Literature Review on Negative Emotive Intensifiers in English

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Abstract

Negative Emotive Intensifiers are the group of English adverbs originally expressing negative emotions but later having intensifying functions. This paper concludes previous studies of Negative Emotive Intensifiers and makes some suggestions for further studies. Firstly, it analyzes the definition and classification of NEIs, finding that previous studies tend to integrate NEIs into intensifiers without considering their emotive features. Then, it claims from two aspects, synchronic perspective and diachronic perspective. Finally, suggestions are explored in detail.

Key words: Negative Emotive Intensifiers; Definition; Synchronic study; Diachronic study

INTRODUCTION

The so-called Negative Emotive Intensifiers (hereafter NEIs) are those adverbs which have negative original meanings but later possess a function of intensifying the adjectives they modify, such as *terribly*, *awfully* and *desperately* in constructions *terribly nice*, *awfully good* and *desperately important*. The special part of NEIs lies in that they originally express negative emotions which is different from intensifiers. This paper aims to elaborate previous studies on NEIs, trying to provide ideas and methods for further studies. The paper is organized as follows. In section 1 this paper lists previous studies on the definition and classification of NEIs. Section 2 this paper presents the synchronic and diachronic studies on NEIs. Finally, this paper draws an conclusion.

1. PREVIOUS STUDIES ON NEGATIVE EMOTIVE INTENSIFIERS

1.1 Studies on the Definition of Negative Emotive Intensifiers

As a subcategory of Emotive Intensifiers, NEIs are those adverbs with negative meanings which could scale the meaning of the adjectives or verbs that are modified up or down to a certain degree. They haven't been fully discussed by scholars. Emotive intensifiers, the term firstly proposed by Jing-Schmid (2007), are used for evaluation, which distinguish themselves from common intensifiers. More specifically, emotive intensifiers are linguistic signs that are used 1) to boost the speaker's illocutionary force and especially to maximize the dramatic effect in communication, and 2) to elect attention from the hearer in conversation, and 3) under certain circumstances, to establish rapport between interlocutors. Liu Fen (2016, p.3) presents the further study of emotive intensifiers. According to her definition, emotive intensifiers are the individualized encoding of degrees based on emotional experiences and psychological measurements and people use them to indirectly express the quality degrees of things or intensity degrees of actions in view of their personal emotions. In a nutshell, NEIs are the group of English adverbs originally expressing negative emotions but later having intensifying functions.

1.2 Studies on the Classification of Negative Emotive Intensifiers

Observed from the previous studies of NEIs, the naming and taxonomy of NEIs haven't reached an agreement yet. Many scholars pay much attention to the degrees and distributional properties expressed by adverbs, integrating NEIs into intensifiers without considering their emotive features. For instance, as early as in 1972, Bolinger (1972, pp.17-18) uses the term "degree words" to denote those adverbs which can scale a quality. He distinguishes four categories of intensifiers, namely boosters, compromisers, diminishers and minimizers, in which NEIs pertain to boosters, as in *terribly anxious*, *awfully new* and *deathly ill*. In *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language*, Quirk et al.(1985, p.590) name those intensifiers indicating a relatively high point on the abstract scale as amplifiers, including *bitterly*, *violently*, *severely* and so on. Later, Johansson (1993, p.40-45) categorizes adverb-adjective collocations in the tagged LOB corpus into ten patterns, one of which named as "value judgment" including *sadly* and *frighteningly*, are actually NEIs. Klein (1998, p.20) discerns intensifiers into eight classes, and notices some NEIs such as *awfully* can be grouped into "extremely high" class.

Furthermore, some researchers divide intensifiers from the perspective of their original meanings. For instance, Bolinger (1972, p.242) classifies intensifiers into ten groups. According to his classification, NELs are scattered in the following groups: Abandonment (e.g. *wildly*, *madly*, *furiously*), Evaluation (e.g. *badly*, *terribly*, *outrageously*), Irremediability (e.g. *hopelessly*, *abjectly*, *woefully*), and Singularity (e.g. *unusually*, *strangely*, *outlandishly*). Sinclair (1998, p.353-354) also contends that some adverbs that modify adjectives are grading adverbs or adverbs of degree. Some NELs can be put in groups of DANGEROUSLY AND TOLERABLY and BREATHTAKINGLY such as *painfully*, *dangerously*, *chillingly*, *worryingly*, *fearfully*. Moreover, Jing-Schmid (2007) provides a comprehensive investigation of lexico-semantics of emotive intensifiers in English, German and Chinese, finding that they are overwhelming accompanied with three conceptual categories of NEIs, including FEAR (e.g. *terribly*, *dreadfully* and *sinfully*), DISGUST (e.g. *stinking* and *filthy*) and ANGER (e.g. *damn* and *verdammt*).

On the other side, Chinese scholars have discussed the classification of EIs but haven't analyzed NEIs separately. For instance, Zhang Jinhai (2014, p.27), with the help of COCA, analyzes the formation and features of "X-ly" EIs as well as the genre differences of their distributions. He classifies EIs into six basic emotions: JOYS (e.g. *joyously*), SADNESS (e.g. *ruefully*), ANGER (e.g. *displeasingly*), FEAR (e.g. fearfully), DISGUST (e.g. *loathly*) and SURPRISE (e.g. *surprisingly*). Four emotions, SADNESS, ANGER, FEAR, and DISGUST,

can be summarized as groups of NEIs. Liu fen (2016, p.73) presents a further study about EIs and divides them into five emotive concepts as HAPPINESS (e.g. *dearly*), ANGER (e.g. *bitterly*), SORROW (e.g. *desperately*), FEAR(e.g. *horribly*) and SURPRISE(e.g. *incredibly*) in which ANGER, SORROW and FEAR demonstrate negative emotions. Based on embodied philosophy, she scrutinizes their common features, mechanism and the related cognitive processing, employing conceptual metonymy theory as well as construal principal of lexical semantics, concluding that EIs are distributed mainly in negative emotional concepts due to people's prior attention about negative events (Liu, 2016, p.82). Compared with Zhang Jinhai's taxonomy, Liu Fen merges the emotion DISGUST into the concept of ANGER.

Viewed from above, in terms of NEIs in English, foreign scholars usually tend to categorize them in the classification of intensifiers. Furthermore, they have delved into intensifiers from the perspective of degrees or semantic characteristics instead of emotions. Some Chinese scholars, on the other hand, analyze EIs which can be used for the purpose of evaluation and classify them in different theories, but they do not focus on NEIs specifically. Hence, NEIs, a distinctive subcategory of EIs, need to be investigated.

2. SYNCHRONIC AND DIACHRONIC STUDIES ON NEGATIVE EMOTIVE INTENSIFIERS

2.1 Synchronic Studies on Negative Emotive Intensifiers

Synchronically, previous western linguists mainly focus on their collocations and meanings of several NEIs. Kennedy (2003), based on the BNC corpus, investigates grammatical and semantic characteristics of collocates of three NEIs: *terribly*, *badly* and *severely*. Besides, Lorenz (2002, p.144-145) gathers top 20 right-hand collocates of *terribly* in the BNC and finds that most of the adjectives have negative connotations besides three positive adjectives *brave*, *impressed* and *proud*. Manea (2013) sketchily deals with semantic features, word formation, syntactic features, stylistic features and usage of some NEIs such as *terribly* and *awfully*. Zhang Ruihua (2013) examines the semantic prosody of four NEIs: *terribly*, *awfully*, *horribly* and *dreadfully*, finding that those words are inclined to occur with unpleasant words. Cocea (2015) tries to figure out semantic and syntactic traits of some NEIs such as *unlikely*, *bitterly*, and *dreadfully* in English and Romanian, concluding that they are characteristically associated with negative words and tend to be used prenominally.

Other research, on the other hand, concentrates on the

register or sociolinguistic functions of NEIs. Biber et al. (1999, p.564) investigate the frequency of intensifiers in British and American English conversation and academic prose. According to their finding, some NEIs, such as *bloody*, *damn*, *terribly,* are used in conversations rather than in academic prose. Xiao & Tao (2007) explore a wide range of sociolinguistic variables of some NEIs including discourse mode and register of people's uses, gender, age, education level, audience gender and age of users. They find, for instance, *bloody*, *damn*, *terribly*, *awfully* and *dead* are significantly more frequent in spoken English and preferably used by females than males. Rossette (2014) analyzes the degree expression of one collocate of NEI *insanely*: *insanely great* in a corpus of Oral English, detecting that *great* bleaches its semantic content and these two words are combined to catch phrase status.

Chineses scholars contribute a lot to investigate NEIs. Some analyse NEIs from the perspective of semantic prosody. Zhang Jinhai (2014, p.80), relying on the frequency of NEIs in COCA, evaluates the semantic prosody of those NEIs expressing sad, disgust and fear emotions. He concludes NEIs tend to express strong negative semantic prosody while NEIs with anger emotion have positive semantic prosody. Huang Ruihong (2007) identifies the semantic prosody of *terribly* used by Chinese learners, clarifying that the positive semantic prosody of *terribly* is underused. Liu Fen (2018) also detects the semantic prosody of *terribly* and *awfully* which demonstrates totally different semantic features according to COCA. She finds that *terribly*, which has a semantic preference to negative properties of entities and feelings of people, expresses strong negative prosody while *awfully* conveys a mixed semantic prosody.

More Chinese research concentrates on NEIs in terms of their semantic features. For instance, Shao Bin et al. (2017) provide cluster analysis and correspondence analysis to explore collocations of 22 intensifiers which include 3 NEIs: *terribly*, *awfully* and *damn*. According to their visualized analysis, *terribly* often collocates with negative adjectives, as in *terribly wrong*, *terribly sorry* and *terribly unfair*. As for *awfully* and *damn*, apt to collocate with informal words, have common collocates of adjectives that express value judgments, space, shape, distance and difficulty level. Hu Lei (2013, p.64) investigates the relationship between the frequency and the collocates of some "X-ly" NEIs such as *desperately*, *severely* and *sadly* in dictionaries, digging out that they are semantically blended and appear poly-functional. Liu Fen & Bai Jiehong (2019) account for the semantic coercion of the construction of NEIs collocating with positive adjectives such as *disgustingly easy* and *painfully beautiful*, explaining the result from the mechanisms of metonymy, metaphor and profiling.

2.2 Diachronic Studies on Negative Emotive Intensifiers

Diachronically, previous research has primarily concentrated on the development of certain NEIs from various perspectives. Firstly, some scholars analyze the development process from grammaticalization. For instance, Méndez-Naya (2003) probes into the different uses of the NEI *swipe* in Old English and Middle English by examining its collocates with verbs, adjectives and adverbs. She suggests a possible grammaticalization path of *swipe*, summarized as follows: adverb in adjunct function associated with 'harmonic' verbs > degree reading with 'harmonic' verbs > verb degree modifier with any type of verb > verb degree modifier of participles in predicative function > intensifier. Moreover, Méndez-Naya (2018) diagnoses the co-occurrence of the NEI *swipe*, concluding that this phenomenon intersects with grammaticalization and renewal.

On the framework of grammaticalization, *death*-related NEIs also arouse great attention. Blanco-Suárez (2013, p.71) examines the evolution of NEIs *dead* and *deadly* over time and detects they lose origin descriptive meanings and come to express subjective meanings. Blanco-Suárez identifies that *dead* is more advanced in the process of grammaticalization while *deadly* shows more abstract values. Later, Blanco-Suárez (2014) conducts further research and traces the diachronic change of *dead* from ME to PDE by selecting collocations from historical dictionaries, showing that *dead* has followed a path, namely descriptive meanings > subjective or affective meanings > intensifying meanings which expresses concomitant features of grammaticalization. Barnfield & Buchstaller (2010), moreover, present the longitudinal development of *dead* with the help of innovative corpus which spans five decades of speech from North-East England. According to their studies, the scenario across diachrony is as follows: the frequency of *dead* soars from the 1960s and reaches its peak in the 1990s while drops from then on for the reason that the new generation tends to use more up-to-date intensifiers instead of stereotyped ones. Margerie (2010) analyses grammaticalization and subjectification path of two constructions of *to death*: NP1 VERB NP2 TO DEATH and NP BE ADJECTIVE TO DEATH, analyzing mechanisms from metaphor, hyperbole and metonymic interfering. Arrizabalaga (2014) studies the emergence of Spain NEI *hasta la muerte* which means *to death* in English. Hoeksema & Napol (2019) explore various resultative constructions of intensifiers in English and Dutch such as NEI *to death* which plays a role in "degree resultatives".

Secondly, some scholars try to inspect the historical change of NEIs from other cognitive perspectives. For instance, Traugott (1995, p.44) investigates the historical change of NEI *awfully*, pointing out *awfully* indicates "the speaker's assessment of the normative referentiality of

the lexical item selected". Méndez-Naya (2008) focuses on the semantic change of the degree function of NEI *downright*, illustrates the interplay between lexicalization and grammaticalization in its development. Partington (1993, pp.183-184), on the other hand, claims the process of delexicalisation of NEIs *terribly*, *awfully* and *dreadfully* which have undergone a shift from modals to intensifiers. Furthermore, Paradis (2008) diagnoses the meaning change of *terribly*, accounting for that it is related to the process of metonymization which means that "there is a continuum from metonymy to zone activation".

On the contrary, there seems to be a paucity in research on NEIs in China. Only several domestic scholars have delved into the diachronic evolution of NEIs within cognitive linguistics. Zhan Quanwang (2009), for example, explores the semantic change of *terribly* based on ELC corpus, concluding that *terribly* has undergone a process of subjectification: from a propositional function to a discourse function, from an objective meaning to a subjective meaning, from a sentence subject to a speaker subject, and from a free form to a fixed form. Liu Fen (2016, p.159) finds that NEIs have changed from those nouns, verbs and adjectives expressing emotions to emotive intensifying adverbs which have intensifying degree and the function to convey speaker's attitude. Moreover, she points out that it is a historical process of semantic bleaching and subjectivity.

CONCLUSION

In a nutshell, scholars in China and abroad have contributed a lot to the study of NEIs. As for the definition and classification of NEIs, scholars research from different perspectives, such as syntactic aspects or semantic features and they are inclined to classify NEIs into intensifiers without considering their emotive features. Synchronic studies try to figure out their collocations, semantic prosody and the register or sociolinguistic functions. Diachronic scholars explain their diachronic evolution from different cognitive aspects, such as grammaticalization, subjectification and delexicalization.

There, however, still exist some limitations that should be shed light on. Firstly, scholars tend to focus on some cases of NEIs while few have applied macro perspective, i.e. studying NEIs as a whole systematically, let alone the combination of micro and macro perspectives. Secondly, as mentioned above, Chinese scholars who are inclined to probe into semantic features of NEIs from a synchronic perspective don't concentrate on the historical change of NEIs. Studies concerning overall diachronic changes and the motivation of NEIs under the more concrete framework such as subjectification in grammaticalization or constructionalization are inadequate. Last but not least, though previous studies are illuminating to some extent, most of them rely on qualitative analysis. The systematic

investigation of NEIs combining both quantitative and qualitative approaches and analyzing through in-depth data mining and visualization is rare. Therefore, further research can study from these aspects.

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