principles according to which different languages organize and represent human experience. The study of lexical typology contributes significantly to comparative linguistics, translation



studies, lexicography, language teaching, cognitive linguistics, and intercultural communication.

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