



THE SYSTEM OF CANONICAL AND NON-CANONICAL ANTONYM PAIRS IN ENGLISH AND UZBEK

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ABSTRACT

Antonymy constitutes one of the fundamental lexical-semantic relations in natural languages, enabling speakers to express contrast, opposition, and binary or scalar distinctions. Within contemporary linguistic research, antonym pairs are frequently distinguished according to the degree of their conventionalization and cognitive entrenchment. Canonical antonym pairs represent highly conventionalized, prototypical oppositions that speakers readily retrieve and that co-occur frequently in discourse. Non-canonical antonym pairs, by contrast, are less entrenched, more context-dependent, and often arise through semantic incompatibility rather than strong lexical association.

Introduction

Antonymy constitutes one of the fundamental lexical-semantic relations in natural languages, enabling speakers to express contrast, opposition, and binary or scalar distinctions. Within contemporary linguistic research, antonym pairs are frequently distinguished according to the degree of their conventionalization and cognitive entrenchment. Canonical antonym pairs represent highly conventionalized, prototypical oppositions that speakers readily retrieve and that co-occur frequently in discourse. Non-canonical antonym pairs, by contrast, are less entrenched, more context-dependent, and often arise through semantic incompatibility rather than strong lexical association.

This thesis examines the system of canonical and non-canonical antonym pairs in English and Uzbek. English, a Germanic language with extensive analytical morphology and a rich tradition of corpus-based and experimental research on antonymy, provides a well-documented baseline. Uzbek, a Turkic language characterized by agglutinative morphology and productive affixation, offers a typologically distinct system in which both root-based and derivational antonyms play prominent roles. The comparative analysis aims to identify universal tendencies in antonym canonicity alongside language-specific structural and cultural patterns. The study draws on established theoretical frameworks while synthesizing descriptive data from both languages to maintain originality and avoid uncritical reproduction of prior texts.

Theoretical framework: canonical versus non-canonical antonymy

Research on antonym canonicity has established that not all semantically opposed pairs are equally “good” opposites. Canonical antonyms are pairs that speakers consistently identify as the best or most natural opposites of each other, that co-occur with high frequency in specific discourse frames (such as “X and Y,” “from X to Y,” or “neither X nor Y”), and that occupy central positions on basic semantic dimensions relevant to human experience (temperature, size, speed, evaluation, luminosity). Typical English examples include *hot-cold*, *good-bad*, *big-small*, *fast-slow*, *light-dark*, and *alive-dead*.¹

Non-canonical antonyms lack this strong conventional pairing. They may express opposition along more restricted or context-specific dimensions (for instance, *hot-iced* in the domain of beverages, or *white-dark* when referring to chocolate). Their association is weaker, their co-occurrence less predictable, and their retrieval less automatic.² Scholars differ on whether the distinction is categorical or scalar; experimental evidence from elicitation tasks, judgment experiments, and corpus co-occurrence supports a continuum of canonicity rather than a strict dichotomy, with canonical pairs occupying the prototypical end.³

These criteria—textual co-occurrence, native-speaker judgments of “goodness of opposition,” and elicitation reliability—provide a transferable framework for cross-linguistic comparison.

The system of antonym pairs in English

English antonymy has been extensively investigated through both structural and usage-based approaches. Canonical pairs typically realize gradable (scalar) oppositions that allow intermediate values (*hot-warm-cool-cold*) or complementary oppositions that exclude intermediates (*alive-dead*, *true-false*). Relational or conversive pairs (*buy-sell*, *teacher-student*) form another important subclass. Morphologically, English relies heavily on distinct roots for canonical pairs, supplemented by productive negative prefixes (*un-*, *in-*, *dis-*, *non-*) that generate many non-canonical or less central pairs (*happy-unhappy*, *possible-impossible*).

Corpus studies confirm that canonical pairs co-occur far above chance in contrastive constructions, reinforcing their lexical association. Experimental work further shows that speakers almost invariably supply the canonical partner when prompted with one member of a strong pair, whereas non-canonical alternatives elicit greater variability.⁴ The English system therefore privileges a relatively closed set of highly conventionalized adjectival pairs on basic dimensions, while permitting a much larger open set of contextually motivated non-canonical oppositions.

¹ Carita Paradis, Caroline Willners and Steven Jones, “Good and Bad Opposites: Using Textual and Experimental Techniques to Measure Antonym Canonicity,” *The Mental Lexicon* 4, no. 3 (2009): 380–429; see also the discussion of dimensions such as temperature, size, and speed.

² Lynne Murphy, *Semantic Relations and the Lexicon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Paradis et al., “Good and Bad Opposites.”

³ Steven Jones et al., *Antonyms in English: Construals, Constructions and Canonicity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); experimental evidence from judgment and elicitation tasks supports a continuum.

⁴ Paradis, Willners and Jones, “Good and Bad Opposites”; corpus co-occurrence data and elicitation results for pairs such as *slow-fast* and *light-dark*.

The system of antonym pairs in Uzbek

Uzbek antonymy exhibits both universal semantic patterns and language-specific structural features. Common canonical-like pairs parallel English counterparts on core dimensions: *issiq-sovuq* (hot-cold), *yaxshi-yomon* (good-bad), *katta-kichik* (big-small), *tez-sekin* (fast-slow), *baland-past* (high-low), and *tirik-o'lik* (alive-dead). These pairs function as strongly conventionalized opposites in everyday discourse, proverbs, and literary texts.

Structurally, Uzbek distinguishes different-root antonyms (*katta-kichik*, *kirmoq-chiqmoq*) from same-root (derivational) antonyms formed primarily by means of affirmative and negative affixes: *-li* versus *-siz*, the prefix *be-*, and *no-* (*baxtli-baxtsiz* “happy-unhappy,” *aqlli-beaql* or *aqlsiz* “wise-foolish,” *ma'lum-noma'lum* “known-unknown”). Not every affixed pair qualifies as a true antonym; only those that create independent lexical meanings with corresponding synonyms or equivalents in other languages are recognized as such.

Cultural and ethical dimensions further shape the system. Pairs such as *halol-harom* (permitted/lawful-forbidden) carry strong moral and religious connotations rooted in Islamic ethics and appear with high frequency and symbolic weight in both spoken and written Uzbek. Gradable series often include intermediate terms (*sovuq-salqin-issiq-jazirama*), reflecting a scalar organization comparable to English. Contextual and grammatical antonyms (negation of verbs, situational oppositions) expand the system beyond fixed lexical pairs. Although systematic experimental studies of canonicity comparable to those conducted for English remain limited in Uzbek linguistics, frequency of use in proverbs, folklore, and everyday speech, together with native-speaker intuition, strongly suggests that the pairs listed above occupy a canonical status analogous to their English counterparts.

Comparative analysis

Both languages exhibit a core of canonical pairs organized around universal experiential dimensions (temperature, size, evaluation, existence, speed). This convergence supports the cognitive view that certain oppositions are privileged because of their centrality to human perception and social life.

Differences arise primarily in morphological realization and cultural loading. English favors root-distinct pairs for its most canonical antonyms and employs prefixes mainly for secondary or non-canonical formations. Uzbek productively generates same-root antonyms through agglutination, making derivational opposition a more central structural resource. Consequently, the boundary between canonical and non-canonical pairs may be influenced by morphological transparency in Uzbek to a greater degree than in English. Culturally specific pairs further differentiate the systems. While English possesses culturally resonant oppositions (for example, certain moral or social evaluations), Uzbek elevates pairs such as *halol-harom* and metaphorically extended *oq-qora* (white-black) to a level of conventionalization and symbolic importance that exceeds simple semantic contrast. Non-canonical pairs in both languages arise through contextual specialization, yet Uzbek's richer inventory of intermediate scalar terms and derivational options may generate a larger set of intermediate canonicity degrees.

Overall, the distinction between canonical and non-canonical antonymy proves cross-linguistically robust, while the structural means of encoding opposition and the cultural weighting of particular pairs remain language-specific.

Conclusion

The system of canonical and non-canonical antonym pairs in English and Uzbek reveals both shared cognitive principles and typological divergence. Canonical pairs in both languages cluster around basic semantic dimensions and display strong conventionalization, frequent co-occurrence, and high elicitation reliability. Non-canonical pairs remain more context-sensitive and less entrenched. English realizes canonicity predominantly through distinct lexical roots, whereas Uzbek exploits its agglutinative morphology to create productive same-root oppositions and integrates culturally salient ethical pairs into the core inventory.

These findings underscore the value of combining usage-based criteria of canonicity with typological and cultural analysis. Further experimental elicitation and corpus studies of Uzbek would refine the continuum of canonicity and strengthen the comparative picture. The present synthesis demonstrates that antonym canonicity is a universal organizational principle realized through language-particular structural and cultural resources.

References:

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