

## CHAPTER TWELVE

# DENOTATION SHIFTS IN NEW COINAGES IN MEDIA DISCOURSES ON POLITICS

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The chapter traces instances of how the intensional content of words in political discourse can be manipulated. The analysis is conducted on a corpus specifically constructed for the purposes of this study; the corpus consists of commentaries from a Bulgarian radio talk show. A list of keywords from the talk show is extracted and the intensional content of the words in the list is investigated. Petofi's representation of the lexicon item in discourse is employed to compare the referents and the meanings associated with the various occurrences of specific items in the corpus. The focus falls on (a) items' meanings interpreted as representing intensional content, and (b) the way they are transferred from dictionary definitions and injected with components from other lexicon items. The claim is that this type of figuration represents what is known as political spin.

**Key words:** corpus assisted discourse studies, political discourse, journalism, intensional meanings, figuration, spin

### **How language expressions name**

In 1905, Bertrand Russel (Russel 1905) wrote that language expressions do not necessarily link with objects in reality, as previously believed. In a process he called 'denoting', he pointed out that the link holds really between language expressions and a whole class of objects, whose name is a common noun in language. Thereby a phrase would indicate that an object in reality can be linked to a noun phrase because the object satisfies the features that characterise the group of objects whose name the class bears. Russel specifies the logical function by which every object that possesses

the features characterising a chair, for example, can be called with that noun. Additionally, Russel notes that some expressions are definite and like proper names link exclusively with one object in reality, while others are indefinite and they do not necessarily pick up one object from the class denoted with the name.

Keith Donnellan (Donnellan 1966) draws attention to the fact that, in naming objects, some expressions are used to evoke a specific object – a function Donnellan calls ‘referential’. Other expressions only ascribe qualities to an object, which is a use Donnellan calls ‘attributive’. Thus, in a sentence linguistically known as predicative, the phrase after the linking verb claims that the named object possesses qualities that classify them as a member of a class (e.g. *Keith is a philosopher*). Apart from the demonstrable fact that nouns can name objects by virtue of the object possessing a set of features typical of a class, the intent of the speaker realised through the speech act is invoked, whereby some noun phrases are used to refer and others are used to qualify.

The relation between an object and reality has also been questioned from the point of view of its truth value. Several philosophers opted to call an instance of naming truthful, if the name connected with the right object in reality. If the object meowed, it is truthful to call it a cat, to mention a simple example. The situation with objects such as The King of France (Russel 1905), who did not exist at the time of speaking, complicated the task of establishing the truthfulness of naming due to the lack of an object in reality to be named with such a phrase. In a lively discussion of unicorns, Santa Clause, love, and other non-existent creatures, which, despite being good names, had no referents in real life, philosophers settled for the notion of a tripartite relation, where a linguistic phrase connects with objects via a third relation, called designation (Lyons 1968). Thereby a linguistic expression connects with an object via a mental category which includes a list of features typical of that object. Thus, Lyons introduces the triangle of meaning, where a noun connects with a class of objects in reality through a “thought” about this object.

A spatial expansion of the model is introduced by Petofi, who discusses the representation of lexicon items in discourse. Instead of a triangle, he proposes a pyramid, where the top represents the citation form of the item (as used in a dictionary); below we can see the actual phrase with its determiners, attributes etc., the way they are connected with an intension/ concept/ sense in the process of designation, and with a referent/ extension/ extralinguistic correlate (Petofi 1985). This pyramid reflects the fact that, in a dictionary, a noun can name a potentially vast array of objects but in a specific context only a specific constellation of those objects is singled out.

The actual reference depends on the whole phrase within the co-text of the use.

Even before that, van Quine (Van Orman Quine 1961) introduces the term “intensional” to reflect the existence of objects designated by nouns, which exemplify a thought category but do not correlate with a referent in reality. Thus, Russel’s idea of a denoting process becomes expanded to also include the notion of designation: it becomes a process which features a set of mental characteristics by virtue of which people can name an object as, for instance, “a pig” because they perceive features of a pig in it, even though the object may be a person. Thereby transfer of features from one object to another can take place, as figuration suggests, by virtue of the designation, or the mental categories included in the process. Later on, this discussion turns to the question of which features of a class are central and which peripheral, and can any of them be considered prototypical and, consequently, formative in the designation process.

Adopting a cognitive point of view, Lakoff (Lakoff and Johnson 1980) considers features associated with concrete, tangible categories easier to grasp and, therefore, more readily employed by people in explaining abstract concepts. On such an approach, love is a nebulous concept better understood in terms of the concrete and tangible concept of MOTION. Thus, conceptual metaphor functions as a cognitive mechanism seeking ways to make sense of abstract notions.

With a focus on the speaker’s feelings, Roland Barthes (Barthes 1993) also discusses a tripartite relation in object naming: the object of denotation, glossed by him as “what you see”, and the object of connotation, glossed by him as “what you think when you see these objects”. This principle has been applied to advertising discourses, where the link between an object and a name lies in the process of creation and involves working with all the notions evoked or even remotely associated with the concept named. Such a theoretical approach focusses on the entire knowledge base of the person who does the naming, including not only his own but also that of the audience they are creating the name for. Emotion has been revealed to also take place in this process, since naming is connected not only with one’s thought about an object, but also one’s feelings, which appear by default in the case of both literal and figurative use.

A significant touch to the theory of naming is added by Foucault’s concept of discourse (Foucault 1972), where terms acquire meaning in the public sphere when shaped by all the uses people make of the names of groups of objects. For instance, “insanity” in Foucault’s research appears in different spheres of social life and accrues all the nuances attached by the different speakers. That is what endorses Sinclair’s claim (Sinclair 1991)

that words obtain meaning in the context they are used, from the co-text they occur in. In this approach, the context is defined via the occasions of speaking and not as in the orderly social sphere posited in ethnographic linguistics (Hymes 1974): in real life, situations are never clear-cut in terms of spoken or written, formal or informal, and the speakers hardly ever comply fully with the requirements of the role they play.

With respect to political discourse specifically, analysts such as Laclau also claim that there are concepts which both occupy the conceptual space of an item and negate its intensional content (Laclau 1996). An example of such occurrences are promises made by politicians which have no referents in reality in terms of the theory of naming outlined so far, but fulfil the requirements of belonging to the class of nouns normally identified with the concept. Laclau is not very specific about the linguistic status of such empty denominators, but the notion of Trump's WALL in recent US politics would be an apt example. To clarify, building a wall between the USA and Mexico was promised by Trump during his election campaign but it has not come into existence as a real-world referent; nevertheless, the linguistic phrase used by Trump displays the specific meaning components as intended by Trump.

In a controlled corpus, representative of the discourse of the political party, Norman Fairclough discovered how a host of new terms of reference helped New Labour evolve away from a traditional party (Fairclough 2000). In his study, Fairclough pays tribute to the strategists who made the words create new meanings in this ambitious and deliberate effort on language. The strategists have come to be known as the sultans of spin as components from the intensional potential of words have been turned around efficiently to evoke desired readings and emotions (Jones 1999).

### **The theoretical framework of this study**

For the purposes of this study, Petofi's model of lexicon items is adopted; according to this model, each word or phrase in a language has its dictionary (citation) form, its specific realisation in a text in the form of a phrase (including pre- and/or post-modification), an intension, which includes all the lexical components described in the lexicon of the text, and an extension being the referent of the text in reality (in the case of non-intensional nouns). This theoretical interpretation is represented in Fig. 1:

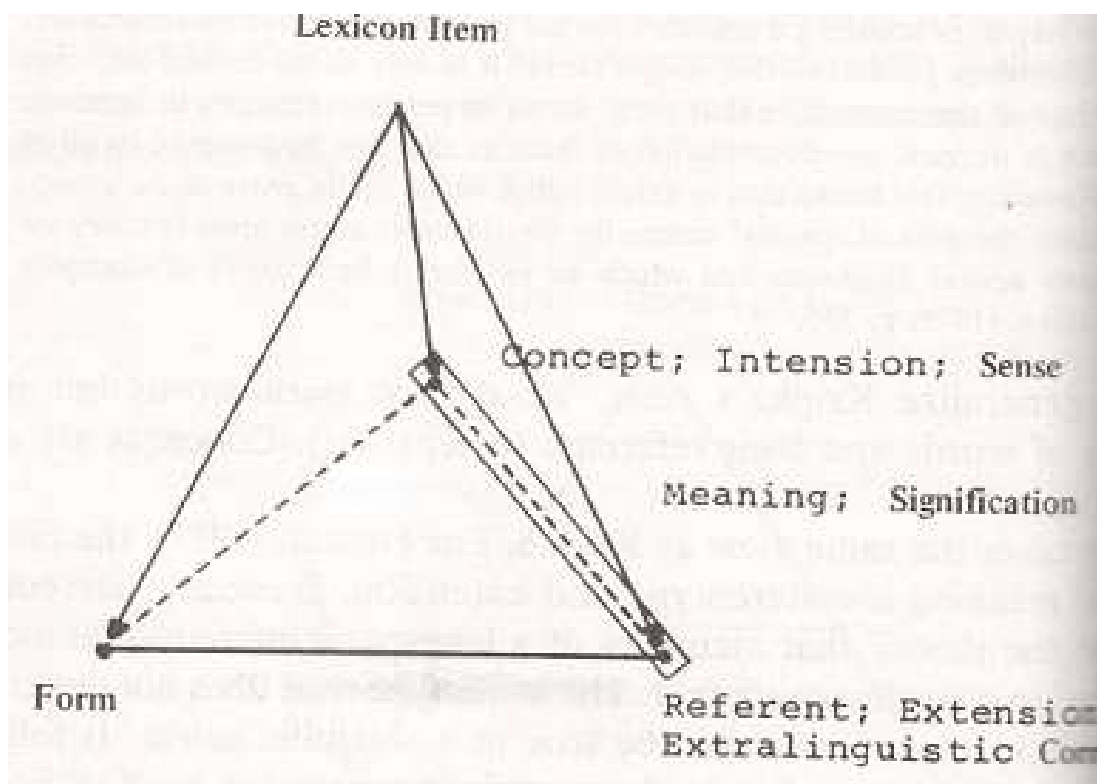


Figure 1. Petofi's presentation of the relation Object – Lexicon Item

In this approach, each word or phrase is purposefully included in a discourse, evoking a constellation of meanings as selected by the speaker out of the intensional potential of the lexicon item. I consider that each linguistic item is thus activated in actual language use and some of its components are invariably manipulated by the speaker to mean what the speaker is trying to convey contextually.

From what was presented throughout the theories of naming, it seems justified to assume that each noun can evoke any of the intensional components of an item, a component which is not identical with the different meanings listed in a dictionary. Each of the dictionary meanings contains an array of the intensional content of the item; the latter is atomic, semantic, and as simple as possible. The meanings can be turned around in a figurative use, but I keep an open mind to any other transformations which could be elicited by first-hand knowledge of the ongoing situation.

### **Corpora and procedure**

The aim of this study is to explore how language projects the intension of a noun phrase, as defined in the overview of the relevant literature in the previous Section. The Noun Phrases selected are employed to name objects

in a discourse. In accordance with the view that meanings emerge in discourses, a corpus was compiled of all the texts produced by a speaker in the context of a daily radio show on Bulgaria's National Radio *Horizont*. The speaker is a popular radio host known as an adept of Russian politics and a proponent of maintaining the traditional close relationship with Russia. Petar Volgin is the host of a radio talk show where he discusses popular everyday topics. In parallel, his commentaries are published in a magazine called *A-specto*. Wikipedia recommends it as a left-leaning publication, airing socialist views characterised (in Bulgarian contexts) by their requirements for massive state intervention into all spheres of life, by 'fraternal fidelity' to Bulgaria's old-time alliance with Russia, by mistrust for US and EU policies, and by a nostalgia for a strong-hand centralised and authoritarian socialism.

The corpus is purpose-built from all the texts published in *A-specto* from 2014 to 2017. The non-profit foundation publisher names neoliberalism as its main enemy. The radio show is publicised as 'an alternative to mainstream media', who are taken to be liberal, pro-European and anti-Russian.

Twenty-five texts have been included in the corpus. These are all the texts written by Volgin for the opening of his shows. They have been published as editorials in the magazine cited above. Apart from those, Volgin has also published officially some of his interviews, but they are not included in the corpus since they incorporate speeches by other people, who entertain different political and social views. The corpus is intended to represent the specific language characterising the particular conceptual system of the journalist.

The overall number of words in the corpus is 22,232. Admittedly, the volume of this corpus is not extensive; nevertheless, it is representative of the author's discourse since all the commentaries he has published as leading matter of his talk shows (within the span of three whole years) have been included. No stop words have been set. The word list of the corpus is analytically compared to the list compiled from the 100-million-word representative corpus of the Bulgarian language BulTreebank (Simov 2004). The comparison elicits words whose frequencies in the corpus are higher than those in the reference corpus; the pattern is generally known as a list of key words (Scott 1997).

The working instrument chosen here is the Wordsmith Tools (Scott 2012) software product. The key words are calculated by log likelihood. The keywords in a corpus usually include proper names, placenames, and terms specific for the particular sphere under investigation. In addition, new coinages are given a high status of key-ness, no matter how low the

frequency of the language use is, since the comparison to the general reference balanced corpus always picks up such lexical items. This is one reason why figuration has a high likelihood of projecting into the keyword list of a corpus.

A paper about key words in languages with an extended system of grammatical forms (Tarasheva 2015) has shown that words which appear in the key-word list with more than one form from their grammatical paradigm have a greater significance for the respective corpus. Shifts between definite and indefinite uses of a word are shown to indicate changes in the representation of class membership; they tend to perform different language functions, and, therefore, the term is subject to restructuring its referential type.

The Key Word List for the corpus is presented in Table 1:

<b>Key word</b>	<b>frequency</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>texts</b>
<i>Мигранти</i> Migrants	10	0.04	7
<i>Мигрантска</i> Migratory	5	0.02	3
<i>Мигрантите</i> The migrants	5	0.02	4
<i>Брюкселските</i> Those from Brussels (adj. definite plural)	9	0.04	6
<i>Брюкселския</i> The one from Brussels (adj. definite singular)	9	0.04	4
<i>Брюкселски</i> From Brussels (adj. indefinite plural)	5	0.02	4
<i>Елити</i> Elites	13	0.06	6
<i>Елит</i> Elite	15	0.07	8
<i>Грантовите</i> Belonging to Grantees (adj. definite plural)	7	0.03	4
<i>Грантови</i> Belonging to Grantees (adj. indefinite plural)	4	0.02	3

<i>Грантаджииите</i> Grantees (noun)	3	0.01	2
<i>Държави</i> States	37	0.17	16
<i>Държава</i> A state	35	0.16	14
<i>Свят</i> The world	39	0.18	16
<i>Хора</i> People	66	0.30	21
<i>Демокрацията</i> Democracy	20	0.09	7
<i>Нормалните</i> Normal	11	0.05	6
<i>Политици</i> Politicians	21	0.09	13
<i>Европейски</i> European (adj. indefinite)	25	0.11	12
<i>Европейските</i> European (adj. definite)	15	0.07	8

**Table 1. Keywords in the corpus**

The meaning of keywords is explored through the co-text they occur in. In the analysis presented here, collocates are taken to be words which occur with a marked frequency in the co-text of the search term. The left-hand collocates are accepted to be the subjects to a verb under investigation, and the right-hand collocates – the direct objects. For nouns left of the keyword we have attributes and to the right – verbs. The software used allows for searches within a specified range of 1, 2, 3 and up to six positions before or after the search term.

### Data analysis

Among the key words in the corpus, we register the repetition of several derivative forms of the word *грант* (grant): *грантовите* (adjective, related to grants, with the morpheme for the definite article), *грантови* (adjective, related to grants, with the morpheme for the indefinite article), *грантаджии* (noun, grant recipient, plural). All the three forms adopt a foreign word *grant*, despite the availability of Bulgarian correspondences of native stock. Thus, the initial impression is of an unnecessary borrowing, alien to the



language and jarring the ear with its foreign sound, and completed with a suffix from the native stock that parodies the derivation as an inappropriate reflection of foreign-ness. The noun for a grant recipient has been derived from the English word with a Turkish suffix *-джия*, frequently associated with derogatory meanings. The effect is a disparaging term putting together an English borrowing and a Turkish suffix.

The Dictionary of contemporary Bulgarian (Institute for Bulgarian Language, BAS, n.d.) lists the word *грант* (grant) accompanied by the following definition: “A non-repayable subsidy freely awarded to assist in completing a particular creative or other project and paid in instalments” (translation E.T.). The definition of the noun does not suggest a pejorative use for the term.

The Bulgarian National Reference Corpus (Simov 2004) lists only three occurrences of the word *грант* (grant), shown in Figure 2.

The use of the foreign borrowed term is limited: there are only three occurrences in the 100-million-word balanced reference corpus. All the three cases appear along a co-text of positive expressions such as “free assistance from the European Investment Bank”, “a sum that need not be repaid”, “5 million leva for building the bridge”. Therefore, in the corpus we study, any negative nuances need to be ascribed to the lexicon item’s use specific to the discourse of the journalist and his talk show.

In the corpus, what can be observed to the right of the word *грантови* (of grants) are adjectives which collocate with the nouns *анализатори* (analysts) and *политици* (politicians). The phrases are used as synonyms to *Брюкселските елити* (Brussels elites), *жълтопанетници* (inhabitants of the central areas of Bulgaria’s capital), *соросоуди* (grantees of George Soros’s foundations). All these synonyms present examples of politically-used conceptual metaphors and metonymies which display significant denotational shifts. However, but the corpus for this study does not provide a sufficient number of occurrences to discuss them. That is why we only focus on the keywords elicited for the corpus “grantee” and its derivatives. From the synonymic substitutions we can see that *грантови/те* (of grants) includes content concerning relationships with the EU, restrictedness to the capital and influence from a philanthropist notoriously associated with conspiracy theories. All the words project negativity: Brussels imposes legislation which ignores Bulgarian interests, the policies are related to the elite and hostile to the ‘people’, the grantees are dependent on malicious individuals, their primary interest is in money etc.

The screenshot displays the Clark WEB SYSTEM interface. At the top, the logo 'CLARK WEB SYSTEM' is visible on the left, and the text 'Български национален референтен корпус - BulTreeBank' and 'Bulgarian national reference corpus - BulTreeBank' is centered. Below the logo are flags for BG, EN, and a 'Помощ' (Help) button. A search bar contains the word 'grant'. Below the search bar, there are two tabs: 'НОРМАЛИЗАЦИЯ (А-а)' and 'СОРТИРОВКА НА ЕЛЕМЕНТА'. Under 'НОРМАЛИЗАЦИЯ (А-а)', there is a checkbox for 'С нормализация' which is unchecked. Under 'СОРТИРОВКА НА ЕЛЕМЕНТА', there are two radio buttons: 'Права' (unchecked) and 'Обратна' (checked). To the right of these options are two more radio buttons: 'Ляв, десен' (unchecked) and 'Десен, ляв' (checked). A 'Търси' (Search) button is located below these options. Below the search bar, there is a section titled 'Израз за търсене:' followed by the word 'grant'. Below this, there is a table with three columns: 'Ляв контекст', 'Намерен елемент', and 'Десен контекст'. The table contains three rows of search results.

Ляв контекст	Намерен елемент	Десен контекст
...Бходимите предарителни проучвания, които са Базови, за да вземем заем	грант	(Безвъзмездна помощ) от ЕС и заем от Европейската инвестиционна банка...
...ето е на стойност 20 млн. марки, от които 25% са под формата на тнар.	грант	, т.е. сума, която не се връща, събщи шефът на "Топлофикация" Ангел А...
...па по линия на Пакта за стабилност, припомни Никола Карадимов. Първият	грант	от 5 млн. евро за строежа на моста ни отпуса Европейската комисия. Ре...

Figure 2. The Bulgarian word ‘grant’ in context from the Bulgarian National Reference Corpus BulTreeBank.

To their right, the noun phrases of *грантаджии* (grantees) tend to collocate with the following verbal actions (my translations – E.T.):

*с пяна на уста повтарят* – foaming at the mouth, they keep repeating

*хлипат активно* – ostentatiously moaning

*ореваха света и околностите* – cried out to be heard on this planet and beyond

All the phrases are metaphorically used in disparagement of the statements made by the ‘analysts and politicians holding grants’. The entire discourse mocks people who have received grants from American foundations. The discourse does not develop an argument what the actions and the views of the people in question represent in order for them to appear so distasteful to the journalist. Volgin presents no counter arguments of his. Instead, the specific naming processes repetitively projects negativity and deliberately depersonalizes the real referents of the noun phrases. In his discourse, pejoratively named people are suggested to perform actions viewed as despicable, without the radio presenter making an effort to explain why the people and their actions are so severely disliked by the author.

The intensional potential of *grantees* in English would include the following components: freely given, purposeful, money, generously given, won in competition with numerous candidates, recognition of useful activity. This list is compiled from dictionary definitions listed in a Web search on “definition: grantee”; the list includes all dictionaries which define the term and are arranged in terms of frequency of use.

In the British National Corpus (Davies 2004) the word *grantee* collocates with *benefit*, *bound*, *rendering* and no adjectives are used with the word. Therefore, the presentation of the word in the corpus is neutral and technical, unlike what we see in the corpus of our study. The intensional content of the phrases in the corpus, however, includes very few of the potential uses described above. Instead, we see ‘money from a foreign agency’, ‘people who are indebted to foreign forces’, ‘people who inhabit the capital and are unaware of the situation in the country’, ‘armchair critics’, ‘yielding to influence’, ‘distanced from the (ordinary/normal) people’.

Furthermore, in our corpus, the denotative content of the term *грантаджия* (grant recipient) is limited to very few of the semantic components generally associated with the lexicon item outside specific contexts. Instead, denotative content from other items is injected into it. Significantly, emotional reactions are meant to be elicited through the

pejorative usage and the negative terms of reference. The conclusion is that, in our corpus, the connotative content is given preference over the denotative one. Volgin seems to avoid naming objects through their respective denotative content. By including content from the co-text, the author sets off a connotative content of derision and negation until the original intensional content is entirely lost for the audience. Overall, a fan of Volgin's show is not likely to gain any specific knowledge of what a grant actually is but they are highly likely to be left with a 'feeling' that a grant is a very bad 'something'. This process of meaning shifting is presented in Figure 3:

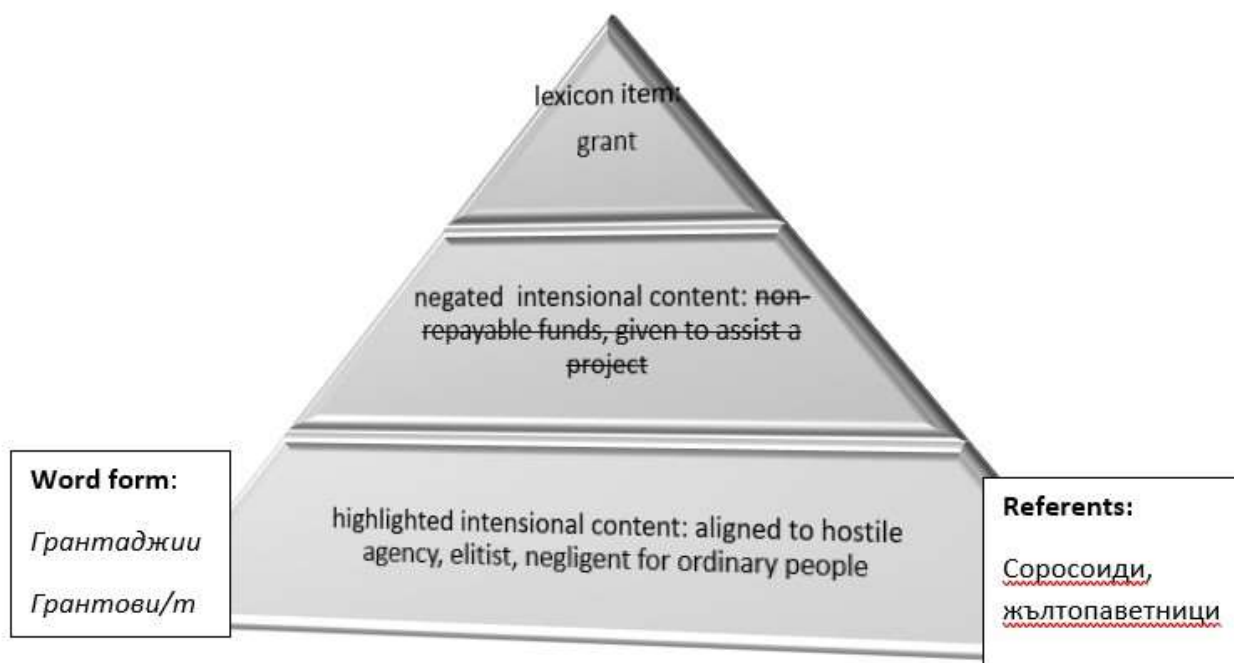


Figure 3. The pyramidal representation of the intensional content of the lexicon item 'grant'.

In the corpus, the word *либералствац* (performing liberal activities, participle) registers with a lower degree of key-ness, as in, for example “*Либералстваците европейски елити упорито избягват най-важния въпрос...*” (*Liberalizing European Elites relentlessly avoid the most important question...*, transl. ET). In this case, the adjective *liberal* is borrowed from English and turned into the verb *либералствам*, which roughly means “to practice/ feign liberal policies”. A participle is also derived from the adjective, meaning “ostentatiously feigning liberal practices”. Clearly, in the transfer to the verbal category, the choice between *practice* or *feign* is enacted quite arbitrarily as no verbal action appears as a

contextual default, but the pejorative use invites a preference for the latter (i.e. for *feign*) rather than for the former (i.e. for *practice*). Moreover, the denotative content is rejected here because *liberalising* associates in English with a definite set of activities such as making laws less restrictive. In Bulgarian, there is a translation equivalent meaning very nearly the same. Despite those facts, the radio journalist, i.e., Volgin, again coins a new word from the borrowed term *liberal* and adds a Bulgarian suffix to convey pejorative meaning: *либерал-стващ*.

## Conclusion

The corpus containing commentaries from the radio talk show analysed here provides examples of specific language use that has the intensional content of words manipulated. We demonstrate the manipulation by using key words occurring in various paradigm forms. The paradigm variety of the occurrences strongly suggests that the words perform important naming functions in the language.

The process of intensional content manipulation observable in the discourse typical of the radio show analysed can be described as follows:

- a. a foreign word is borrowed;
- b. derivatives are produced using native suffixes to a humorous effect;
- c. the intensional content of the original word is shifted;
- d. negative connotations are added from the linguistic co-text.

The outcome of this process is that the original intensional content is lost. In comparison to the original word, the result is a depleted intension, in which external content is projected. Alternatively, connotations are profusely added until they prevail and dominate in the mind of the audience. Thus, the borrowed foreign word becomes generally void of its original intensional content and the word becomes associated with a different content of mainly connotative character.

In sum, this chapter has demonstrated a type of figuration where the denotative content of a borrowed word of foreign origin becomes depleted and then becomes substituted by a content of predominantly negative connotations. In this way, the term's discursive colouring changes; its pejorative overtones are usually enhanced by the author adding a native suffix to the foreign word. Then the denotative content is substituted for connotations of mainly negative character. As a result, members of the discourse audience who have little knowledge of the original borrowed term

are left with a scanty understanding of the word's original denotation and with the certainty that the 'new' word conveys negative meaning.

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