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The General Semantic Features of Measurement Units in English

Adkhamova Shohinakhon Anjarjon qizi

Phd student at Fergana State University, Uzbekistan

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Abstract: This paper explores the semantic features of measurement units used to express weight, volume, and time. It highlights how these units both precise and approximate are employed not only in literal contexts but also metaphorically to convey emotional states, subjective perceptions, and expressive meanings, especially in literary and everyday language. Such figurative use enriches discourse and reveals the deep connection between language, thought and human experience.

Keywords: Measurement units, semantics, figurative meaning, weight expressions, volume and capacity, time expressions, precise units, approximate units, metaphorical language.

Introduction: In linguistics, units of measurement are lexical items used to express quantitative categories such as amount, volume, length, weight and time. These units function as part of the language's quantifiers and serve various communicative purposes such as providing precision, enabling comparison, evaluation or even creating figurative meaning in speech. For instance, lexical units like "a bit", "a few", and "a piece" represent quantities in approximate or countable forms. Measurement terms denoting volume include words like "liter", "gallon" or "cup". Units such as "meter", "inch" and "foot" express length. Common weight units include "kilogram", "gram" and "pound". As for time, expressions like "second", "minute" and "hour" are standard temporal measurements. These linguistic elements not only convey physical quantities but also contribute to the expressiveness and clarity of discourse, often playing stylistic or metaphorical roles.

In linguistics, units of measurement are generally classified into two main categories based on their usage:

precise and approximate units. Beyond simply denoting quantity, these expressions also serve important communicative functions across various contexts. Precise measurement units refer to standardized expressions defined by international measurement systems. These are typically used to describe physical properties such as volume, length, weight and temperature. Examples include terms like kilometer, kilogram, milliliter, second and degree Celsius, which are always associated with specific numerical values. For instance, phrases such as "The container holds one liter of milk" or "The road is ten meters long" clearly show volume and length paired with numbers. A key feature of these units is their universality. They represent the same quantity regardless of the speaker or language. On the other hand, approximate or subjective measurement units lack a fixed numerical value and often reflect personal perception, estimation or emotional nuance. These are commonly found in spoken discourse, figurative language or expressions of personal experience. Words and phrases like "a bit", "a handful", "a pinch" or "a drop" express relative quantities that can differ from person to person. For example, in the sentence "Add a pinch of salt to the soup", the amount is not measured in grams but understood in an intuitive, context-dependent way. Together, both precise and imprecise measurement units reflect not only the lexical variety of language but also its semantic richness. Through them, speakers are able to convey ideas either through exact quantities or relational evaluations, depending on the communicative situation.

METHOD

This section explores the semantic features of measurement terms used to express weight, volume, capacity and time. While these units primarily denote physical quantities, they are also frequently employed to convey figurative and emotional meanings. Lexical items like gram, milligram, and ton represent units of weight. These words are commonly used to quantify mass in a physical sense, but they can also reflect emotional or metaphorical weight. Broadly, they fall into two categories: precise and approximate units. Precise weight units are those established within international or national measurement systems, including kilogram, gram, ton, milligram, pound and ounce. For instance, in the sentence "This year the cotton harvest yielded 30 tons," the word ton carries its literal (denotative) meaning. However, weight units are often used metaphorically, especially in artistic and conversational contexts. They serve as linguistic tools to express psychological states, pressure or burden. Consider the sentence: "He had tons of problems on his shoulders." Here the word tons conveys not a literal mass, but the overwhelming number and emotional weight of the issues. Similarly, "There's still a ton of pain in my heart" reflects intense emotional suffering, not a measurable quantity. Volume and capacity units help describe spatial dimensions or quantities of substances. These too can be divided into precise and approximate types. Precise units like liter, milliliter, cubic meter, gallon and barrel are typically used in scientific, technical or formal contexts. For example, "two liters of water" refers to an exact measurement. On the other hand, approximate or figurative units convey subjective impressions of volume. Terms such as a sip, a handful or a pinch suggest imprecise amounts and often carry emotional undertones. These expressions are commonly used metaphorically. For instance, "His patience cup is full" metaphorically frames patience as a measurable container, implying that he has reached his limit. Similarly, "Her heart was a full bowl of sorrow" reflects emotional intensity by using volume imagery. Volume units not only describe physical quantities but also function as powerful linguistic means to express inner experiences, emotional states, and attitudes.

Time-related words serve to indicate the duration, sequence and narrative positioning of events. As with other measurement terms, time units are classified into precise and imprecise types. Precise time units such as second, minute, hour, day, week, month, year and century are clearly defined and associated with the calendar or clock. In contrast, imprecise or subjective time expressions like a moment, a little while, some time, a long time depend more on perception and emotional context. These expressions are often used metaphorically. For example, "Life passed in the blink of an eye" portrays the fleeting nature of life and time through figurative language. Such uses add stylistic richness and emotional resonance to texts.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

A number of prominent scholars have examined these units through various approaches, offering in-depth analyses of their meaning and conceptual structure. Ronald Langacker, in his two-volume work Foundations of Cognitive Grammar, explores the cognitive foundations of units related to weight, volume and time. He emphasizes how these units are represented in human cognition and how they relate to psychological states. Eve Sweetser, in From Etymology to Pragmatics, investigates the metaphorical and cultural motivations behind the use of measurement expressions. Phrases such as "the weight of responsibility" or "time flies" reflect the way language captures collective human experience through metaphor. James R. Hurford, in his book The Origins of Meaning, examines the evolutionary basis of measurement concepts. He argues

that such units not only quantify physical reality but also function as cognitive tools within language development and thought. Stephen Levinson, in Space in Language and Cognition, analyzes the spatial and perceptual representations of volume and capacity-related units. Expressions like “a cup of sorrow” or “a handful of hope” highlight the emotional and semantic weight these units can carry. Ray Jackendoff, in Foundations of Language integrates semantics with cognitive psychology, focusing on the mental structures underlying temporal expressions. He explores how phrases such as “in a blink of an eye” or “for ages” reflect subjective perception of time. The collective findings of these scholars demonstrate that measurement units in English are not limited to expressing physical quantities. Rather, they hold profound conceptual, perceptual and cultural significance, contributing meaningfully to the fields of semantics and cognitive linguistics.

CONCLUSION

In language, measurement units serve not only to express physical quantities but also function as linguistic tools carrying complex semantic meanings. These units appear in both precise and approximate forms, revealing multiple layers of meaning depending on context. Especially in literary expressions, they play a crucial role in conveying figurative thought. The metaphorical use of weight, volume and time units reflects emotional states, personal experiences and worldviews, highlighting the expressive richness of language. Therefore, the semantic analysis of measurement terms provides insight not only into lexical variation but also into their stylistic and pragmatic functions in communication.

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