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POLYSEMY OF EMOTIVE UNITS IN CONTEMPORARY ENGLISH: SEMANTIC DIFFUSENESS AS A MECHANISM OF MEANING VARIATION

ПОЛІСЕМІЯ ЕМОТИВНИХ ОДИНИЦЬ СУЧАСНОЇ АНГЛІЙСЬКОЇ МОВИ: СЕМАНТИЧНА ДИФУЗНІСТЬ ЯК МЕХАНІЗМ СМИСЛОВОЇ ВАРІАТИВНОСТІ

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The article examines the polysemy of emotive units in contemporary English and argues that their semantic variability is best described through the notion of semantic diffuseness. In the present study, semantic diffuseness is not treated as an autonomous theory or as a universal explanatory formula. It is used as an analytical term referring to the partial overlap of emotive, evaluative, epistemic, and interactional functions within a single linguistic form. The relevance of the topic is conditioned by the fact that, in present-day English, units such as *wow*, *oh*, *great*, *fine*, and *seriously* no longer function exclusively as direct verbal markers of emotion. In actual discourse, they may express emotional reaction, signal evaluation, mark the speaker's stance, mitigate or intensify utterances, regulate interpersonal alignment, and organize discourse progression. For this reason, their meanings cannot be reduced either to a single lexical invariant or to a mechanically enumerated list of dictionary senses.

The aim of the article is to determine how the overlap of lexical meaning and discourse function gives rise to related but distinct senses in contemporary English emotive units. The study is theoretical and analytical in character. It synthesizes current research on polysemy, interjections, emotivity, and corpus pragmatics and applies semantic-discursive analysis to a set of recurrent English units that are especially sensitive to context, position, and prosody. The analytical procedure includes four steps: identifying the lexical semantic core of the unit, establishing its discourse position, determining its evaluative orientation, and specifying its interactional function in context.

The analysis shows that the meaning variation of emotive units is conditioned primarily by the type of emotion conveyed, the degree of emotional force, evaluative polarity, interactional role, and position within the utterance or turn. On this basis, the article demonstrates that emotive polysemy should be understood not as accidental contextual fluctuation, but as a regular result of semantic-pragmatic redistribution. The theoretical value of the study lies in refining the description of emotive meaning in English. Its practical value lies in its relevance for lexicography, discourse analysis, translation studies, and linguistically informed annotation of language data.

Key words: emotive unit, polysemy, semantic diffuseness, emotivity, pragmatics, discourse marker.

У статті досліджується полісемія емотивних одиниць сучасної англійської мови та обґрунтовується думка про те, що їхню семантичну варіативність найдоцільніше описувати за допомогою поняття семантичної дифузності. У пропонованому дослідженні семантична дифузність не трактується ані як самостійна теорія, ані як універсальна пояснювальна формула. Вона використовується як аналітичний термін для позначення часткового перекриття емотивних, оцінних, епістемічних та інтеракційних функцій в одній і тій самій мовній формі. Актуальність теми зумовлена тим, що в сучасній англійській мові такі одиниці, як *wow*, *oh*, *great*, *fine* та *seriously*, уже не функціонують винятково як прямі вербальні маркери емоції. У реальному дискурсі вони можуть виражати емоційну реакцію, сигналізувати оцінку, маркувати позицію мовця, пом'якшувати

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або інтенсифікувати висловлення, регулювати міжособистісне узгодження та організувати розвиток дискурсу. Із цієї причини їхні значення не можна звести ні до одного лексичного інваріанта, ні до механічно перерахованого списку словникових значень.

Метою статті є з'ясування того, яким чином перекриття лексичного значення та дискурсивної функції породжує взаємопов'язані, але відмінні значення в емотивних одиницях сучасної англійської мови. Дослідження має теоретико-аналітичний характер. У ньому синтезовано сучасні праці з полісемії, інтер'єкцій, емотивності та корпусної прагматики, а також застосовано семантико-дискурсивний аналіз до низки поширених англійських одиниць, особливо чутливих до контексту, позиції та просодії. Аналітична процедура включає чотири етапи: визначення лексико-семантичного ядра одиниці, встановлення її дискурсивної позиції, визначення її оцінної спрямованості та уточнення інтеракційної функції, яку вона виконує в контексті.

Аналіз засвідчує, що смислова варіативність емотивних одиниць зумовлюється передусім типом вираженої емоції, ступенем емоційної сили, оцінною полярністю, інтеракційною роллю та позицією в межах висловлення або репліки. На цій підставі у статті доводиться, що емотивну полісемію слід розуміти не як випадкове контекстуальне коливання, а як закономірний результат семантико-прагматичного перерозподілу. Теоретична цінність дослідження полягає в уточненні опису емотивного значення в англійській мові. Практична цінність зумовлена його значенням для лексикографії, дискурс-аналізу, перекладознавства та лінгвістично вмотивованого анутовання мовних даних.

Ключові слова: емотивна одиниця, полісемія, семантична дифузність, емотивність, прагматика, дискурсивний маркер.

Problem Statement. In contemporary linguistics, polysemy is no longer regarded as a secondary imperfection of lexical description. Rather, it is treated as one of the central ways in which language organizes related meanings around a single form. Recent semantic work has shown that polysemy is not always a matter of sharply discrete senses; in many cases, it involves gradience, partial conventionalization, and context-sensitive differentiation [1; 2]. This perspective is especially productive for the study of emotive units, since such units tend to function simultaneously on lexical, evaluative, pragmatic, and discourse-organizing planes.

The problem is particularly evident in contemporary English. In present-day spoken, media, and digitally mediated discourse, forms such as *wow*, *oh*, *great*, *fine*, and *seriously* often exceed the limits of straightforward emotion expression. Depending on context, they may signal surprise, approval, scepticism, irony, concession, irritation, mitigation, uptake, or transition to a new discourse step. Consequently, the traditional assumption that an emotive unit possesses one stable emotional meaning with several peripheral contextual shades becomes insufficient. What requires explanation is not merely the multiplicity of uses but the regularity with which these uses remain semantically connected.

In this article, connectedness is approached through the notion of semantic diffuseness. The term is employed here in an operational sense: it designates the partial overlap of emotive, evaluative, episodic, and interactional components within one recurrent form. Such an approach allows for describing how related meanings arise in discourse without dissolving the lexical identity of the unit itself.

Analysis of Recent Research and Publications. The current discussion of polysemy is strongly influenced by approaches that place pragmatic inference and contextual conventionalization at the centre of semantic analysis. R. Carston argues that polysemy is a heterogeneous phenomenon and that pragmatically derived interpretations may, in some cases, become sufficiently stabilized to count as encoded senses [1]. J. Li, in turn, emphasizes the continuous nature of polysemy and thus challenges overly rigid models of sense segmentation [2]. For the present study, these observations are important because emotive units rarely lend themselves to a clean division into isolated meanings; rather, they tend to form clusters of related uses.

This view is supported by recent work on language and emotion. Research in this area increasingly treats affective meaning not as a narrow lexical domain, but as a field shaped by semantics, pragmatics, discourse, and prosody [3; 4]. Within this broader field, interjections and short emotive forms have received great attention. M. Dingemanse shows that interjections occupy a central place in lan-

guage because they condense expressive meaning and social action into highly economical forms [3]. N. Norrick demonstrates that interjections in everyday talk function as pragmatic markers, especially in turn-initial position, and that their interpretation is strongly dependent on intonation and interactional placement [4]. A. Gladkova, U. Vanhatalo, and C. Goddard further establish that interjections are semantically analysable and should not be dismissed as semantically empty affective reflexes [5]. U. Stange-Hundsörfer's corpus-based study confirms the systematic variation of emotive interjections in British English across speakers and communicative contexts [6].

Methodologically, the most productive framework for this topic is corpus pragmatics. Contemporary corpus-pragmatic research no longer limits itself to frequency counts; it studies how recurrent forms acquire different functions across discourse environments, and it increasingly relies on layered annotation sensitive to position, function, and communicative context [7; 8]. This is especially relevant for emotive units, whose semantic contribution often becomes visible only when lexical meaning is analysed together with discourse placement and pragmatic work.

Ukrainian scholarship also offers important groundwork for the topic. Ya. Hnezdilova's study remains fundamental for distinguishing emotionality and emotivity in modern English discourse [9]. N. Kashchyshyn convincingly demonstrates the strategic role of emotivity in English-language diplomatic discourse [10]. T. Kots analyses emotive mechanisms in contemporary publicistic texts and clarifies their relation to evaluation and expressiveness [11]. T. Krylova and O. Zinenko show that emotivity cannot be adequately translated without regard for cultural and pragmatic factors [12]. V. Lavrukhina, in turn, foregrounds the verbal realization of emotivity in literary discourse and its close connection with evaluation and stylistic organization [13]. At the same time, despite these important achievements, the specific question of how polysemy operates within emotive units in contemporary English still remains insufficiently systematized.

Purpose of the Study. The aim of the article is to establish how related meanings arise within contemporary English emotive units and to show that this process may be described as semantic diffuseness, that is, as the overlap of lexical, evaluative, and discourse-pragmatic functions within one form.

Presentation of the Main Material. For the purposes of the present study, an emotive unit is understood as a recurrent linguistic form that directly expresses an emotional reaction or indirectly indexes affective stance, evaluation, or interactional positioning. Such a definition intentionally includes not only primary interjections, but also discourse-sensitive evaluative forms and stance markers whose emotive force is actualized in context. This broader understanding is necessary because contemporary English does not confine emotive meaning to canonical emotion words. In many cases, emotive meaning is distributed across brief, highly frequent forms whose interpretation depends on discourse position, intonation, and speaker intention.

The present study is theoretical-analytical rather than corpus-building. Its material consists of recurrent English units widely discussed in research on interjections, discourse markers, and emotivity, with special attention to *wow*, *oh*, *great*, *fine*, and *seriously*. The analytical procedure is fourfold. First, the unit's lexical-semantic core is identified. Second, its position in the utterance or turn is taken into account. Third, the evaluative orientation of the use is established. Fourth, the interactional function performed by the unit in the local discourse context is specified. This procedure allows distinguishing between lexical meaning proper and contextually activated discourse function without artificially separating them.

Within this framework, semantic diffuseness is understood as the gradual overlap of multiple meaning components within a single form. More precisely, it refers to those cases in which the emotive value of a unit cannot be separated cleanly from its evaluative, epistemic, or interactional contribution. This overlap does not entail semantic vagueness in the negative sense; rather, it points to a regular linguistic property of forms that operate under conditions of high contextual dependence. In such cases, the semantic core of the unit remains identifiable, yet its exact interpretation varies systematically across discourse environments.

The unit *wow* offers a clear illustration. *Wow, she got the fellowship*, the form expresses surprise accompanied by admiration. In *Wow, that was expensive*, the element of surprise remains, but the evaluative vector shifts toward negative assessment. In *Wow, great timing*, especially with ironic intonation, the same form can convey a sarcastic rebuke rather than approval. What links these uses is not identity of meaning, but continuity of affective force combined with different evaluative outcomes. The lexical unit, therefore, does not simply “change meaning at random”; rather, it activates related senses depending on discourse framing.

A similar process can be observed in the use of *oh*. In *Oh! I forgot my keys*, the unit marks a sudden realization. In *“Oh, I see,”* it no longer signals emotion but rather uptake and understanding. In *Oh, right*, it may indicate acknowledgement, restrained agreement, polite disengagement, or mild impatience, depending on intonation and sequential placement. The case of *oh* is especially revealing because it shows how an initially emotive form may develop epistemic and interactional functions while retaining a trace of its expressive origin.

The unit *great* demonstrates how evaluative forms become polysemous in discourse. In *That’s a great idea*, the adjective performs a literal positive evaluation. In *Great. Now we’re late*, the same form undergoes evaluative reversal and functions ironically. In *Great, let’s move on*, it helps close one discourse step and open another. Here, the movement is from assessment to an ironic stance, then to discourse management. The semantic relation among these uses is evident, but it cannot be captured by a monosemous account.

The unit *fine* is equally instructive. In *“I’m fine,”* it may denote acceptable well-being, but in many contexts it also implies emotional withholding or reluctance to elaborate. In *Fine! Do it your way*; the form marks an irritated concession. In *That’s fine with me*, it functions as a marker of acceptance or permission. Its semantic core may be described as adequacy or sufficiency, yet this core is redistributed across self-presentation, interpersonal strategy, and evaluative moderation.

Finally, *seriously* shows how a lexical adverb develops stance-marking and reactive functions. In *Are you seriously leaving now?*, it intensifies disbelief or irritation. *Seriously, thank you*; it operates as a sincerity marker. In the context of ‘*Seriously?*’, it functions as a reaction of scepticism or incredulity. This progression shows that emotive polysemy is often tied to reduction, turn-initial placement, and repeated use of discourse.

The examples above allow us to identify the chief dimensions along which emotive meanings vary: the type of emotion conveyed, the degree of emotional force, evaluative polarity, discourse position, and interactional role. These are not abstract “parameters” introduced for rhetorical effect; they are the concrete dimensions along which meaning shifts can be observed. Their interaction explains why related senses emerge without destroying semantic continuity.

From this perspective, emotive polysemy should not be reduced either to lexical ambiguity or to unrestricted contextual freedom. It is a regular semantic-pragmatic phenomenon arising where a recurrent form carries a lexical core and, at the same time, performs discourse work. That is why the description of emotive units must move beyond rigid sense lists and account instead for patterned relations among uses.

This conclusion has direct implications for lexicography, translation studies, and discourse analysis. In dictionaries, emotive units require sense descriptions that register contextual conditions of use. In translation, lexical equivalence alone is insufficient whenever the unit primarily performs ironic, mitigatory, or interactional work. In discourse analysis, such forms must be treated as semantically meaningful rather than as peripheral expletives. For the same reason, any linguistically serious annotation of emotive language must register not only emotion type, but also evaluative orientation and interactional function.

Conclusions. The analysis shows that the polysemy of emotive units in contemporary English is not an accidental accumulation of contextual shades, but a regular effect of semantic-pragmatic redistribution. Units such as *wow*, *oh*, *great*, *fine*, and *seriously* develop related senses because their lexical

meaning interacts systematically with evaluation, discourse position, intonation, and interactional purpose.

In the present article, semantic diffuseness has been used as an operational term for this overlap of functions. Understood in this way, the term does not replace analysis; it names the observable fact that emotive, evaluative, epistemic, and discourse-organizing values may converge within one and the same form. Such convergence explains why emotive units resist monosemous description while remaining semantically coherent.

The study, therefore, supports a view of emotive meaning as lexically grounded, pragmatically differentiated, and discursively actualised. This approach is relevant to theoretical semantics and pragmatics, but it is equally important for lexicography, translation, and discourse-oriented linguistic description.

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