

STUDY OF LEXICAL UNITS OF SCARCITY ON THE
CONTEXTUAL LEVEL

Նվազական իմաստ արտահայտող բառային միավորների ուսումնասիրությունը
կոնտեքստային մակարդակում

The processes of logical and conceptual perception and the abstraction of reality by man stimulate his creative activity, as well as his linguistic ability. Man has been incessantly striving to acknowledge and name the objects of his surrounding world, according to their size, qualities, amount, and the actions he performs according to the strength or weakness of the intensity they express. The role of human factor is great for naming the objects of his surrounding world. The size of the objects is indispensable for acknowledging the surroundings as accurately as possible. It would be impossible to have a clear view of man, his existence and his activity without drawing a clear demarcation line between words used to denote small and big objects, without his ability to name things by their small weight, or to coin words denoting a low intensity of an action or a low quality of an object. There are various words used to denote a small size, and there are those that name low human intelligence or insufficiency of something. It seems there may be nothing in common between these words, but there is a concept uniting all of them: this is the concept of scarcity/little quantity/small size/fewness of sth underlying these words. Whether it is *particle(n)* (a minute portion of matter), *emaciated(adj)* (abnormally thin and weak), *harebrained(adj)* (a person of low intelligence), *tap(v)* (to hit sb/sth quickly and lightly) or *decrease (v)* (become or make sth become smaller in size, number, etc.), the main notions that unite these lexical units of various meanings, belonging to different parts of speech, are those of lowness of their quality and the intensity of the action, smallness of size and littleness of amount – shortly, they indicate a scarcity or a low degree of their qualitative and quantitative features - constituting the lexico-semantic field of scarcity, further subdivided into various lexico-semantic groups and subgroups.

The principles, approaches and mechanisms of the perception and naming of lexical units of scarcity are unique in each language. Words expressing scarcity, little quantity and insufficiency of sth comprise an essential part of the English word stock. The lexico-semantic field of scarcity and lexico-semantic fields generally, also called thematic, conceptual or notion fields, have been thoroughly observed by a great number of linguists, such as L. Weisgerber, G. Ipsen, W. Porzig, A. Rudskoger, G. Muller, K. Reyning, and most importantly, by the German linguist Jost Trier who had an invaluable investment in the thorough investigation of the theory of the lexico-semantic fields. The lexical fields theory was one of the most fruitful concepts

evolved so far in structural semantics. Trier can be considered as a proponent of Humboldtian ideas and of other German thinkers, but his approach to problems of lexical structure takes its inspiration especially from Saussure's principles. A lexical field is a closely organized sector of the vocabulary, the elements of which fit together and delimit each other like pieces in a mosaic (Хидекель, Гинзбург 1969:41-42). Trier did not accept the independent existence of a word in the language system, observing that everything in the system gets its meaning from the whole, i.e. words are not independent bearers of meaning, and each of them has some meaning as the adjacent words also have meanings. He viewed fields as the basic elements of language, and that words come to exist as constituent elements of the fields. They hold an intermediate position between a separate word and the whole vocabulary: likewise words, fields can unite, constituting units of a higher class, and like the vocabulary, they can be subdivided into much smaller units (Goddard, Wierzbicka 1994:25-27).

The semantic correlations between lexical units linked by the common semantic component of scarcity/little quantity/fewness/low intensity/little value and quality/low intelligence, etc., and constituting the lexico-semantic field of scarcity, can be expressed by words belonging to different parts of speech, especially nouns, adjectives and verbs, as well as adverbs and pronouns, though few in number, e.g. *follicle, bacteria, inch(n)* (a small or the smallest unit used for measuring), *puppy, duckling, kid(n)* (small, young age), *gnome, elf, pigmy(n)* (small imaginary creature encountered especially in myths and stories), *touch, clap, dab(n)* (a substantivized low intensity of an action), *particle, morsel, speck(n)* (extremely small objects), *inadequacy, scarcity, paucity(n)* (insufficiency of sth), *weightless, emaciated, skinny(adj)* (little weight), *fleeting, ephemeral, temporary(adj)* (lasting a short period of time), *imbecile, moron, nincompoop(adj)* (having low intelligence), *trifling, negligible, cheesy(adj)* (of little value or importance), *lingering, loitering, sluggish(adj)* (low speed), *itty-bitty/itsy-bitsy, teeny/teensy/teensy-weensy, minimum, weeny, Lilliputian(adj)* (very or extremely small size), *deformed, degenerate(adj)* (1. having moral standards that are low and unacceptable), *sip(v)* (to drink sth, taking a very small amount each time), *abridge(v)* (to make a book, play, etc. shorter by leaving parts out), *sink(v)* (to decrease in amount, volume, strength, e.g. the pound *has sunk* to its lowest recorded level against the dollar), *allay(v)* (to make a feeling less strong), *alienate(v)* (to make sb less friendly or sympathetic towards you), *despoil, depreciate(v)* (1. to become less valuable over a period of time, 3. to make sth unimportant gradually), *dilute(v)* (2. to make sth weaker or less effective), *sag, flag(v)* (to become fewer or weaker), etc. Among the adverbs of scarcity we find *less and less, least, hardly* (1. almost not, almost none), *barely* (3. just, certainly not more than), *mildly* (1. slightly, not very much), *scarcely*, etc. Pronouns of scarcity are *little, less, least, at the (very) least* (used after amounts to show that the amount is the

lowest possible), *few*, *only a few*, *some* (in its fourth meaning, it denotes 'a small amount or number of sth'), etc.

There are nominal groups represented by the pattern **n+prep.+n** which denote 'a little quantity of sth' in the word groups that constitute a great number in English, and they are characterized by a high degree of emotiveness and expressiveness, e.g. *a nibble of biscuit, a nip of brandy, a morsel of food, a sprinkling of pepper, a spot of trouble, a shred of evidence, a spark/ray of hope, an ounce of truth, a breath of suspicion, a dab of perfume, a grain of salt, a tot of whisky, titbits of gossip, a snatch of music, a shot of morphine, a puff of wind, a pool of light, a tinge of envy/regret, a bark of laughter, a globule of fat, a touch of sarcasm, a whiff of air/wind, fragments of glass, a flurry of activity*, etc.

A full analysis of a word is possible only due to its two-level study, i.e. a study on the paradigmatic and syntagmatic levels. The word, as a unit of linguistic system, requires a thorough study on the paradigmatic level where its meaning is viewed in comparison with that of other lexical units. The syntagmatic analysis reveals the semantic and stylistic peculiarities of the lexical unit in the context where the word, the dictionary unit, turns into a discourse unit. It is in the context where a full analysis of the semantic peculiarities of the lexical units of scarcity can be performed, and the word can acquire new contextual meanings besides its primary dictionary ones. In other words, the paradigmatic and syntagmatic peculiarities of the word are combined and revealed in speech or on the contextual level.

The paradigmatic peculiarities are realized on the syntagmatic level. A great number of lexical units of scarcity are polysemantic, whereas in texts or in speech they are used only by one meaning. All the remaining lexico-semantic variants are excluded but this one, as a result of its inclusion in the context and the narrowing of the semantic structure of the word. Sometimes, the word acquires meanings that are not fixed in the dictionary. It is also important to observe that the contextual and syntagmatic analysis of the polysemantic lexical units cannot be performed without analyzing lexical units' combinability with other words in the sentence. The meaning of the word is largely conditioned by the combinability rules and most importantly, by the actualization of certain meanings in the context. Thus, the usage of the word is conditioned by the context where it occurs. The context is a grammatically and lexically organized unity where the semantic peculiarities of the units of all levels are realized. In a sentence, the word is no more a dictionary unit, but rather a discourse unit, thanks to the links with other words within the framework of a certain meaningful discourse (Stamenov 1997).

According to H. Grice, new meanings are revealed in the process of communication, connected with the hearer's perception of the speaker's communicative intention (1990:155). To achieve an effective communication, the hearer should try to guess the interlocutor's purpose and to achieve a temporary

identification with the latter, grasping his intentions. The analysis of the speaker's or the writer's intentions also presupposes a revelation of stylistic peculiarities hidden behind the word or the combination of words, that leads to grasping the indiscernible content-conceptual information in the text.

In fiction, due to the personal style of the writer, new meanings are revealed, and sometimes the word loses its main meaning acquiring a new one. With a purpose of revealing some semantic and stylistic peculiarities of lexical units of scarcity on the syntagmatic level, i.e. within the context, and also attempting to reveal the purpose of the author and the factors favouring the interpretation of words, expressions and sentences by the reader, J. Swift's 'Gulliver's Travels' was opted for which was not a haphazard choice. In this novel not only the harsh reality of the 19-20th centuries' bourgeois England was depicted, its vices and the obsequiousness of the noblemen criticized, but it is also a perfect example of an adventurous novel; a fantastic story where the real and the imaginative merge into each other, and the grotesque and the minuscule come to exist in a unity. This fantastic, queer, yet the real world created by J. Swift baffles the reader and in the meantime captures him by the strength of its author's imagination, his spirit and his ability of truly describing the reality. This imaginative world has its inhabitants, its laws, culture and morals. The land of the Lilliputians – it is the very England and on a larger scale, it is Europe. The diminutive creatures, who host Gulliver, are the fantastic and satirical portrayals of Europeans. Lilliputia and its inhabitants, with their habits, traditions, ways of governing and political intrigues, are a hundreds of times diminished miniature of the whole Europe.

The modeling of this fantastic and yet realistic world is performed by the way Swift handles the vocabulary units. The size of the objects, and the lexical units used to express them are the most crucial tools for Swift. The pages of the novel are replete with cases of peculiar handling of lexical units of scarcity and the author's acute irony, accompanying the reader up to the end. Especially peculiar uses of *small* and *little* are observed in this work.

The size of the objects serves to express the character of the figures – a good means for measuring their souls. By reading this novel, we see that small is not always small, and that gigantic – not always so. The size of the objects is relative, it can alter in comparison with other objects, and hence the estimation of small or big objects is rather a visual illusion. The minuscule and the gigantic merge into each other.

Undoubtedly, philosophers are in the right when they tell us that nothing is great or little otherwise than by comparison. It might have pleased fortune to have let the Lilliputians find some nation, where the people were as diminutive with respect to them, as they were to me. (J. Swift 1973: 90)

Inspired by English idealist philosopher Berkley, J. Swift took the view that small and large exist only by comparison, which is well illustrated by Gulliver's adventures first in the land of the Lilliputians and then in Brobdingnag: Gulliver is a monster among the Lilliputians, but a minuscule creature among the huge inhabitants of Brobdingnag. Thus, the size of the objects can change in comparison; it is unstable and even deceptive.

It is alleged that the word *lilliput* was coined by J. Swift, as it became widely-used after 'Gulliver's Travels' was published and became a favourite book. G. Morley, an English literary critic, in his introductory of one of the editions of 'Gulliver's Travels' took the view that Swift derived the word *lilliput* of two stems: 1. of a dialectical stem *lill* (little), 2. of Latin *putidus* (spoiled). As studies show, in Romance philology the children, having inherited the vices of the adults, were called *Lilliputians* (J. Swift 1973:273). Likewise, in 'Gulliver's Travels', the *Lilliputians* were the beings that embodied the vices of the English society in the 18th century, and some of them were the enemies of J. Swift, disguised as Lilliputians. Today the word seems to have lost its connotational meaning in which it was used by J. Swift, and by the word *Lilliputian* sth of extremely small size is meant.

The use of imaginary words, expressions, nations, names of creatures and cities is a typical feature of 'Gulliver's Travels', e.g. *Yahoos*, *Houyhnhnms*, the *Cascagians* (names of imaginary nations), *Laputa*, the island of *Luggnagg*, the land of the *Brobdingnag*, etc. The name of the metropolis of Lilliput, *Mildendo*, was also coined by J. Swift. It is interesting to note that the final *o* at the end of the word is the diminutive suffix *-o*. The Lilliputians being diminutive creatures, the name of their metropolis is also diminuted.

To well depict the small size of the Lilliputians in comparison with normal-sized people, J. Swift makes use of such words that emphasize the smallness of those creatures and the things they use:

...that short I cost his Majesty about a million and a half of *sprugs* (their greatest gold coin, about the bigness of a *spangle*): and upon the whole, it would be advisable for the Emperor to take the first fair occasion of dismissing me. (J. Swift 1973:65)

The use of contrasting words is evident here: '*sprugs*', which is their greatest coin, is about the bigness of a '*spangle*' that is defined as 'a small piece of shiny metal or plastic used to decorate clothes'. Thus, whatever is the greatest for the Lilliputians is the smallest for us – normal-sized human beings.

However, in my thoughts, I could not sufficiently wonder at the intrepidity of these diminutive mortals, who durst venture to mount and walk up on my body, while one of my hands was at liberty, without trembling at the very sight of so prodigious a creature as I must appear to them. (J. Swift 1973:36)

The word combination *'diminutive mortals'* carries an emotive charge in the context. Together with expressiveness, the adjective imparts a negative coloring to the utterance, once more stressing the 'very' or 'extremely' small size of those 'mortals' and the deeds they performed.

In the second part of the novel, Gulliver is the guest of the huge-sized inhabitants of Brobdingnag. To describe their enormous size, he uses many hyperboles:

The mistress sent her maid for a small dram cup, which held about two gallons, and filled it with drink; I took up the vessel with much difficulty in both hands, and in a most respectful manner drank to her ladyship's health, expressing the words as loud as I could in English [...]. (J. Swift 1973: 93)

The farmer took Gulliver to his place and treated him with dinner. They gave him *'a small dram cup, which held about two gallons'*. A gallon is actually equal to 4.5 liters, thus two gallons is about 9 liters: a cup holding two gallons cannot be logically small. Thus, *small* is used in the context deliberately by the author, as a means of exaggeration, an intensifier, to better express the huge size of Gulliver's hosts.

We passed over five or six rivers many degrees broader and deeper than the Nile or the Ganges; and there was hardly a rivulet so small as the Thames at London Bridge. (J. Swift 1973: 101)

The Thames is 200 meters long, the longest river in England, whereas Gulliver calls it a 'rivulet', i.e. a small river and attributes it with the adjective 'small' that is used emphatically to suggest that the rivers in Brobdingnag were so wide, deep and long that the Thames is a rivulet in comparison; the use of *small* is a case of hyperbole in this sentence, too.

She [Glumdalclitch] carried a little book in her pocket, not much large than a Sanson's Atlas; it was a common treatise for the use of young girls, giving a short account of their religion: out of this she taught me my letters, and interpreted the words. (J. Swift 1973: 101)

Sanson's Atlas was compiled by Nicolas Sanson, a French cartographer. It had many versions of publication, but the edition, known by J. Swift, might be 20 inches in length and width. Taking into account its size, the girl's book was big enough for Gulliver, but for the girl – so little that it could be put in her pocket.

But this conceived was to be the least of my misfortunes: for, as human creatures are observed to be more savage and cruel in proportion to their bulk, what could I expect but to be a morsel in the mouth of the first among these enormous barbarians that should happen to seize me? (J. Swift 1973: 90)

'Morsel' that means 'a small amount or piece of sth, especially food' acquires a stylistic coloring in the context and a metaphoric usage, as a means of emphasizing

the smallness of Gulliver, in comparison with the gigantic inhabitants of Brobdingnag.

As it was mentioned above, a word can acquire new meanings in the context, very much different from its dictionary meanings. The subtle nuances expressed by the word can be grasped not only by having a perfect knowledge of the writer's style, but also by being able to read between the lines, with an eye to grasp the message of the story.

It now began to be known and talked of in the neighborhood, that my master had found a strange animal in the field [...], seemed to speak in a little language of its own, had already learned several words of theirs, went erect upon two legs. was tame and gentle, would come when called, do whatever it was bid, had the finest limbs in the world [...]. (J. Swift 1973:98)

The adjective 'little' is rarely collocated with 'language', but in the given context, the use of the word can be explained in the following way: Gulliver was a minute creature among the huge-sized inhabitants of Brobdingnag. Everything about him was diminutive and fine, and those gigantic people contrived that his speech, hence his language was also small, as he 'seemed to speak in a little language of his own'. We, human beings, are also inclined to think that animals, birds and insects have a so-called 'little' language of their own. *Little* is not only associated with their small size, but also with the fact that their way of communicating with each other is peculiar and incomprehensible to us.

Nothing angered and mortified me so much as the Queen's dwarf [...]; he would always affect to swagger and look big as he passed by me [...] and he seldom failed of a smart word or two upon my littleness. (J. Swift 1973:102)

The dwarf, the smallest creature in the kingdom despised Gulliver, mocking his small size in comparison with the inhabitants of Brobdingnag. The word *littleness* acquires two meanings in the context: 1. the small size of Gulliver's body and 2. the meanness of his character: the dwarf thought if Gulliver was small, he was also contemptible and mean, having an abject and petty soul.

... but by what I have gathered from your own relation, and the answers I have with much pains wringed and extorted from you, I cannot but conclude the bulk of your natives to be the most pernicious race of little odious vermin that nature ever suffered to crawl upon the surface of the earth. (J. Swift 1973:110)

Gulliver tells the king of Brobdingnag all about Britain: its constitution, laws, vices, court intrigues, corruptions, the hypocrisy and the conspiracies of the English noblemen. Astonished by those accounts of Gulliver's country, the king of Brobdingnag called the English *the most pernicious race of little odious vermin*'. The word *little* does not only mean small in comparison with the natives of Brobdingnag, but it is also associated with the abjectness and the obsequiousness of English noblemen and their malicious nature.

The adjective *small* can be used with drinks in the meaning of 'not strong, weak, containing little alcohol', as in the given context:

They found by my eating that a small quantity would not suffice me; [...] I drank it off at a draught, which I might well do, for it hardly held half a pint, and tasted like a small wine of Burgundy, but much more delicious. (J. Swift 1973: 35)

The mistress sent her maid for a small dram cup, which held about two gallons, and filled it with drink. [...] This liquor tasted like a small cider, and was not unpleasant. (J. Swift 1973: 93)

The adjective *small* besides its meanings of 'small size, little quantity' can have various meanings, as a result of semantic extension. These meanings are sometimes characterized by a positive or negative connotation, the latter being prevalent, e.g. *a small beginning* means 'an unpromising start in business, as a synonym of *humble*, *modest*, and *small harvest* means 'a bad harvest'.

The expression *it was small of him* can be the synonym of 'it was mean of him'.

To feel small means 'to feel humiliated'.

He has small English means 'he knows bad English'.

The meaning of 'little quantity or small amount' can be expressed by other words that add an emphatic coloring and expressiveness to the utterance, as in the case of the word '*narrow*', the main dictionary meaning of which is 'measuring a short distance':

He [my father] sent me to Emanuel College in Cambridge, at fourteen years old, where I resided three years and applied myself close to my studies; but the charge [...] being too great for a narrow fortune, I was bound apprentice to Mr James Bates, an eminent surgeon in London, with whom I continued four years. (J. Swift 1973:31)

'*Narrow*' can also have the meaning of 'limited in a way that ignores important issues or the opinions of other people', this meaning a bit diverging from the meaning of 'short distance', as a result of semantic extension. The adjective *short*, the main dictionary meaning of which is 'measuring or covering a small length or distance or lasting a small amount of time', can also have the meaning of 'limited, narrow-minded', characterized by expressiveness:

As for himself, he protested, [...] he would rather lose half of his kingdom than be privy to such a secret, which he commanded me, as I valued my life, never to mention any more. A strange effect of narrow principles and short views! (J. Swift 1973:55)

Thus, in the analysis of lexical units of scarcity on the contextual level, some semantic and stylistic peculiarities are revealed, conditioned by the style of the author, the combinability rules and the actualization of certain meanings in the context. The study of contextual use of lexical units of scarcity reveals some complex

interrelations between the context and the lexical units of scarcity. The context brings about some modifications of meaning in the lexical units of scarcity under study giving stylistic colouring to the whole utterance.

The lexical units of scarcity are represented in the dictionary as neutral units, whereas on the syntagmatic level, i.e. in the context, they fulfill expressive-emotive functions, possessing characteristics of connotative aspect, and they are sometimes used as stylistic devices.

Thanks to the individual style of the author, his purpose to create emotive-expressive effect and the combination of the word with other words in the context, new meanings emerge, and some stylistic peculiarities are revealed.

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Հոդվածում քննարկված են նվազական իմաստ արտահայտող բառային միավորները, պատկերացում է տրված դրանց իմաստային ընդհանրության մասին՝ որակական և քանակական հատկանիշների սակավություն, փոքր չափ, ցածր որակ, իմացական ցածր մակարդակ, թերի ծավալ, կշիռ, պակաս կարևորություն և այլն։ Դիտարկված է բառիմաստային դաշտերի տեսությունը և դրանց սահմանումը, ուսումնասիրված է նվազական իմաստ արտահայտող բառիմաստային դաշտը։ Նվազական իմաստ արտահայտող բառային միավորների իմաստային և ոճական առանձնահատկությունների քննությունը կատարվել է Հոնաթան Սկիֆթի «Գուլիվերի ճանապարհորդությունը» վեպի օրինակով։