

Defining Gradonymy: From A Lexical-Semantic Relation to A Cross-Linguistic Syntactic Category

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Abstract: The article substantiates a shift from the traditional view of gradonymy as a lexical-semantic relation to its interpretation as a cross-linguistic syntactic category shared by English and Uzbek. Using four diagnostic criteria — a common scale, unidirectional entailment, non-substitutability and non-polarity — gradonymic relations are compared at the levels of the word form, the word, the phrase, the phraseological unit and the sentence. The study shows that gradonymy operates irrespective of the size of the unit, but is realized mainly analytically in English and through affixal, reduplicative and phraseological means in Uzbek.

Keywords: Gradonymy, gradonymic relations, scale of gradation, syntactic category, degree category, intensifiers, reduplication, phraseological unit, comparative typology, English and Uzbek.

Introduction: Speakers rarely describe the world in strictly binary terms. Temperature, size, emotion, evaluation and even politeness are perceived as continua, and every language develops means of locating a quality at a particular point of such a continuum. In semantics this phenomenon has been studied under the headings of gradability, grading and degree. E. Sapir's classic essay on grading showed that comparison is logically prior to the apparently absolute meaning of words such as big or many (Sapir, 1944), while D. Bolinger's monograph on degree words demonstrated that intensifiers form a structured system of their own rather than a random list of adverbs (Bolinger, 1972). In structural lexicology the relation between words that denote successive points of one scale — cold — cool — warm — hot, sovuq — salqin — iliq — issiq — came to be described as a distinct paradigmatic relation, alongside synonymy, antonymy and hyponymy (Lyons, 1977; Cruse, 1986). In the Uzbek tradition this relation is known as graduonimiya (darajalanish) and is treated as one of the basic systemic relations of the lexicon (Ne'matov & Rasulov,

1995).

This lexical framing, however, has become too narrow for the facts it is meant to describe. The author's earlier studies have shown that the same scalar ordering is produced by adjectival phrases built around degree adverbs and the suffix -roq (Islomova, 2026c), by phraseological units such as a little worried — deeply concerned — sick with worry (Islomova, 2026a), and by complex combinations of degree, intensity and evaluation in idioms (Islomova, 2026b). Pragmatic research points in the same direction: the directness of requests and the strength of expressions of gratitude are also arranged along ordered scales (Islomova, 2025c; Islomova, 2025d). If gradonymic relations hold between phrases, idioms and utterances, then a definition that limits gradonymy to single words cannot account for a large part of the evidence.

The aim of the present article is therefore to redefine gradonymy so that it covers units of any rank and can serve as the basis of a cross-linguistic comparison of English and Uzbek. The following tasks are set: (1) to review the main existing definitions and identify the

features they share; (2) to turn these features into explicit diagnostic criteria; (3) to verify the criteria on English and Uzbek material at five levels of language structure; and (4) to formulate a working definition of gradonymy as a semantic-syntactic category with language-specific means of realization.

TOPICALITY OF THE THEME AND THE CURRENT STATE OF THE PROBLEM

The topicality of the study is determined, first, by the growing practical demand for contrastive descriptions of English and Uzbek. Since the presidential decree PQ-1875 of 10 December 2012 on improving the system of foreign-language learning, English has been taught from the first grade, and research has shown that early bilingualism in Uzbekistan brings both cognitive benefits and risks of negative transfer (Islomova, 2025b). Structural differences between the analytic English system and the agglutinative Uzbek one are a documented source of interference in both directions: Uzbek learners carry SOV word order into English, while young bilinguals simplify Uzbek morphology under the influence of English (Islomova, 2025a). Gradation is one of the areas in which such mismatches are especially visible, because the two languages encode degree with formally very different means.

Second, the theoretical description of gradation is divided among several traditions that rarely meet. Lexical semantics treats gradonyms as members of lexical series and focuses on gradable antonyms and their scales (Lyons, 1977; Cruse, 1986; Cruse, 2004). Formal semantics models gradable adjectives through scale structure — open versus closed scales, relative versus absolute standards — and explains why completely full is natural while completely tall is not (Kennedy & McNally, 2005); cognitive linguistics connects these properties with boundedness (Paradis, 2001) and with the conceptual metaphors through which intensity is understood as heat, pressure or height (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Grammatical descriptions of English, in turn, present degrees of comparison as a morphological category of the adjective and intensifiers as a subclass of adverbs (Quirk et al., 1985; Iriskulov, 2006; Kaushanskaya et al., 2008; Rayevska, 2009; Maksumov, 2016), while contrastive coursebooks give the most systematic account of comparison and intensification in Uzbek (Alimova & Rasulov, 2022).

What is missing is a single notion that connects these descriptions. The degree category of grammar, the lexical gradonymic series and the scalar organization of phraseology are usually discussed separately, although they express the same semantic relation. The author's previous work has prepared the ground for such a synthesis: five mechanisms of gradation were identified in 200 English and 200 Uzbek phraseological units (Islomova, 2026a), degree, intensity and evaluation were distinguished as three dimensions of phraseological scales (Islomova, 2026b), and the adjectival phrase was shown to contain a modifier slot and a suffixal degree slot common to both languages (Islomova, 2026c). The present article generalizes these results and asks what gradonymy must be if all of them are to count as instances of it.

METHODOLOGY

Material. The study draws on gradonymic series in English and Uzbek collected from reference grammars (Quirk et al., 1985; Iriskulov, 2006; Kaushanskaya et al., 2008; Maksumov, 2016; Alimova & Rasulov, 2022), phraseological dictionaries (Rahmatullayev, 1966; Moon, 1998), and the material of the author's earlier studies: the corpus of 200 English and 200 Uzbek phraseological units (Islomova, 2026a), adjectival phrases from the semantic fields of dimension, colour, temperature and evaluation (Islomova, 2026c), and request and gratitude formulas recorded in everyday and classroom communication (Islomova, 2025c; Islomova, 2025d).

Methods. Definitional analysis, componential analysis, the comparative-typological method following the procedure of M. Alimova and Z. Rasulov (2022), and transformational tests of substitution and entailment were applied.

Procedure. The research was carried out in three stages. At the definitional stage, the features common to existing definitions of gradonymy were extracted. At the criterial stage, these features were reformulated as diagnostic tests that can be applied to any pair of units irrespective of their size. At the verification stage, the tests were applied to English and Uzbek units at five levels — word form, word, phrase, phraseological unit and sentence (utterance). A pair of units was recognized as gradonymic only if it passed all tests. The tests are as follows.

Test 1 — common scale. Both units must measure the same dimension, which is shown by the corrective frame X, in fact Y / X, aslida Y: cold, in fact freezing is natural, whereas cold, in fact red is anomalous.

Test 2 — unidirectional entailment. The stronger unit entails the weaker one, but not vice versa: The water is boiling entails The water is hot; Suv qaynoq entails Suv issiq; the reverse inferences do not hold.

Test 3 — ordered reinforcement. The frame X, even Y / X, hatto Y is acceptable only when Y is higher on the scale: warm, even hot and iliq, hatto issiq are natural; hot, even warm and issiq, hatto iliq are not.

Test 4 — non-substitutability. Replacing one unit with the other changes the truth conditions of the sentence, which distinguishes gradonyms from synonyms.

Test 5 — non-polarity. The units occupy successive points of one scale rather than its opposite poles; a series typically admits a middle term (lukewarm, iliq), which distinguishes gradonyms from contrary antonyms.

ANALYSIS OF THE RESULTS OBTAINED

1. The definitional stage: what existing definitions share

Although the existing definitions differ in terminology, they converge on four features. Gradonyms (a) express one and the same property, (b) express it to different degrees, (c) are ordered relative to one another, and (d) are neither interchangeable like synonyms nor polar like antonyms (Lyons, 1977; Cruse, 1986; Ne'matov & Rasulov, 1995; Alimova & Rasulov, 2022). Notably, none of these four features refers to the word as such. The restriction of gradonymy to the lexicon is not a consequence of its definition but a historical consequence of where it was first described. This observation is the starting point for the proposed redefinition: if the definitional features do not depend on the size of the unit, the category can, in principle, be extended to any unit that satisfies them.

2. The lexical level

At the lexical level both languages possess well-developed gradonymic series, and all five tests are passed. Table 1 gives examples from four semantic fields.

Table 1

Lexical gradonymic series in English and Uzbek

Semantic field	English series	Uzbek series
Temperature	cold – cool – lukewarm – warm – hot – boiling	sovuq – salqin – iliq – issiq – qaynoq
Size	tiny – small – medium – big – huge – enormous	mitti – kichik – o'rta – katta – ulkan – bahaybat
Evaluation	poor – fair – good – excellent – outstanding	yomon – o'rtacha – yaxshi – a'lo – beqiyos
Emotion	annoyed – angry – furious	norozi – jahldor – g'azabnok

The two languages coincide in the overall architecture of these series — a neutral middle term, a weaker and a stronger zone, and lexically suppletive extreme members (enormous, bahaybat). The differences lie in density: in some fields English has more lexicalized steps (cool and lukewarm correspond to the single salqin/ilq zone), whereas in others Uzbek fills the gaps not with separate words but with morphological and phraseological means, as the following levels show.

3. The level of the word form

The decisive argument against a purely lexical

definition comes from morphology. In Uzbek, one adjectival stem yields a complete gradonymic series through affixes and reduplication: qizg'ish (reddish) – qizil (red) – qizilroq (redder) – eng qizil (the reddest) – qip-qizil (deep red). The suffixes -(i)sh and -mtir mark a weakened degree (oqish, ko'kimtir), -roq marks the comparative regardless of the weight of the stem, the particle eng forms the superlative analytically, and partial reduplication with a linking consonant (kap-katta, yam-yashil, yap-yangi) expresses an emphatic, maximal degree (Alimova & Rasulov, 2022; Islomova, 2026c). Each of these forms passes Tests 1–5 with

respect to the others: qip-qizil entails qizil, qizil, hatto qip-qizil is natural, and the forms are not interchangeable.

English possesses a shorter morphological series: reddish – red – redder – reddest, with a length-conditioned split between synthetic (smaller) and analytic (more beautiful) comparison (Kaushanskaya et al., 2008). It has no morphological counterpart to

Uzbek reduplication, so the maximal degree must be rendered lexically (huge, brilliant green) or periphrastically; this asymmetry was identified as the most translation-resistant point of the whole domain (Islomova, 2026c). The fact that a single lexeme can enter into gradonymic relations with its own word forms shows that the relation holds between grammatical units, not merely between dictionary entries.

Table 2

Morphological gradonymic series of one stem

Degree step	English	Uzbek
Weakened	reddish	qizg'ish, ko'kimtir
Neutral	red	qizil
Comparative	redder	qizilroq
Superlative	(the) reddest	eng qizil
Emphatic / maximal	— (deep red, bright red)	qip-qizil

4. The level of the phrase

In the adjectival phrase gradation is located in a dedicated syntactic position. Both English and Uzbek order degree adverbs along a fixed intensity cline — slightly – fairly – rather – quite – very – extremely – absolutely and birmuncha – ancha – ancha-muncha – juda – nihoyatda – behad – mutlaqo — and place them in the specifier slot before the head adjective (Maksumov, 2016; Islomova, 2026c). The resulting phrases rather small – very small – extremely small and birmuncha kichik – juda kichik – behad kichik pass all five tests, yet the gradonymic contrast is carried not by any single word but by the phrase as a whole: the head is constant, and the degree value is a property of the modifier–head construction.

The same holds for the verb phrase. English grades verbs both lexically (like – love – adore; dislike – hate – loathe) and through degree adverbs (slightly annoy – seriously annoy). Uzbek combines adverbial modification (yoqtirmoq – juda yoqtirmoq), lexical change (yoqtirmoq – sevmoq) and set phrases (jonidan ortiq sevmoq). Uzbek verbal gradation also makes use of repetition, as in yig'lab-yig'lab charchamoq, where English prefers coordination or modifier stacking (cried and cried, very, very tired) (Islomova, 2026a). At the phrasal level, therefore, gradonymy is clearly a

syntactic relation: it is encoded by a combination of positions — a modifier slot and a degree slot — that both languages share (Islomova, 2026c).

5. The level of the phraseological unit

Phraseology adds a further type of gradonymic carrier: the idiom, whose degree value is not compositional. In the series a little worried – deeply concerned – sick with worry and xavotir olmoq – qattiq xavotir olmoq – ich-etini yemoq the highest step is expressed by a figurative unit that contains no explicit intensifier at all, and yet it passes Tests 1–3: sick with worry entails worried, and worried, even sick with worry is natural. Five mechanisms producing such scales were identified in the earlier study — scalar lexical substitution, metaphorical intensification, syntactic amplification, evaluative scaling and culturally grounded conceptual gradation (Islomova, 2026a). It was further shown that phraseological scales are multidimensional: a single idiom may simultaneously encode degree, intensity and a positive or negative evaluation (Islomova, 2026b). For example, boiling with anger and g'azabdan yonmoq both occupy a high point on the anger scale through the conceptual metaphor of heat (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), but the Uzbek series relies more heavily on culturally specific bodily imagery (ich-etini yemoq, dili vayron bo'lmoq).

6. The level of the sentence and utterance

Finally, gradonymic ordering is found between whole utterances. Evaluative utterances form a scale — It’s not bad — It’s good — It’s excellent; Yomon emas — Yaxshi — Zo’r — in which the stronger utterance entails the weaker one. In pragmatics, request strategies are ordered by degree of directness: Kitobni ber (Give me the book) — Kitobni berib yuborarmidingiz? (Could you give me the book?) — Ana shu kitobni o’qisam yaxshi bo’lardi (I’d love to read that book) (Islomova, 2025c). Expressions of gratitude are similarly graded: thank you — thank you very much — I can’t thank you enough in English and rahmat — katta rahmat — ming rahmat in Uzbek, where the more elaborate forms are preferred in addressing elders (Islomova, 2025d).

At this level the tests require one adjustment. For pragmatic scales, truth-conditional entailment (Test 2) is replaced by an increase in pragmatic force — the

degree of politeness or of imposition — while the remaining tests apply unchanged: Thank you, in fact thank you very much is natural, and the formulas are not interchangeable in a given social situation. Utterance-level gradonymy should therefore be recognized as a distinct, pragmatically defined subtype. Its practical relevance is confirmed by learner data: Uzbek learners of English tend to over-use please and thank you, transferring the context-dependent Uzbek scale of politeness to a language in which the same markers are formulaic (Islomova, 2025d).

7. Synthesis: gradonymy as a cross-linguistic syntactic category

The results of verification are summarized in Table 3. At every level examined, units were found that satisfy all diagnostic criteria; what changes from level to level is the formal carrier of the degree value, not the relation itself.

Table 3
Levels of gradonymic relations in English and Uzbek

Level	Carrier of degree	English means	Uzbek means
Word form	affix, particle, reduplication	-er/-est, more/most	-(i)sh, -mtir, -roq, eng, qip-qizil
Word	lexeme	cool – warm – hot	salqin – iliq – issiq
Phrase	modifier + head	rather / very / extremely small	birmuncha / juda / behad kichik
Phraseological unit	idiom, set phrase	sick with worry, boiling with anger	ich-etini yemoq, g’azabdan yonmoq
Utterance	speech-act strategy	Give me... / Could you...?	Ber... / Berib yuborarmidingiz?

Three conclusions follow from this synthesis. First, gradonymy is rank-independent: the defining features hold equally for word forms, words, phrases, idioms and utterances, so restricting the category to the lexicon is unjustified. Second, gradonymy is positionally structured: at the phrasal level it is realized through syntactic positions — an intensifier slot and a degree slot — which both languages share (Islomova, 2026c); in this sense it is a syntactic and not only a lexical phenomenon. Third, gradonymy is typologically universal but differently distributed: English concentrates degree marking in analytic modifiers and lexical suppletion, whereas Uzbek distributes it across affixes, the particle eng, reduplication, repetition and

culturally grounded idioms (Islomova, 2026a; Islomova, 2026c).

On this basis the following working definition is proposed. Gradonymy is a paradigmatic semantic-syntactic relation between two or more linguistic units of any rank — word form, word, phrase, phraseological unit or utterance — that denote successive, ordered values of one and the same scalar property, are linked by unidirectional entailment (or, at the utterance level, by an increase in pragmatic force), and cannot be substituted for one another without changing the degree meaning. As a cross-linguistic category, gradonymy is defined by its semantic invariant and its syntactic positions, while the means of filling those

positions are language-specific.

The redefinition has direct applied consequences. For translation, it predicts that equivalence must be sought at the level of the degree value rather than the unit: qip-qizil corresponds not to a word but to a phrase (deep red), and ich-etini yemoq to an idiom of comparable strength. For teaching, it explains typical transfer errors — the under-use of English degree adverbs by learners accustomed to the compact -roq, and the over-use of intensifiers to compensate for untranslatable reduplication (Islomova, 2026c) — which parallel the broader L1-transfer effects observed among Uzbek learners of English (Islomova, 2025a; Islomova, 2025b).

CONCLUSION

The study has shown that the defining features of gradonymy — a common scale, ordering, non-substitutability and non-polarity — do not depend on the size of the linguistic unit. When these features are turned into diagnostic tests and applied to English and Uzbek, gradonymic relations are found at the levels of the word form, the word, the phrase, the phraseological unit and the utterance. Gradonymy should therefore be redefined from a purely lexical-semantic relation into a rank-independent semantic-syntactic category whose phrasal realization rests on positions shared by both languages: a modifier (intensifier) slot and a degree slot.

At the same time, the category is realized through typologically different means. English relies mainly on analytic modifiers, a length-conditioned synthetic/analytic split in comparison and lexical suppletion, while Uzbek combines the uniform suffix -roq, diminishing suffixes, the particle eng, a rich paradigm of intensifiers, reduplication, repetition and culturally grounded idioms. The proposed definition and diagnostic tests provide a unified framework for the dissertation research on gradonymic relations in the syntactic units of English and Uzbek. Further stages of the research will apply this framework to the verb phrase and the simple sentence on corpus material and will quantify the distribution of gradonymic means in both languages.

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