

Original Paper

A Corpus-based Study on the Diachronic Change of Negative Emotive Intensifier in English--A Case Study of *Dead*

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Abstract

In the English teaching, vocabulary learning has always been a focus. This study selected Brown corpus, Frown corpus and Crown corpus as corpus tools, employed quantitative and qualitative research methods, and took negative emotive intensifier dead as an example. The diachronic changes of this word in the past 60 years are analyzed from the perspectives of frequency, distribution, collocation and semantic prosody. The results indicate that the frequency, distribution, collocation and semantic prosody of dead have not changed significantly. However, dead collocating with verbs and adjectives used to play a positive reinforcement role shows an increasing trend.

Keywords

negative emotive intensifier, dead, diachronic study

1. Introduction

There is a certain type adverbs in English used to show the emphasis, which is called stress word. Stress word is further divided into intensifier and downtoner. In daily communication, speakers always use stress word to strengthen their tone of voice, express their attitude towards someone or something. For example, the tone of sentence b is stronger than that of sentence a in the first group. This is because that the intensifier *so* strength the tone of sentence b. As the same, speakers often use weak words to abate his/her tone. In the second group, the downtoner *somewhat* made the tone of sentence b weaker than that of sentence a.

1) a: You are cute.

b: You are *so* cute.

2) a: The weather is colder than I expected.

b: The weather is *somewhat* colder than I expected.

This thesis tends to focus on a specific category intensifiers which originally have negative meanings

but later possess a function of intensifying what they modify, such as *terribly*, *awfully* and *desperately* in the constructions *terribly nice*, *awfully good* and *desperately important*. As known from present studies scholars usually discuss them as a part of intensifiers rather than consider them as an independent category. Diachronically, although some studies have been carried out to sketch the evolution of one or two specific NEIs (negative emotive intensifiers), little studies have been done on the historical change of NEIs as a whole, not to mention their evolution characteristics. However “intensification is a direct indication of a speaker’s desire to use and exploit the expression of hyperbole. A diachronic examination of intensification can reveal what strategies speakers used in the past in order to achieve this goal, and suggest how these strategies came eventually to shape this part of the language” (Partington). In other words, a diachronic study can help to better understand why as well as how NEIs have shaped over time.

Thus, this thesis aims to figure out how NEIs have changed through time. Through the combination of quantitative and qualitative research methods, this thesis extracts NEIs from Corpus of Brown (1961), Frown (1992) and Crown (2021), providing an in-depth analysis to carry out the diachronic study of NEIs targeting at exploring the characteristics of the change.

The significance of the research can be stated as follows. Theoretically speaking, this thesis aims to uncover the diachronic evolution of NEIs in English which has advantages to use for reference for the evolution law of NEIs as well as intensifying functions in English. Practically speaking, from the perspective of lexicography, this thesis provides certain reference significance in compiling dictionaries and using vocabulary. More over from the perspective of translation this thesis analyses the semantic meaning of NEIs which is useful for practices of translation.

2. Literature Review

Synchronically, previous western linguists mainly focus on NEIs’ collocations and meanings. Kennedy (2003), based on the BNC corpus, investigates grammatical and semantic characteristics of collocates of three NEIs: *terribly*, *badly* and *severely*. Manea (2013) sketchily deals with semantic features, word formation, syntactic features, stylistic features and usage of *terribly* and *awfully*. Cosea (2015) tries to figure out semantic and syntactic traits of *unlikely*, *bitterly*, and *dreadfully* in English and Romanian, concluding that they are characteristically associated with negative words and tend to be used prenominal.

Other researches, on the other hand, concentrate on NEIs’ register or sociolinguistic functions. Biber et al. (1999:564) 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. Rossette (2014) analyzes the degree expression of one collocation, *insanely great* in a corpus of oral English, detecting that *insanely* gets semantic bleaching.

Scholars at home contribute a lot to investigate NEIs. Zhang Jinhai (2014:80), relying on the frequency of NEIs in COCA, evaluates the semantic prosody of those NEIs expressing sadness, anger, disgust and

fear emotions. 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*. Liu Fen and 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.

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 (2017) diagnoses the co-occurrence of *swipe*, concluding that this phenomenon intersects with grammaticalization and renewal. Secondly, some scholars try to inspect the historical change of NEIs from other cognitive perspectives. For instance, Traugott (1995:44) 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 (1993:183-184), 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”.

In a nutshell, scholars at home and abroad have contributed to the study of NEIs. However, there still exist some limitations that should be shed light on. 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 is rare.

3. Methodology

3.1 Analytical Framework

The diachronic semantic change of NEIs is the core of this thesis. However, semantic meanings of NEIs cannot be inferred in isolation. According to Firth (1957:192), meanings are contextualized and should be examined in contexts which cannot be separated. Linguists may “deal with meanings at various levels, sometimes in a descending order, beginning with social context and proceeding through syntax and vocabulary to phonology and even phonetics, and at other times in the opposite order”. Meanings of NEIs cannot be explored alone but should be investigated in phrases in which NEIs lie in. Meanings and forms of NEIs are essential when analyzing the characteristics of NEIs.

Thus, guided by the Firthian theory, this thesis will trace the diachronic semantic change of NEIs from collocational levels. The diachronic change of NEIs in terms of frequency, distribution, collocate and semantic prosody.

3.2 Research Design

3.2.1 Research Questions

- 1) How does Negative Emotive Intensifier *dead* in English change over time?
- 2) What are the characteristics of the diachronic change?

3.2.2 Data Collection

The data of this thesis is selected from the Brown (1961), Frown (1992) and Crown (2021). The Browne family corpus is one of the most prominent examples of century-old corpora. This study select Brown (1961) built by Francis and Kučera in 1964, Frown corpus in 1992, Crown (2021) built by Dr. Jiajin Xu and his students at Beijing Foreign Studies University in 2022. The reason why these corpora can be used in comparison is that they all adopt the same sampling scheme, that is, the corpus includes 500 texts, each of which has 2000 words, and is divided into 15 genres and 4 genres. Therefore, the databases are highly compatible and comparable. These data goes through nearly 60 years, which can manifest people's usage changes from the past to now.

3.2.3 Analysis Process

This thesis employed quantitative and qualitative research methods, and took negative emotive intensifier *dead* as an example. The diachronic changes of this word in the past 60 years are analyzed from the perspectives of word frequency, distribution, collocation and semantic prosody. In the process of data analysis, researcher will use Excel and Chi-square calculator to calculate the frequency normalization and Chi-square value.

4. Data Analysis

4.1 Frequency

Frequency refers to the number of occurrences of a certain word or phrase in every million words in corpus, which is one of the most important concepts in corpus linguistics. However, the raw frequency of a certain word in the corpus cannot produce a comparison effect, so it cannot be used to show in which corpus it is used more frequently. Because the total number of words in each corpus is different, researchers must make use of the frequency normalization of the selected words for comparison. This part mainly analyzes the frequency normalization of *dead* in the three corpora, then explains the reasons for the diachronic changes in the usage frequency of it. Through the comparison of the frequency normalization, we can clearly see the changes of usage frequency. In order to make data intuitive and persuasive, researcher imports the raw frequency of *dead* and the total number of words in the corpus from the three corpora into Excel, and calculates the frequency normalization by using the formula. In addition to compare the frequency normalization of selected word, following the principle of statistics, we should also test whether there is significant difference between the data involved in the

comparison. Therefore, this section also uses the Chi-square calculator for frequency variance. Frequency normalization and Chi-square text are shown in Table 1&2:

Table 1. Frequency Normalization of *Dead* in Brown, Frown and Crown

Corpus	Size of corpus	Freq in corpus	Norm.frequency
Brown(1960s)	1148454	173	0.0151%
Frown(1990s)	1154283	193	0.0167%
Crown(2020s)	1000000	200	0.0200%

Table 2. Chi-square Value of *Dead* in Brown, Frown and Crown

Corpus	Compared corpus	Chi-square	sig.
Brown	Frown	-0.8926	0.344
	Crown	-7.2221	0.007**
Frown	Crown	-2.9825	0.084

Diachronically, the usage frequency of *dead* has a increasing trend. The data in Table 1 show that the usage frequency of *dead* is the highest in the Crown corpus, frequency normalization is 0.0200%. On the other hand, the data in Table 2 show that the usage frequency of *dead* is significantly different between Brown corpus and Crown corpus ($p < 0.05$), with the development of nearly 60 years, the usage registers of *dead* have increased, and people's understanding of the semantic meaning of *dead* is no longer limited to its negative meaning, the function of intensive words is increasingly reflected.

4.2 Distribution

"Register refers to a variety of language produced by people in actual language activities out of the need of communication, or because of their different careers and interests, as well as the different situations, objects, places and topics of their discourse, which is reflected in different styles and phrasal styles in the language" (Yang, 2002). The distribution information of *dead* indicates in which category *dead* is used most frequently, which guides foreign language learners to accurately use the word in the appropriate register.

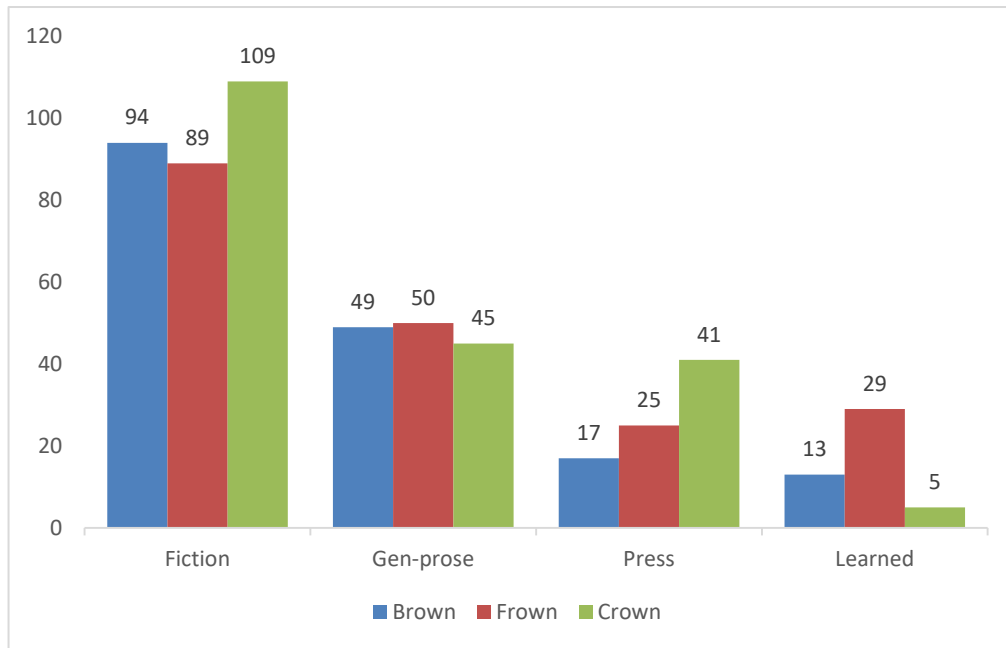


Figure 1. Distribution of *Dead* in Brown, Frown and Crown

Diachronically, the distribution of *dead* in each category has little difference. Figure 1 shows that *dead* is used most frequently in fiction texts and least frequently in academic texts. In particular, it is worth noting that in Crown corpus, the usage frequency of *dead* in academic texts is the lowest. There is a significant difference compared with the data of other two corpora. The reason is that academic writing is more and more standardized in the use of semantics, and *dead* is relatively informal and non-academic, so the frequency of use in academic fields is gradually decreasing.

4.3 Collocation

Firth (1957) pointed out: "Collocation is the partnership between words. In the concordance of corpus, the sum of the number of words centered around the node words is the span, and the words appearing in each position within the span are the collocation words of the node words." Hong Ling kai (2010) believes that collocations refer to the expression forms of words that are often used together, and they are the most active part of corpus-based vocabulary studies. This part is mainly arranged in accordance with log-likelihood value, with the left and right span 3 and the minimum co-occurrence frequency 4, so as to analyze the collocation difference of "*dead*" in different corpora.

Table 3. Collocation Word List of *Dead*

Rank	Collocation word list in Brown		Collocation word list in Frown		Collocation word list in Crown	
	Collocation word	Log- likelihood	Collocation word	Log- likelihood	Collocation word	Log- likelihood
1	was	49.398	person	33.441	man	66.569
2	man	29.244	soldiers	32.338	left	27.107
3	living	24.001	was	26.208	end	23.246
4	.	20.457	now	25.437	he	21.902
5	he	19.890	bodies	25.320	shot	16.968
6	book	17.382	husband	18.104	was	15.894
7	him	16.632	everyone	17.324	dead	15.138
8	three	8.988	.	14.235	street	14.593
9	before	5.627	man	13.763	found	14.348
10	who	4.968	're	13.246	him	13.202

Diachronically, there is no significant difference in the collocation of *dead* in the three corpora. *Dead* has three parts of speech: adjective, noun and adverb. It can be seen from Table 3 that *dead* is used as an adjective the most frequently in the three corpora. *Dead* as an adjective can be used to modify a noun. It can also be used with a verb to form an indicative structure. However, Table 3 shows that the co-occurrence words of *dead* in Frown corpus are more specific than those in Brown corpus, including *soldiers*, *bodies* and *husband*. In addition to the collocation of *dead* with the definite article "the" to indicate a class of people, *dead* as a noun also forms a noun phrase with other words, which can be found in the three corpora. For example: *dead reckoning*, *the dead of last night*, *in the dead of winter*, *working dead* and so on. In addition, in Crown corpus, *dead* used as an object complement increases. For example:

- 1) A hidden rifleman had blown him off his horse and **left** him for *dead*.
- 2) Ruby **found** Bertha *dead* in her cage Saturday morning.
- 3) Half the town **wanted** him *dead*.

However, in collocation with a minimum co-occurrence frequency of 4, there is no use of *dead* as a positive intensifier in the three corpora. After the manual analysis, the author found that the function of positive intensifier is reflected when *dead* is used as adverb to match verbs and adjectives, the meaning of *dead* is equal to completely, directly and totally. In addition, this usage has an increasing trend in the three corpora, which is shown in the table below.

Table 4. Frequency Comparison for *Dead* Used as a Positive Intensifier

	Brown	Frown	Crown
Occurrence	2	2	5
Instance			<i>dead</i> wrong
	<i>dead</i> drunk	<i>dead</i> wrong	<i>dead</i> white eyes
	<i>dead</i> tired	<i>dead</i> asleep	going <i>dead</i> away
			stopped <i>dead</i>
			<i>dead</i> drunk

4.4 Semantic prosody

"Semantic prosody is a meaning used primarily to express the attitude of the writer or speaker (Louw)." The semantic prosody formed by word collocation can be divided into negative, neutral and positive. Table 3 shows that the common noun collocation of *dead* is almost all specific nouns, such as man, person, soliders, etc., which means not alive. At this time, *dead* shows negative semantic prosody. On the other hand, *dead* is also matched with some location words and time words, which means complete end of a certain moment, For example, the dead of the winter. At this time, *dead* reflects neutral semantic prosody. Finally, *dead* is also used as an adverb with some verbs and adjectives, whose meaning is precise, directly and completely. At this point, *dead*, as an intensifier, reflects a positive semantic prosody. To sum up, when *dead* is used as an adjective and noun, it mostly shows negative semantic prosody, while when it is used as an adverb, it shows neutral or positive semantic prosody.

5. Conclusion and Implication

Through quantitative and qualitative analysis, the research results show that, compared with Brown corpus 60 years ago, the use frequency of *dead* in Crown corpus has increased significantly. With the standardization of academic writing, the use frequency of *dead* in academic texts in Crown corpus has decreased significantly. From the perspective of collocation and semantic prosody, it is most common for *dead* to be used as an adjective and noun, which is usually used with a specific noun to indicate a negative semantic prosody. On the other hand, the research data show that *dead* used as an adverb matching with adjectives and verbs to play a positive reinforcement role has increased in the Crown corpus due to the influence of the subjectification. To sum up, diachronically, the frequency, distribution, collocation and semantic prosody of *dead* have not changed significantly, but the positive reinforcement effect of *dead* as an adverb is increasing.

Through the diachronic research of *dead* based on Brown, Frown and Crown corpora, some enlightenment for foreign language learners and English teachers in learning and teaching are as follows:

1. English teachers should combine corpus tools with traditional teaching methods, so as to make up for

the shortcomings of traditional teaching and make students realize the collocation of words and the context of use.

2. English teacher should use corpus resources to enhance students' awareness of vocabulary culture. In the lesson preparation stage, teachers can use corpus tools to check the special cultural meanings of words in advance, such as collocation and semantic prosody knowledge, so that students have a deep understanding of the cultural meanings contained in English words, so as to enhance cross-cultural awareness.

3. Students learn vocabulary through corpus, compare lexical semantic prosody and collocation features, and innovate memory methods, so as to enhance memory effect.

4. From the perspective of translation, teachers and students should pay attention to the extensional semantics of vocabulary and the rationality and innovation of vocabulary collocation.

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