



PRAGMATIC-LINGUISTIC FEATURES OF NEGATIVE EVALUATION IN NEUTRALLY EVALUATIVE WORDS

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Abstract

This article explores the pragmalinguistic mechanisms through which neutrally evaluative words acquire negative connotations in specific communicative contexts. Drawing on theoretical perspectives from semantics, pragmatics, and cognitive linguistics, the study demonstrates that evaluation is not an inherent or static feature of a word, but often shaped by speaker intent, contextual cues, and cultural norms. Through analysis of Uzbek, English, and Russian examples, the article reveals how neutral lexemes can undergo evaluative degradation, particularly under the influence of irony, presupposition, and negative contextual framing. The findings highlight the dynamic nature of linguistic evaluation and its dependence on interactional and sociolinguistic factors.

Keywords: neutral evaluation, pejoration, pragmatics, evaluative semantics, context, speaker intention, lexical meaning, linguistic evaluation, connotation, semantic shift, irony, language pragmatics, cognitive linguistics, Uzbek language, speech act.

Introduction

It is known that evaluation is a product of human cognitive activity. This very aspect of evaluation has ensured its scholarly examination from ancient times to the present day. The study of the category of evaluation in philosophy, logic, aesthetics, and ethics has also led to its consideration as a subject of linguistics. Finnish logician G.H. von Wright explores several types of evaluations from a logical perspective (technical, convenience-based, utilitarian, medical,



hedonistic, and ethical evaluations). Taking von Wright's typology as a basis and transferring it to a linguistic framework, N.D. Arutyunova distinguishes two types of evaluations: general and specific. General evaluations are those of the "good" or "bad" type, while specific evaluations include the following types: sensory-auditory, aesthetic, utilitarian, psychological, and ethical.

Any evaluation can carry either a positive or negative value, meaning linguistic units can be divided into those that express positive or negative evaluations. Units that express deviation from norms or violations of standards belong to the latter group. According to scholars such as E.M. Wolf, V.I. Karasik, A.V. Kovalevskaya, and G.G. Koshelev, pejorative (negative) language units are characteristics of the negatively evaluative layer. At the same time, it is considered illogical to equate the concepts of "pejorative," "negative," and "pejorative connotation."

The above statements show that evaluation is not an accidental or speech-specific phenomenon emerging in linguistic units, but rather a reflection of human attitudes toward reality. This allows us to regard the existence of evaluation in language, just as it exists in ethics or philosophy, as a natural linguistic phenomenon. That is why in the semantics of linguistic units, an evaluative component always exists alongside lexical meaning. This can be demonstrated using certain synonymic paradigms. For example, in the Uzbek language, the synonyms *tilshunos*, *tilchi*, and *lingvist* (linguist) do not inherently carry positive or negative evaluations—they are neutrally evaluative. However, even within this neutrality, there are degrees. Compared to *tilchi*, the words *tilshunos* and *lingvist* exhibit a stronger mark of neutrality. The word *tilchi*, being associated with colloquial style, slightly weakens its neutral evaluation. Similarly, the Russian synonyms "языковед" and "лингвист" are also considered neutrally evaluative. "Evaluation is one of the most essential aspects of mental reflection activity" and forms the foundation of human cognitive activity. In line with this cognitive principle, any object or phenomenon in reality is evaluated in one way or another. Such human attitudes toward real-world phenomena are naturally filtered through the lens of the national language, and only then are reflected in linguistic units. Within the semantic structure of a linguistic unit, alongside meaning, there is also a subjective evaluation. For this reason, many linguists argue that a certain subjective (positive, neutral, or negative) evaluation is an inherent component of



word meaning. For example, V.V. Vinogradov stated: “Evaluation is not merely a nuance of lexical meaning, but a potential component of the word’s semantic structure.”

From these views, it can be understood that evaluation is a supplementary feature in word semantics. Although it differs from meaning, it is realized alongside it. At the same time, it becomes clear that language users express objective referents with lexical meaning and their subjective attitude through evaluation. Neutral evaluation also takes a place within the semantic structure of the word, just like positive and negative evaluations. The neutrality of such an evaluation is determined in contrast to positive and negative meanings. Just as a positive evaluation cannot be understood without the presence of a negative one, it would also be impossible to grasp the concept of a neutral evaluation without positive and negative evaluations. Neutral evaluation stands at the center of the evaluative paradigm, with positive and negative evaluations above and below it.

It is important to note that a linguistic unit without positive or negative evaluation should not be considered unevaluated but rather as neutrally evaluative. Neutral evaluation, although not immediately noticeable, serves as the foundation for other evaluations. A linguist identifies the positive or negative evaluation of a linguistic unit by comparing it against neutral evaluation and knowledge of its neutral context. That is why both V.V. Vinogradov and A. Hojiyev did not consider evaluation to be merely a nuance of lexical meaning, but rather a potential part of the semantic structure of linguistic units. In agreement with these linguists, we will now explore the process of neutral evaluation turning negative. In the pragmalinguistic analysis of speech acts, the speaker’s intention and context are of critical importance. Sometimes, a speaker constructs a statement in a neutral form, but the meaning received by the listener may take on a social or emotional tone depending on context. This neutrality is often used to create effects such as irony. The concept of “neutral evaluation” has been described in the works of researchers studying evaluation within the framework of relevance theory, particularly when addressing the pragmatic effect of seemingly neutral speech forms. In English linguistics, much has been written about how neutral evaluation is contextually derived. For example, J. Lyons noted: “In the semantic analysis of language, the meaning of a word or phrase often depends on context.



A speaker may aim to convey a neutral meaning, but the listener's reception and social factors may alter it. Therefore, objective evaluation in linguistics relies on the specific features of language." This suggests that, like any evaluation, neutral evaluation is also realized within context.

In Uzbek linguistics, it is often emphasized that neutral evaluation may exist in a linguistic unit's semantic structure prior to speech. Linguists who support this view consider neutral evaluation as part of the lexical meaning, recorded in various explanatory dictionaries as a stable feature. We also agree with this view: neutral evaluation is not merely a category realized in speech—it resides within the lexical meaning of the linguistic unit itself. Having a neutral evaluation allows a lexical unit to serve as the central word in a synonymic paradigm. Since neutral evaluation in the human cognitive system is based on contrasts with positive or negative judgments, it is not immediately apparent when analyzing lexical meaning. This shows that it is deeply embedded in the structure of meaning. For instance, the words *devor*, *wall*, and *стена* refer to a physical object in the real world—a barrier that separates two spaces made of brick or other materials—and they do not carry positive or negative connotations. The absence of such connotations indicates a neutral evaluation that is inherently part of their meaning. It is this absence of evaluative judgment that leads speakers to regard such words as neutrally evaluative. This quality applies to lexical units in English, Russian, and other languages as well.

In language, the phenomenon of evaluative degradation (i.e., the shift from neutral to negative evaluation) is a frequently observed linguopragmatic process, clearly influenced by the speaker's intention. Russian linguoculturologist V.A. Maslova considers it one of the signs of a language worldview. Here, the speaker intentionally uses a lexical unit in a negative evaluative sense. This does not occur spontaneously—evaluation does not become negative on its own. As discussed in the previous chapter, one aspect of this depends on communicative intent. However, the linguopragmatic process goes beyond that: in order for a word undergoing evaluative degradation to suit the speaker's intent, they must construct a context using appropriate words that reinforce this negative interpretation. Otherwise, the word cannot effectively convey a negative evaluation.



V.K. Kharchenko argues that one should not confuse evaluation with description in language units. For example, the words *впечатлительный* (*impressionable*), *подвижный* (*active*), *уставший* (*tired*), and *заросший* (*overgrown*) are descriptive by their lexical meanings, and it would be incorrect to categorize them as evaluative. However, observations show that descriptive words are frequently used for evaluative purposes. For example: "*Наташа посмотрела в его спину, подумала: "Фактурный мужик". У него был красивый рост, красивая голова, чуть мелкая и сухая – как у белогвардейца, красивые руки, совершенная форма ногтей. Но не было у Наташи таких сил, которые могли бы заставить ее снова полюбить эти руки вместе с формой ногтей.*" (V. Tokareva)

"Natasha looked at his back and thought: "*A well-built guy.*" He had a tall figure, a handsome head, slightly small and dry—like a White Guard officer, beautiful hands, perfect nail shape. But Natasha no longer had the strength to fall in love with those hands and their perfect nails again.

Although *фактурный мужик* is generally neutrally evaluative, in this context it conveys a positive evaluation. Linguist Y.A. Fomina confirms this, stating: "In this example, the phrase *фактурный мужик* carries an evaluative meaning (a subjective aesthetic judgment of the man's appearance), but it lacks axiological interpretation (is it good or bad?)." Thus, the formation of a positively evaluative context around a neutrally evaluative word has altered its evaluation. This is common across many languages.

It is known that pejorativity (negativity) is one of the highest forms of judgment expressed through pejorative evaluation of the objective world. The objective world is represented through the customs and characteristics of society members. The category of pejorativity reflects the important and common relationships between real-world phenomena and moral values or ethical norms. It arises as a result of generalizing the historical development of cognition and social practice (i.e., the norms of behavior accepted by a given society).

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***Modern American Journal of Linguistics,
Education, and Pedagogy***

ISSN (E): 3067-7874

Volume 01, **Issue** 04, July, 2025

Website: usajournals.org

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