

Words of hardness and softness: towards lexical typology¹

abstract category: oral

theme session: Lexical typology of qualitative concepts

This paper presents an on-going study of the semantic domain of softness/hardness. At present we have data on eight languages: Russian, French, Chinese, Korean, and four Uralic languages (Finnish, Mordvinian, Komi and Nenets).

The qualities in this semantic domain are patientive, i.e., an object can only be described as hard or soft after interaction with the subject, so for our study we used a typological questionnaire containing a list of situations in which hardness/softness of an object is experienced (touching, chewing, contact with clothes or furniture, etc.)

In our study lexical systems are classified as rich, poor, or average according to the number of words discovered in the semantic domain in question (after [Maisak, Rakhilina eds. 2007]). **Poor systems** contain a single pair of antonyms (Komi *choryd* 'hard' vs *n'ebyd* 'soft'). **Average systems**, containing a total of three words, with synonyms for either 'hard' (Russian *tv'ordyj* and *zhestkij*, 'hard', vs. *m'agkij* 'soft') or 'soft' (French *dur* 'hard' vs. *mou* and *moelleux*, 'soft'), reveal semantic distinctions which fall into two categories:

1) **perceptive** – immanent vs. experiential

The perceptive parameter distinguishes between qualities which are either immanent or dependent on the perception of a subject. For example, in Russian *tverdyj* describes the ability to resist deformation, and may imply contact of the object with instruments or quasi-instruments (hands), while *žestkij* describes the sensation of hardness which is impressed on a subject, e.g. through chewing, using furniture, wearing clothes etc, cf. the notion of experiential adjectives in [Kustova 2004].

2) **attitudinal** – desirable vs. undesirable

The attitudinal parameter distinguishes between qualities which a subject considers desirable or undesirable. For example, French system contains two terms for 'soft': *moelleux*, meaning softness as pleasant, comfortable or otherwise positive, such as soft (fresh) bread, soft (comfortable) cushions; while *mou* tends to have negative connotations, such as soft (overcooked) potatoes etc.

Based on the distinctions found in "average" systems, we can hypothesize the existence of systems with four terms, either perceptive (e.g., 'objective hardness' vs. 'experienced hardness' or 'objective softness' vs. 'experienced softness') and/or attitudinal (e.g., 'desirable hardness' vs. 'undesirable hardness' or 'desirable softness' vs. 'undesirable softness').

Our study also revealed **rich systems** containing more subtle distinctions. Korean, the richest system we have encountered in our study, has three words for 'hard' and seven for 'soft'. It uses both the perceptive and attitudinal oppositions and also introduces additional distinctions: hard shell (shellfish) vs. solid body (stone); visual vs. tactile perception of softness; the result of interaction with an object (e.g., rebounding (pillow) vs. penetrating (jelly)), etc. These distinctions also show cross-linguistic consistency.

The metaphoric meanings of 'soft' and 'hard' are derived in a typologically consistent way, and maintain the core semantic distinctions organizing the perceptive and attitudinal systems, e.g. French *mou* 'soft (undesired)' → *un élève mou* 'a dull, slack student'.

A further interesting feature of the adjectives under consideration is their ability in some languages to function as intensifiers (e.g. English *hard drinker*), which can be regarded as the first step towards grammaticalization, see [Rakhilina ed. 2010]. Note also that grammaticalization is a fairly rare discussed phenomenon for adjectives, cf. [Heine, Kuteva 2002].

References

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¹ This work is supported by Russian Foundation for Basic Research, grant 13-06-00884.