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Taboo-based Intensifiers in Arabic and Polish

Abstract

This article is a description and comparison of Polish and Arabic taboo-based intensifiers in terms of both the semantic domains from which they are derived and their level of desemanticization. For this objective, four domains were selected: (1) death, (2) religion, God, and demons, (3) sexuality, and (4) family. Within those domains an array of linguistic forms were analysed with the aim of examining to what extent they retained traces of the original meaning. Another question to elucidate is whether the transition from one category to another in the process of semantically-driven grammaticalization is accompanied by the loss of the taboo element of these lexemes.

Keywords

1. Introduction

This article compares Polish and (Egyptian) Arabic taboo-based intensifiers in terms of both the semantic domains from which they are derived and their level of desemanticization (or semantic bleaching). Intensifiers, especially those based on taboo terms, are one of the most rapidly changing spheres of linguistic usage (Quirk et al. 1985, Ito & Tagliamonte 2003), and therefore they might be considered to be highly problematic to both students of a language and translators. With the exception of a limited number of most common and highly grammaticalized forms such as 'very' in English, the majority cannot be tracked down in a dictionary. On the other hand, as they might constitute a transitional stage of language evolution, their use is very often narrowed to certain types of context and their productivity is limited, which is why they require pragmatic skill and an idiomatic approach. Wilson's (1977) example of the problem is

the expression 'stark naked', which, if substituted by 'very naked', would be unfortunate, if acceptable at all; the same goes for: 'wide awake', 'brand new', etc. Considering this, it is crucial for both students and translators to understand how linguistic changes proceed, starting from the core issues related to the speakers' desire to demonstrate originality or to capture the attention of the listeners.

2. Intensifiers

Intensity is one of the most prominent qualities of language; it is concerned with the 'degree to which the speaker's attitude toward a concept deviates from neutrality' (Bradac et al. 1979). Labov, like many others, sees intensity as a central feature of 'social and emotional expression' (Labov 1984: 43, Partington 1993). Intensity functions in two spheres: alleviation (downward direction) and amplification (upward direction) (Seiler 1991). Intensifiers modify the discourse by reinforcing (adding emotional load and emphasis) or attenuating a feature (Paradis 1997: 41). Bolinger (1972: 17) regards an INTENSIFIER as 'any device that scales a quality, whether up or down or somewhere between the two'. The same author claims that two characteristics come to the fore in the discussion regarding intensifiers: their versatility and colour, both related to the fact that they are 'feverishly' recycled and continuously recreated. Those features might also spring from the fact that intensifiers tend to develop hyperbolic functions, which Mahmood (2015) explains is 'due to the natural instinct of human behavior to state, assert, emphasize or sometimes exaggerate certain speech.'

To convey intensity, many lexical and non-lexical means are employed. According to Labov (1984), there is no fixed set of devices used to mark the intensity of an utterance. When lexical elements are considered, Bolinger (1972) mentions adjectives especially, as well as adverbs, nouns and verbs – all grouped together under the umbrella term 'degree words'. In the grammar of English they are treated as modifiers (Biber 1999). Apart from these markers of intensity there are other methods involving specific prosodic contour, intonation, stress, etc. (Labov 1984: 43).

There are several proposals for classifying intensifiers, among which a common thread is the distinction between amplifiers and downtoners (Bolinger 1972, Quirk and Greenbaum 1976, Quirk et al. 1985, Pavić Pintrić & Frleta 2014). To this, some authors add a middle ground: moderators or approximators (Paradis 2000). Among the amplifiers, there are usually two groups: maximizers (sometimes: emphasizers) denoting the maximal stage and boosters that scale the particular feature upwards (Quirk and Greenbaum 1976, Bolinger 1972). Downtoners are divided into diminishers and minimizers (Bolinger 1972). Intensification is therefore seen as a two-ended scale centred around the 'neutral'

value. Paradis (1997) also classifies the adjectives found in collocations with intensifiers. Among these, three types can be distinguished: scalar (gradable, modified by moderators and boosters), limit and extreme (non-gradable, modified by maximizers).

Intensifiers can be based on several conceptual domains. Most of them, however, undergo a process called SEMANTIC BLEACHING or DESEMANTICISATION, which means they lose their meaning, though their semantics remain recoverable to some extent (Radden and Dirven 2007). This kinds of meaning that underlie intensifiers are highly culturally-dependent and may differ according to the linguistic variety in question. With reference to Arabic and other languages, Feodorov (2009) mentions a reference to the idea of force as one of the domains from which intensifiers are derived. Consider the following examples from Egyptian Arabic:

(1) *ʾawi* 'very' (< *qawi* 'strong')
(2) *gāmid* 'strongly', 'hard'

Similarly in Polish:

(3) *silnie* 'strongly'
(4) *mocno* 'strongly'

The same can be observed in other languages: *fort* in French, *forte* in Italian, *šadīd* 'strong' in Modern Standard Arabic (MSA). All the terms mentioned above have the common feature of gradually moving from concrete to abstract (Feodorov 2009). Feodorov also mentions other concepts forming the semantic base of intensifiers, such as the idea of completeness, for example *bi t-tamām* 'completely', a large quantity as in *katīr* 'a lot', excess: *fawq* 'above', or the idea of fear: *rāʾiʿ* 'extraordinary', *hāʾil* 'uncommon' (both derived from roots meaning 'fear'). Some of the etymologies mentioned by the author are only recoverable through dictionaries and are inaccessible in the mental lexicon of the speakers, which is especially worth noting with reference to forms showing an 'evolution towards opposite meanings', for example fear > admiration (ibid.).

A different type of classification is represented by spatial references, which include upper limit or centrality (ibid.), as in the following examples from Egyptian Arabic and Polish:

(5) *ʾāḫir ḥāga* 'the last thing'
(6) *kompletnie* 'completely'
(7) *całkowicie* 'entirely'
(8) *totalnie* 'totally'

In the current paper, the somewhat neglected domain of taboo-based intensifiers will be discussed. Taboo terms are an inexhaustible source of intensifiers, for example in English: 'the hell'. Such expressions have a variety of possible grammatical forms; one thing, however, is common: they are based on the selection of a highly (currently or historically) tabooed theme/agent – one that is or was considered inviolable in the specific speech community. These intensifiers may include references to such topics as religion, sexuality, death, disease, dirt, bodily excretions, body parts, sacred or demonic persona/objects. The reference to tabooed content is not particularly surprising given the nature of intensifiers and the taboo itself. Vogel (2014: 1) says, 'taboo emerges from the extremities of human value systems', which creates a ready-made tool for amplifying the emotional load of expressions. In this paper, four conceptual domains of intensifiers common for Polish (PL) and Egyptian Arabic (EA) lexicon will be analysed and compared.

3. Problem and methods

Languages differ in terms of ways they express intensity and the level of intensity required in speech. The knowledge of such methods is considered a part of the pragmatic competence of a speaker and, therefore, should be acquired in the process of language learning, whether as a native or second language.

Intensity ascription is also a problematic issue in translation. Mahmood (2015) analyses some examples of unfortunate translation choices based on inadequate renditions of hyperbolic forms between English and Arabic. When dealing with two completely unrelated languages, a translator comes across a lack of literal equivalence, differing levels of intensity of seemingly equivalent expressions, and different frequencies with which certain forms are used. For example, Arabic tends to use emphatic constructions rather than lexical items; therefore, intensity in Arabic is more often expressed syntactically, whereas in English or other languages (including Polish), it tends to be conveyed lexically. Therefore, according to the author, the two expressions: *ḍarabahu ḍarban mubarriḥan* and its translation 'he hit him bitterly' cannot be treated as equivalent. The degree of intensity in the Arabic expression is higher, because the cognate accusative construction used in Arabic 'suggests an uppermost degree of intensification and emphasis that the English intensifier "bitterly" lacks. This is due to the morphological and phonological structures of the new derivatives' (Mahmood 2015: 26). As a remedy, the author proposes that the translator sacrifice syntactic structure for the sake of the necessary hyperbolic function or on other occasions, in the face of the absence of lexical and syntactic tools, an additional semantic measure might be called for in order to achieve the same intensification as in the source language.

In general, there are several reasons why the translation of intensifiers might constitute a problematic issue; some of them are found in (Mahmood 2015): (a) the vagueness of certain intensifiers; (b) the boundedness of the modifying heads; (c) the fuzziness of the meaning of intensifiers; (d) the multi-functionality of intensifiers.

The linguistic devices used in Arabic to convey intensity range from morphological and lexical to various syntactic tools, although they are rarely dealt with in a systematic way; one of the few pieces of research conducted to investigate this issue with reference to Arabic is (Górska 2015). This work, however, does not focus on lexical methods of conveying intensity. Such examples and discussion with reference to EA can be found in Woidich (1995) and Woidich (2017, to appear). The current paper is an attempt to describe and compare certain types of intensifiers – those based on taboos, as used by Arabs and Poles. Firstly, examples of such intensifiers excerpted from various texts[1] will be compared in terms of their number in each of the selected semantic domains (death, God, demons, religion, sexuality, and family). Another question will concern the degree of grammaticalization they undergo, which will involve the perception of the taboo in these expressions. In order to examine this, the phenomenon of GRAMMATICALIZATION (Sinclair 1992, Partington 1993) will be considered, by means of which a lexical item loses its semantic content (bleaching) and which might also lead to the reassessment of its structural status (Brems 2003). Thereby, words that belong to primary categories like nouns become parts of secondary categories (adverbs, auxiliaries, prepositions). The question here is to find out whether the transition from one category to another in the process of semantically-driven grammaticalization is accompanied by the loss of the taboo aspect of these lexemes.

4. Grammaticalization

Grammaticalization is one of the greatest motors of change in language and, at the same time, one of the most intensely researched issues, especially in a diachronic perspective. Tagliamonte (2012) states the diagnostics of grammaticalization are particularly useful for interpreting linguistic patterns in language variation and change.

The term was first introduced by Meillet (1912) who defined it as an 'attribution of a grammatical character to a formerly autonomous word'. This captured what to this day is considered the essence of grammaticalization, a process in which content words evolve into functional elements (Hopper and Traugott 1993) in the apparatus of grammar. The definition formulated by

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[1] The corpus of texts in both languages consists of spontaneous (online material and natural conversations).

Kuryłowicz is considered by many as 'the classic one': 'Grammaticalisation consists in the increase of the range of a morpheme advancing from a lexical to a grammatical or from a less grammatical to a more grammatical status, e.g. from a derivative formant to an inflectional one' (Kuryłowicz 1975). Similarly Hopper (1996) sees grammaticalization as '[t]he process whereby lexical forms such as the verb "to manage" are press-ganged into service as grammatical forms.' To this, Heine and Reh (1984: 15) add some more characteristics of the process, saying that it is 'an evolution whereby linguistic units lose in semantic complexity, pragmatic significance, syntactic freedom, and phonetic substance, respectively.'

Grammaticalization proceeds as a sequence of changes over a period of time along pathways called 'clines' which may look as follows: discourse > syntax > morphology > morphophonemics > zero (Givón 1979). The conceptualization is unidirectional and moves from concrete to abstract (Börjars & Vincent 2012). Heine (2003: 579) distinguishes four steps in the process of grammaticalization: 1) desemanticization (semantic bleaching); 2) extension (extending the form to new contexts); 3) decategorialization (reduction or loss of morphosyntactic properties); 4) erosion (phonetic reduction). The first of these steps (desemanticization, delexicalization) is often mistakenly seen as a synonym for grammaticalization (Brems 2003). Among the principals of grammaticalization, Hopper (1991) distinguishes: layering (when old forms still exist alongside the new ones), divergence (the coexistence of literal uses of the word along with grammatical ones), specialization (when one form is singled out to perform a grammatical function), persistence (when traces of the original meanings are still visible in a new form), decategorization (a unidirectional loss of categoriality).

The basic cognitive mechanisms underlying grammaticalisation are metaphor and metonymy, which might result in a 'loosening of collocational requirements and loss of literal semantic features' (Brems 2003). The loss of semantic richness might involve reducing the initial meaning to a small number of features (Hopper 1996), in our case mainly 'intensity'.

5. Assessing the degree of the grammaticalization of intensifiers

Labov calls intensifiers 'cognitive zeroes', by which he means that they have zero representational content (Labov 1984: 43). This view seems, however, somewhat too extreme. Bolinger (1972) claims that intensifiers might be grammaticalized to various degrees. The grammaticalized ones have the quantitative characteristics of intensifying the adjacent words, while the non-grammaticalized add a specific flavour to the expression; therefore, their value is quantitative and qualitative at the same time, for example *nieopisanie piękna*

means 'very beautiful, to the extent that it cannot be described'; *niewiarygodnie szybki* means 'so fast it is hard to believe it'. The question of how to assess the level of grammaticalization has been considered for decades.

The assessment of the degree of the grammaticalization of words is not an easy task, because the process might take centuries and changes sometimes progress at varying speeds over particular periods of time. Bolinger (1972) tends to use the word 'relatively' when considering the grammaticalization of linguistic items (Brems 2003). He also highlights the fuzziness of distinctions in this particular case. All researchers agree that the deconstruction of original meaning sometimes referred to as semantic bleaching, and on other occasions as desemanticisation / delexicalization, is one of the initial steps in grammaticalization. With this in mind, we should be careful not to confuse between grammaticalization and delexicalization defined as a reduction of semantic content (Sinclair 1992, Partington 1993). This paper, in most cases will concern this particular stage.

Semantic impoverishment is one of the most broadly discussed issues in assessing the level of grammaticalization (Heine 2003, Heine and Reh 1984, Hopper 1996) and the common belief is that a high level of grammaticalization involves losing the complexity and richness of the semantic content, especially when intensifiers are considered. According to Bolinger, this, however, is not a decisive factor. The frequency of use is sometimes taken to indicate a high degree of grammaticalization, which Bolinger (1972), again, opposes saying that some relatively grammaticalized intensifiers might be less frequent than others, and less grammaticalized. This is related to another criterion – the collocational range of intensifiers (Partington 1993, Ito & Tagliamonte 2003). Partington (1993: 183) claims that the most advanced items in terms of grammaticalization collocate more widely than others. They also tend to be applicable to both positive and negative contexts – that is, radiate both a positive and negative semantic prosody. Grammatically, Lehmann (1995) emphasises the role of the autonomy of a sign, consisting of three parameters: weight, cohesion (bondedness), and variability as a criterion for the assessment of the grammaticalization extent. According to him, a reduction in autonomy signals a rise in grammaticalization. Heine and Reh (1984) relate high levels of grammaticalization to: loss in semantic complexity, functional significance, and expressive value along with a rise in syntactic significance, a reduction in the number of members of the same paradigm, a decrease in syntactic variability and rise in fixedness, and a rise in semantic, morphosyntactic and phonetic coalescence. The last problem often discussed is the distinction between the use of intensifiers with attributive and predicative adjectives. It is believed (Ito & Tagliamonte 2003) that the predicative usages are characteristic of the last stage of grammaticalization, whereas the attributive uses represent an earlier stage.

That said, it is once again important to emphasise that the degree of grammaticalization is not a discrete feature of any item. Terms often have a tendency to, according to Brems (2003), 'hover indecisively' between grammatical classes. This is why in this particular paper, only the stage of semantic reduction (semantic bleaching / desemanticisation / delexicalization) of intensifiers will be examined.

6. Analysis and discussion

6.1. Death

The examination of material from Egyptian Arabic shows that in EA, references to the noun 'death' and verb 'to die' have developed into productive intensifiers; they are used in various contexts, including overtly positive ones as in the following examples:

 (9) *waḥišni mōt* 'I miss you to death (like death)'
(10) *baḥibbik mōt* 'I love you to death (like death)'
(11) *bamūt fīki* 'I adore you' ('I am dying about you')

The item *mōt* 'death' is a common noun, although due to its taboo nature it developed into an intensifier, which included a change of grammatical category from noun to intensifying adverbial (Woidich, in press), which is visible in the fact that it occurs without an article after a definite noun phrase, Woidich's example for this is:

(12) *il-banāt il-ḥilwa mōt* 'the terribly nice girls'

A change in grammatical category together with a wide range of possible contexts in which this intensifier can occur is a clear indicator of a high degree of grammaticalization. Another example where the verb *yimūt* 'to die' is employed to express the extreme intensity of a feature/action/state is: *bamūt min il-bard* 'I'm dying of cold'. As death is a final stage in human existence, the relation between these concepts is metaphorical: the extremity of death comes to signify the extremity of the feature. There are very similar examples in Polish:

(13) a. *umieram z głodu* 'I'm dying of hunger'
     b. *umieram z ciekawości* 'I'm dying of curiosity'
     c. *umieram z nudów* 'I'm dying of boredom'
     d. *umieram z tęsknoty* 'I'm dying of longing'

However, in Polish, positive semantic prosody is relatively rare, as in:

(14) *umieram z rozkoszy* 'I'm dying of pleasure'

Adverbs referring to death, such as:

(15) *śmiertelnie* 'deathly'
(16) *makabrycznie* 'gruesomely'
(17) *morderczo* 'murderously'

have limited context of usage. Only *śmiertelnie* 'deathly' is considered a regular intensifier; Bałabaniak and Mitrenga (2015: 69) claim it refers to predicates that express the final stage of the process in human mental states as a means of hyperbolization ('to die' means 'to get bored', 'to fall in love').

Therefore, the conclusion would be that 'death' as a domain of intensification is more productive in EA than it is in PL and, at the same time, it is more bleached semantically.

6.2. God / demons / religion

In Egyptian Arabic we encounter examples of the word *dīn* 'religion' in such phrases as:

(18) a. *yiḫrib bētak* '(may God) destroy your house'
    b. *yiḫrib bēt dīnak* '(may God) destroy the house of your religion'
(19) a. *yilʿan ummak* '(may God) curse your mother'
    b. *yilʿan dīn ummak* '(may God) curse the religion of your mother'
(20) a. *yilʿan abūk* '(may God) curse your father'
    b. *yilʿan dīn abūk* '(may God) curse the religion of your father'
(21) a. *ibn kalb* 'son of a dog'
    b. *ibn dīn kalb* 'son of the religion of a dog'

Therefore, we might say, *dīn* 'religion' here is used as an intensifier. It is the first member of the *iḍāfa* construction and therefore cannot be interpreted as adverbial. What we have here is an entire emphatic construction. However, the fact that this word is treated grammatically as an intensifier and not as a regular noun can be inferred from the semantic incompatibility seen in the examples *dīn kalb* 'religion of a dog' or *bēt dīnak* 'house of religion'. Semantics here is a final indicator of the grammatical rather than lexical function of this word. This also suggests a high degree of grammaticalization.

Unlike *mōt* 'death' in which a large set of collocates could be observed, *dīn* 'religion' seems to appear in a very limited context. It is easy to notice that a problem of a methodological nature occurs with this word; let us note that all of the intensified examples are insults or curses. A probable explanation would be that insults and curses belong to a very specific linguistic area, in which an action of some external agent (usually God, though rarely explicit) is called for.

They therefore originate from a kind of belief in the magic power of language and are associated with a higher level of emotional involvement than other utterances. Thus, when an intensifier is used, it should be equally as emotionally strong as the phrase to which it is added. Additionally, it is pertinent to point out that the expressions mentioned above are strongly tabooed due to their blasphemous nature, which is in turn related to the role of religion in a (mostly) Muslim and pious society such as Egypt. These considerations appear to be a factor that blocks the spread of this intensifier to other domains of use. As mentioned previously, the semantic analysis of the function of these examples indicates a high degree of grammaticalization with a simultaneous high degree of specialization of these expressions and restrictions of their applicability in different contexts. This would contribute to the discussion of factors influencing the level of grammaticalization: the widespread use in different contexts does not, in fact, seem to be decisive.

A different type of intensifier is seen in the adjuration *waḷḷahi* 'oh God' that in some contexts turns out to have a confirming and reinforcing function rather than being an act of genuine swearing.

(22) *waḷḷahi ḥilwa* 'she's really beautiful' ('My God, she's beautiful')

In Polish the very word 'religion' does not serve as an intensifier, but there is a number of similar references:
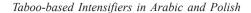
(23) *bosko* 'devinely'
(24) *niebiańsko* 'heavenly'
(25) *sakramencko* 'cursedly'

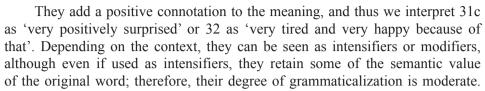However, those with a negative meaning are even more numerous here:

(26) *diabelnie* 'devilishly'
(27) *diabelsko* 'devilishly'
(28) *jak diabli* 'like the devil'
(29) *piekielnie* 'hellishly'
(30) *szatańsko* 'diabolically'

Grammatically speaking, all of them originated as adverbs modifying adjectives or verbs. When considering their degree of grammaticalization, *bosko* 'devinely' and *niebiańsko* 'heavenly' appear in a limited number of contexts:

(31) a. *niebiańsko urokliwa* 'heavenly beautiful'
     b. *niebiańsko smaczny filet z kurczaka* 'a heavenly tasty chicken fillet'
     c. *niebiańsko zdziwiony* 'heavenly surprised'
(32) *bosko zmęczeni* 'devinely tired'

They add a positive connotation to the meaning, and thus we interpret 31c as 'very positively surprised' or 32 as 'very tired and very happy because of that'. Depending on the context, they can be seen as intensifiers or modifiers, although even if used as intensifiers, they retain some of the semantic value of the original word; therefore, their degree of grammaticalization is moderate.

In the group referring to demons and evil powers 26 and 29 are the most commonly used in modern Polish.[2] Their function is not related to either the nouns 'devil' and 'hell' or the adjectives 'devilish' and 'hellish' (Bałabaniak & Mitrenga 2015: 158). They are function words with a broad range of uses as intensifiers. They are especially frequent with adjectives referring to human intellect and skills; therefore, they have a predominantly positive semantic prosody. Their applicability to adverbs with opposite meanings (Janus 1981: 45) is possible, which supports the thesis that such expressions are highly delexicalized.

(33) a. *diabelnie ładny* 'devilishly pretty'
     b. *diabelnie brzydki* 'devilishly ugly'

A quite different example of a taboo-based intensifier is cited in Kehayov (2009):

(34) *on myśli, że jest diabli wiedzą jak mądry* 'he thinks he is the devils know how smart'

Kehayov explains that in this type of expression the 'intensifiers pick up an agent from certain lexical domains denoting entities that are perceived as inviolable' (2009: 1). The usage of this construction can be examined by substituting the taboo element with another, also belonging to the domain of the taboo. Other examples from the same author are:

(35) a. *on myśli, że jest chuj wie jak mądry* 'he thinks he is fuck knows how smart ('he thinks he is dick knows how smart'
     b. *on myśli, że jest cholera wie jak mądry* 'he thinks he is so bloody smart ('he thinks he is cholera knows how smart'

To stay within the domain of sacred forces, the following sentence would probably be deemed correct by most native speakers of Polish:

(36) *on myśli, że jest Bóg wie jak mądry* 'he thinks he is God knows how smart'

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[2] According to the National Corpus of Polish Language.

Magdalena Zawrotna

6.3. Sexuality

When sexuality is considered, in Arabic, there are two frequently used and heavily obscene terms:

(37) *fašḫ* 'being spread wide' (referring to a woman's legs during sexual intercourse)
(38) *nēk!* 'fuck!', 'fucking'

In the process of grammaticalization, these expressions have lost their meaning (but not their vulgarity) and have been reduced to the function of intensifiers. They can be used in all possible types of context, both with positive and negative connotations, which suggests they are highly grammaticalized. However, their range of use is limited to crude language (which, as previously discussed, does not contradict the idea of their high grammaticalization).

(39) *di ṣūra ḥilwa fašḫ!* 'this photo is fucking beautiful'
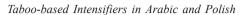(40) *šufna ʿarabiyya gamda nēk* 'we saw a fucking great car'.

In Polish, there is a small range of examples used to modify (intensify) verbs, adjectives as well as adverbs:

(41) a. *mam zajebiście ważne pytanie* 'I have a bloody important question'
     b. *jest zajebiście zimno* 'it is bloody cold'
(42) a. *kurewsko leje* 'it's fucking pissing down with rain (whorishly)'
     b. *to się robi kurewsko nudne* 'it is getting boring as fuck (whorishly)'
(43) *skurwysyńsko* 'a real son of a bitch'

All of them evolved from vulgarisms and are themselves felt to be highly obscene: *zajebiście < jebać* 'to fuck', *kurewsko < kurwa* 'whore', *skurwysyńsko < skurwysyn* 'son of a bitch'. *Zajebiście* is especially common as an intensifier, whose range of usage is spectacular. However, a resistance of *zajebiście* to systematic intensifier use is visible when it is used with verbs. In this case, it has the meaning of 'in an extraordinary manner' (conveying intense admiration):

(44) *ona zajebiście śpiewa* 'she's a bloody amazing singer' (she sings bloody amazingly)

The tabooness of these expressions is transposed into their vulgarity. Nevertheless, they are highly grammaticalized: they appear in all types of context, both negative and positive, and they are used to intensity opposite meanings.

6.4. Family

Stewart (1997, 2014) claims that such terms as 'mother', 'father', 'family', 'ancestors' are common in their function of curse intensifiers in many dialects of Arabic, including EA. 'Family' can be included under the rubric of 'taboo' as a basic social unit and a central point of human identity. It is therefore sacred (tabooed), and as such, provides a semantic source of insults and curses. This might include substituting the addressee with *illi gabūk* 'those who brought you into the world' or *illi ḫallifūk* 'those who begot you', and this way, reinforcing its illocutional force. Other such examples include:

(45) a. *kalb* 'dog'
　　 b. *ibn il-kalb* 'son of a dog'
(46) a. *ʿabīṭ* 'stupid'
　　 b. *ibn il-ʿabīṭa* 'son of a stupid woman'
(47) a. *yilʿan abūk* '(may God) damn your father'
　　 b. *yilʿan abūk wi abu abūk* 'may (God) damn your father and the father of your father'
(48) a. *yiʿlan ummak* '(may God) damn your mother'
　　 b. *yilʿan abu ummak* '(may God) damn your mother's father'
(49) a. *yilʿan šaklak* 'may your appearance be cursed'
　　 b. *yilʿan abu šaklak* 'may (the father of) your appearance be cursed'
(50) a. *yiḫrib bētak* '(may God) destroy your house'
　　 b. *yiḫrib bēt ummak* '(may God) destroy the house of your mother'
(51) a. *yilʿan ummak* 'may your mother be cursed'
　　 b. *yilʿan mayyitīn ummak* 'may your mother's ancestors be cursed'

Let us also note that the examples 47b and 48 mention 'father of your father' and 'father of your mother', not 'your grandfather', which supports the idea that the function of *abu* in these expressions is grammatical. This reinforces its interpretation as an intensifier.

In Polish, the following example is particularly important since it is considered to be the most commonly used vulgarism with an intensifier based on kinship term.

(52) *kurwa mać* 'whore mother'

Its range of use is strictly limited to the very expression mentioned above, although there is no doubt in that it is highly grammaticalized, as evidenced by the fact that usually its semantic relation to a mother, if realized at all, is never taken into consideration by the speaker. The whole expression functions as an exclamation, and is therefore almost completely devoid of its semantic references. This is yet another example contradicting the opinion that the wider the range of lexical contexts in which an item is used, the greater the level of its grammaticalization.

7. Concluding remarks

In the current paper an attempt has been made at the synchronic description and interpretation of the grammaticalization (with the focus on the first step – desemanticization) of selected Polish and Arabic intensifiers based semantically on taboo terms. Four domains were selected based on the availability of comparable lexical items in both languages. Within those domains, an array of linguistic forms were analysed with the aim of examining to what extent they retained traces of the original (taboo) meaning. The common feature of both languages is the fact that such expressions are usually marked by a relatively high level of semantic bleaching / desemanticization. This involves an emotional layer (the ability to raise the intensity of adjacent words) that is more salient than the meaning. The level of such bleaching differs, however, in the two analysed languages, according to the domain under examination, as well as from item to item.
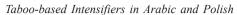
The domain of death is more productive as a source of Arabic intensifiers than in Polish. It provides more semantically bleached examples, which are, at the same time, applicable in all types of context. In Polish, its usage is slightly more limited, which implies a lesser degree of semantic bleaching.

'Religion' is a strongly tabooed word in Arabic, which, when used in curses or insults, magnifies the force of the utterance. Its use is, however, limited due to the religious ban on what is called *sabb ad-dīn* – 'blasphemy'. On a lexical level, the word *dīn* 'religion' is used to intensify an insult or a curse by symbolic directing its power onto the religion of the interlocutor, which is considered sinful. This mechanism, however, takes place outside of the speaker's awareness. The analysis suggests the grammatical character of the addition of *dīn* in the examples studied.

In Polish, words related to religion represent varying levels of desemanticisation. Those related to the area of God are used less frequently than those related to demons, although both usually have a positive semantic prosody, with those related to demons commonly intensifying such traits of personality as wit and skills.

The domain of sexuality in both languages is a source of highly grammaticalized intensifiers, characterized by a wide collocation with other words, both in a positive and negative context. Furthermore, in both languages, their number is limited and their use implies a significant level of impoliteness and thus is reduced to a certain type of situation. This would indicate that the reduction of semantic features does not include the 'taboo value' of these words.

The last domain: 'family' is extensively used in Arabic as a source of intensifiers for curses or insults. In Polish, there is only one example of such a function, albeit a prominent one. In both languages, this particular domain is one of the most peculiar examples of the intersection between semantics and

grammar. Especially the references to 'mother' – common in both languages – are worth mentioning, since 'mother' is a strongly tabooed (sacred) figure in both cultures.

To sum up, in both languages, there is a large group of words based on taboo terms. Some of them might be considered semantically empty, which allows them to occur in a great variety of lexical contexts (Bolinger 1972: 248), while others retain a great portion of their original meaning. In these words, a gradual loss of semantic content can be observed along with the acquisition of the grammatical role of function words. The retention of semantic features might impede the connectivity of the words to which it is applicable. There are, however, examples of words whose usage is limited to very specific types of modified items (verbs of adjectives) or types of context (e.g. a vulgar one) that still remain highly grammaticalized. This leads to a necessary reassessment of the claim that the ability to collocate with a wide range of words is an indication of a high degree of grammaticalization.

This paper has been an attempt to answer the question of how the transition of words (nouns, adverbs) to the grammatical category of intensifiers affects their meaning and degree of taboo. Vogel's (2014) 'extremities in human value system': God, the devil, death and many other concepts are strong enough to mark the words used to name them with a value (emotional ambivalence) beyond their mere meaning. This emotional colour equips them with specific pragmatic capacities that seem to remain active in these words even when the original meaning has been completely eroded. Some of them remain tabooed (Polish *mać*), even when their connection with the original taboo word is no longer or not easily recoverable.

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