ISSN: 2181-3337 | SCIENTISTS.UZ VOLUME 5 ISSUE 8 AUGUST 2026

ENANTIOSEMY IDENTIFICATION CRITERIA: AN OPERATIONAL FRAMEWORK BASED ON ENGLISH AND UZBEK DATA

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DOI: 10.67620/sai.58c0002

ABSTRACT

Enantiosemy, the coexistence of opposed meanings within a single linguistic form, presents a persistent classification problem in lexical semantics because apparent opposition may arise from polysemy, homonymy, pragmatic inference, or discourse-specific reinterpretation. This study develops an operational framework for identifying enantiosemy through a qualitative comparison of English and Uzbek data. A controlled set of 24 candidate units, evenly divided between the two languages, was evaluated using six diagnostics: semantic polarity, single-unit identity, contextual disambiguation, collocational differentiation, translation sensitivity, and functional classification. The analysis classified 12 candidates as robust, six as borderline, and six as non-enantiosemic. English examples were concentrated primarily at the lexical level, whereas Uzbek candidates more frequently involved grammatical and phraseological mechanisms. The findings indicate that semantic opposition alone is insufficient for classification: robust cases require evidence that opposed senses belong to one linguistic unit and are systematically activated by distinguishable contexts. The proposed framework therefore integrates structural, cognitive, pragmatic, and cross-linguistic evidence. It also provides a transparent basis for separating genuine enantiosemy from ordinary polysemy, homonymy, and context-induced contrast. Although the dataset is limited, the model offers a replicable foundation for future corpus-based research, lexicography, translation studies, and contrastive semantic analysis across typologically different languages, and pedagogy.

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07.09.26

Keywords: *enantiosemy, contronymy, semantic polarity, lexical semantics, English-Uzbek linguistics, pragmatics.*

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Introduction

Enantiosemy refers to a semantic configuration in which one linguistic form is associated with meanings that stand in an oppositional relation. In English-language discussions, related labels include contronym, auto-antonym, antagonym, and Janus word. Canonical examples include sanction, which can indicate authorization or punishment, and dust, which can describe either removing a substance or applying a fine substance to a surface. Such items appear paradoxical because a single form seems to encode incompatible directions of meaning. Yet the paradox is partly methodological: without a principled procedure, analysts may classify any contextually variable or historically divergent sense as enantiosemic.

The problem matters beyond terminological precision. Enantiosemy lies at the intersection of polysemy, antonymy, homonymy, semantic change, pragmatics, and phraseology. Antonymy normally

relates two distinct forms, whereas enantiosemy localizes opposition within one form. Polysemy permits multiple related senses without requiring polarity, and homonymy groups formally identical but historically or semantically unrelated lexemes. Consequently, the existence of two dictionary glosses that appear different is not enough to establish enantiosemy. A convincing analysis must show both internal semantic relatedness and systematic opposition. This requirement becomes more important in cross-linguistic research, where a form that appears internally contradictory in one language may be translated by entirely different lexical or grammatical resources in another.

The present study addresses this problem through a controlled comparison of English and Uzbek. The dataset contains 24 candidate units, 12 from each language, evaluated through six proposed diagnostics. The analysis develops these diagnostics into an explicit operational model. It asks three questions: (a) What minimum criteria are necessary to distinguish enantiosemy from neighboring semantic phenomena? (b) How do context and collocation contribute to the activation of opposed senses? and (c) Does the English-Uzbek comparison suggest different structural locations for enantiosemic contrast? The central argument is that enantiosemy should not be identified from semantic polarity alone. It is better treated as a constrained form of sign-internal opposition whose classification depends on converging lexical, contextual, collocational, translational, and functional evidence.

Literature Review

Lexical-semantic theory provides several competing ways to interpret enantiosemy. Structural approaches traditionally distinguish lexical relations by the organization of senses and forms. Cruse (1986, 2000) emphasizes the need to separate paradigmatic opposition from sense relations within polysemous items, while Murphy (2003) shows that antonymy is not merely logical negation but a conventional lexical relation shaped by linguistic knowledge and use. From this perspective, enantiosemy cannot simply be called “antonymy inside a word” unless the opposed senses can be shown to participate in a stable semantic relation.

A cognitive-semantic perspective shifts attention from fixed dictionary senses to categorization and meaning construction. Prototype models allow one lexical category to extend through metaphor, metonymy, and perspectival shifts rather than through a set of sharply separated definitions (Taylor, 2003). Lakoff and Johnson (1980) similarly demonstrate that conceptual mappings can motivate apparently distant meanings, while Evans (2009) argues that lexical meaning is dynamically elaborated in context. These approaches help explain why opposite interpretations may remain connected through a common conceptual schema. For example, a lexical item can profile opposite endpoints of the same event frame, or the same action can be construed from agent and patient perspectives. Such mechanisms make enantiosemy compatible with motivated polysemy rather than treating it as an accidental lexical defect.

Historical semantics adds a diachronic explanation. Traugott and Dasher (2002) show that semantic change often develops from recurring pragmatic inferences that become conventionalized. Geeraerts (2010) likewise situates polysemy and semantic change within a broader history of lexical-semantic theory. Enantiosemic pairs may therefore arise when contextual reinterpretations stabilize in different directions, when evaluative meanings ameliorate or deteriorate, or when an event is reconceptualized from different participant roles. Diachrony is important, but it cannot be the sole diagnostic: two historically unrelated homonyms should not be reclassified as enantiosemy merely because contemporary glosses happen to be opposite.

Specialist studies reinforce the need for explicit criteria. Kajberuny and Hakobyan (2020), using dictionary data and the British National Corpus, argue that English enantiosemy can be analyzed as motivated polysemy and stress the value of collocation in separating senses. Avdeeva et al. (2019) likewise discuss classification criteria and the heterogeneous factors that produce intra-word opposition. More recent comparative work distinguishes autoantonymy and enantiosemy while emphasizing context and translation problems (Sotvoldiev, 2024). These studies converge on an important methodological principle:

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opposite meanings must be demonstrably associated with the same form, but their distribution must also be observable in recurrent linguistic environments.

Uzbek evidence broadens the phenomenon beyond isolated lexical words. Odilov (2014) demonstrates that phraseological units may develop opposed interpretations and proposes distinctions such as symmetric versus asymmetric and synchronic versus diachronic phraseological enantiosemy. Odilov (2016) further argues that enantiosemy in Uzbek can arise through semantic development, grammatical factors, and speech-based reinterpretation. This is particularly relevant to a comparison with English because the structural locus of opposition may differ across languages. A language with productive agglutinative morphology and a rich phraseological system may distribute semantic contrast across grammatical or multiword constructions more visibly than a language in which dictionary headwords often carry the contrast.

Corpus methodology also informs the proposed framework. Sinclair (1991) established the importance of collocation and repeated co-occurrence patterns for lexical interpretation. For enantiosemy, this means that opposed senses should not be demonstrated through invented examples alone. Even in a small qualitative study, collocational evidence can test whether different interpretations repeatedly occur in distinct lexical or syntactic environments. Likewise, linguocultural analysis is relevant when phraseological or evaluative meanings depend on shared cultural knowledge. Wierzbicka (1992) argues that lexical meaning can encode culture-specific conceptualizations, cautioning against assuming that cross-linguistic equivalents have identical semantic boundaries.

Taken together, the literature suggests four unresolved methodological issues. First, semantic opposition must be distinguished from mere difference. Second, formal identity must be separated from homonymy. Third, context should function as evidence rather than as an unlimited source of ad hoc reinterpretation. Fourth, a cross-linguistic model must be capable of classifying lexical, grammatical, and phraseological units without assuming that all languages realize enantiosemy in the same structural way. The six-diagnostic framework developed below is designed to address these four problems.

Method

The study employs a qualitative comparative design with limited descriptive quantification. The aim is not to estimate the frequency of enantiosemy in English or Uzbek, but to test whether a consistent set of diagnostics can classify plausible candidates more reliably than intuitive judgment. The dataset consists of 24 candidate units, equally divided between English and Uzbek. Candidates were selected through literature-based and lexicographic screening to include lexical, grammatical, deictic, and phraseological patterns. The design reports aggregate classification outcomes and representative examples in order to test the diagnostic procedure; it does not claim to provide an exhaustive inventory of enantiosemic forms in either language.

Each candidate was evaluated against six operational criteria summarized in Table 1. Semantic polarity asks whether the two interpretations can reasonably be represented as opposed directions, states, evaluations, or participant perspectives. The single-unit constraint tests whether both interpretations belong to the same lexical or constructional unit rather than to accidental homonymy. Contextual disambiguation examines whether naturally interpretable discourse can select one sense without making the other equally plausible. Collocational differentiation asks whether the senses prefer different lexical, syntactic, or constructional environments. Translation sensitivity examines whether the single source-language form regularly requires distinct target-language equivalents across its opposed uses. Functional classification assigns the candidate to a lexical, grammatical, deictic, or phraseological level so that cross-linguistic comparison does not collapse structurally different phenomena.

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Table 1

Operational Criteria for Identifying Enantiosemy

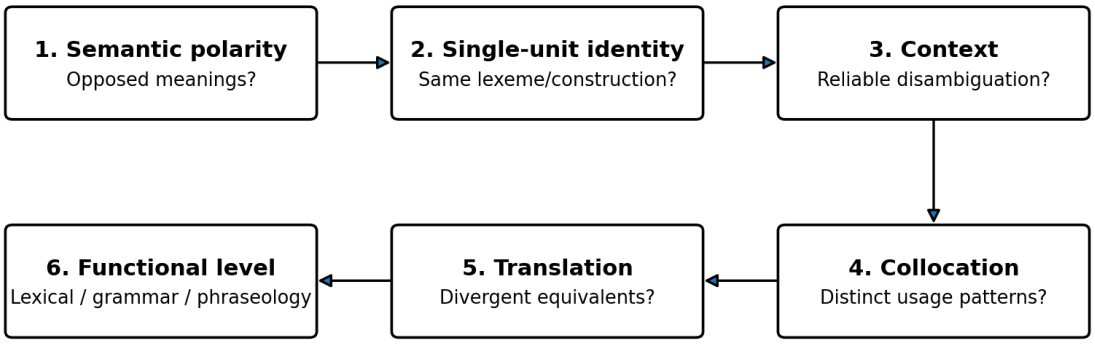
Criterion	Operational question	Typical evidence	Role in decision
Semantic polarity	Do the senses encode genuinely opposed directions, states, evaluations, or perspectives?	Dictionary definitions; componential contrast; contextual paraphrases	Mandatory gate
Single-unit constraint	Do both senses belong to the same lexeme or conventional construction rather than homonyms?	Lexicographic structure; morphology; etymology where needed	Mandatory gate
Contextual disambiguation	Can ordinary discourse reliably select one opposed sense?	Natural examples; discourse frames; syntactic cues	Primary support
Collocational differentiation	Do the senses prefer distinguishable lexical or syntactic environments?	Collocates; argument structure; recurrent phrase patterns	Primary support
Translation sensitivity	Does one source form require different target-language equivalents across opposed uses?	Parallel translation choices; bilingual lexicography	Secondary support
Functional classification	At what structural level is the opposition conventionalized?	Lexical, grammatical, deictic, or phraseological analysis	Prevents category error

Note. Robust classification requires both mandatory gates plus converging evidence from at least two contextual or distributional diagnostics.

The decision process was cumulative rather than mechanical. A candidate was classified as robust when semantic polarity and single-unit identity were supported and at least two contextual diagnostics converged. Borderline status was assigned when opposition was plausible but depended heavily on pragmatic inference, historical interpretation, or a weakly established structural relation. Candidates were excluded when the contrast was better explained by ordinary polysemy, homonymy, or a contextually created opposition not conventionalized in the unit itself. Figure 1 represents this sequence as a replicable workflow.

Figure 1

Operational Decision Pathway for Enantiosemy Identification



Note. Semantic polarity and unit identity function as exclusion gates; context, collocation, and translation provide converging support before final functional classification.

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The analysis proceeded in five stages. First, each item underwent semantic screening. Second, structural verification tested whether the readings belonged to one unit. Third, contextual examples were compared to determine how discourse resolved the polarity. Fourth, collocational and translation behavior was considered as supporting evidence. Finally, candidates were classified and compared across English and Uzbek by structural type. This procedure follows corpus-informed principles without claiming a full corpus study: corpus methodology motivates the attention to recurrent contexts and collocations, but no frequency statistics or significance tests are reported.

Results

Application of the framework produced three outcome groups. Of the 24 candidates, 12 were classified as robust instances of enantiosemy, six as borderline, and six as non-enantiosemic under the stricter criteria. Thus, half of the initial candidates survived as robust cases, while the remaining half required qualification or exclusion. This distribution supports the methodological premise that intuitive semantic opposition tends to overgenerate candidates when structural identity and contextual evidence are not independently tested.

The clearest English cases were lexical. Sanction illustrates a conventional polarity between authorization and punitive restriction. Dust profiles opposite directions of transfer: removing dust from a surface versus applying a powder-like substance to a surface. Screen can profile presentation, as in screening a film, or concealment/protection, as in screening something from view. These cases are robust because opposed readings are lexically established and are strongly disambiguated by syntactic and collocational environments. By contrast, fast, with older senses related to firmness or immobility and the familiar sense “moving quickly,” was treated as borderline because contemporary speakers may not experience the senses as a transparent oppositional pair. Apparent was also treated cautiously because “clearly visible/evident” and “seeming rather than necessarily real” are contrasting epistemic construals, but not a simple binary opposition in all contexts.

The Uzbek data displayed greater structural diversity. The documented candidates include chiqmoq and tushmoq, whose interpretations vary across motion and constructional contexts; hali, whose temporal interpretation depends on discourse anchoring; and the phraseological unit yuz burmoq, which can be associated with orientation toward or away from a referent in context. The analysis does not claim that every contextual alternation of these forms is enantiosemic. Rather, they demonstrate why grammatical and phraseological evidence must be evaluated differently from isolated dictionary headwords.

A cross-linguistic tendency emerged from the classified examples: English robust cases were predominantly lexical, whereas Uzbek candidates more often involved grammatical, deictic, or phraseological organization. Given the small purposive sample, this pattern should be interpreted as a structural tendency within the dataset, not as a population-level typological law. Nevertheless, it supports the need for a definition of enantiosemy broad enough to recognize sign-internal opposition beyond single free-standing lexemes while still requiring conventionalized evidence.

Discussion

The results support an operational rather than purely definitional account of enantiosemy. The key issue is not whether two glosses can be made to look opposite, but whether opposition is a stable property of one linguistic unit and whether speakers can systematically resolve it through conventional contextual cues. This position is compatible with cognitive accounts of flexible lexical categories (Evans, 2009; Taylor, 2003) while retaining the structural discipline emphasized in lexical semantics (Cruse, 2000; Murphy, 2003).

The first implication concerns the boundary between enantiosemy and polysemy. All robust enantiosemic items are polysemous in the broad sense that one form is associated with more than one interpretation, but not all polysemy is enantiosemic. The additional requirement is polarity. Even then, polarity is gradient: some sense pairs are direct reversals, while others involve opposing orientations,

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evaluations, or participant roles. This explains why a binary yes/no judgment is often inadequate at the screening stage. The robust-borderline-excluded classification gives the analyst a principled way to represent uncertainty instead of forcing marginal items into the category.

Second, context is necessary but not sufficient. If context alone can create the opposite meaning, any ironic or creative use could be labeled enantiosemic. The proposed framework therefore treats contextual disambiguation as evidence only after single-unit identity and plausible conventional polarity have been established. Collocation strengthens this distinction. The English verb dust, for instance, is not ambiguous in the same way across all environments: constructions specifying a surface versus a substance help select whether material is removed or applied. This distributional perspective is consistent with Sinclair's (1991) account of collocation and with Kajberuny and Hakobyan's (2020) corpus-supported treatment of English enantiosemy.

Third, the English-Uzbek comparison shows why a strictly word-based definition may be too narrow for cross-linguistic work. Odilov's (2014, 2016) research demonstrates that Uzbek phraseological and grammatical structures can host oppositional semantic relations. The present dataset likewise contains candidates whose contrast emerges through constructional or discourse organization. However, expanding the domain beyond words creates a methodological risk: analysts may begin labeling any reversible construction as enantiosemic. Functional classification is therefore not a decorative typology; it is a control mechanism. A lexical candidate should be tested as a lexeme, a phraseological candidate as a conventional multiword unit, and a grammatical candidate as a recurrent construction. The relevant "same unit" must be defined at the level where conventional meaning is actually stored and activated.

Fourth, translation sensitivity offers a useful secondary diagnostic. When one English form such as sanction requires different Uzbek equivalents depending on whether permission or penalty is intended, the translation split makes the internal polarity visible. The same principle works in the opposite direction: a multifunctional Uzbek form may need different English renderings across contexts. Translation divergence is not proof by itself, because ordinary polysemy also produces multiple translations. Its value lies in triangulation. When translation divergence aligns with semantic polarity, contextual disambiguation, and collocational separation, confidence in the classification increases.

Fifth, linguocultural interpretation is particularly important for phraseological and evaluative enantiosemy. Wierzbicka (1992) argues that languages package cultural conceptualizations differently, and fixed expressions often depend on shared scripts of evaluation, interpersonal stance, or social behavior. This helps explain why apparently equivalent phrases may not preserve the same polarity across languages. It also cautions against deriving Uzbek classifications solely from English metalanguage. The analytical categories should be comparable, but evidence for conventionality must come from usage within each language.

The framework also clarifies the relation between synchronic and diachronic explanation. Historical semantic change may explain how opposite senses developed, as suggested by Traugott and Dasher's (2002) model of pragmatic inference and conventionalization. Yet a synchronic identification procedure should not require a complete etymological history. A present-day item can be classified operationally if its opposed senses are conventional and structurally related, even when the historical path is uncertain. Conversely, historical cognacy alone does not establish contemporary enantiosemy if the meanings now belong to separate lexemes or survive only in archaic usage.

Overall, the study's main contribution is methodological. Rather than proposing another list of contronyms, it specifies what evidence should count when deciding whether a candidate belongs to the category. The six diagnostics make disagreements inspectable: researchers can identify whether they disagree about polarity, unit identity, context, collocation, translation behavior, or structural level. This is a more productive basis for replication and corpus expansion than an intuition-driven inventory.

Implications, Limitations, and Future Research

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The framework has practical value for lexicography, translation, and language teaching. Dictionaries can mark opposed senses more transparently when the senses are supported by recurrent collocations. Translators can treat polarity-sensitive units as risk points that require contextual verification rather than direct word-for-word substitution. For advanced language learners, contrastive examples can demonstrate that knowing a headword does not guarantee correct interpretation when the same form participates in opposed constructions.

Several limitations remain. The 24-item dataset is small and purposive, so the numerical distribution cannot be generalized to English or Uzbek as whole languages. The controlled candidate set was not derived from a reproducible corpus sampling frame; accordingly, the study does not claim frequency-based validation. In addition, judgments of semantic opposition may vary between analysts, especially for evaluative, deictic, and historically layered senses. Future research should therefore expand the dataset, preregister explicit coding rules, and report inter-rater agreement. A larger study could combine lexicographic screening with balanced corpora, compare collocational profiles statistically, and test whether native speakers consistently recognize the proposed polarity. Cross-linguistic extension to other Turkic and Indo-European languages would further show whether the lexical-versus-constructional tendency observed here is typologically robust.

Conclusion

Enantiosemy is best understood not as a lexical curiosity but as a problem of identifying conventionalized opposition within a single linguistic unit. The English-Uzbek comparison shows that semantic polarity alone is too permissive: apparent opposites may result from ordinary polysemy, homonymy, pragmatic inference, or translation asymmetry. The proposed six-diagnostic framework responds to this problem by combining semantic polarity, single-unit identity, contextual disambiguation, collocational differentiation, translation sensitivity, and functional classification.

Applied to the controlled 24-item dataset, the framework yielded 12 robust cases, six borderline cases, and six exclusions. The documented English examples primarily support lexical enantiosemy, whereas the Uzbek examples point to a wider role for grammatical, deictic, and phraseological organization. Because the dataset is limited, this contrast should be treated as a hypothesis for larger corpus-based testing rather than as a categorical typological claim.

The broader significance of the model lies in replicability. It converts a traditionally intuitive label into a sequence of questions that can be checked against linguistic evidence. In doing so, it preserves the insight that word meaning is context-sensitive while preventing context from becoming an unrestricted explanation for any contradiction. A future corpus study with explicit sampling, collocational statistics, and independent coding can test and refine the framework. For current lexical-semantic and translation research, however, the operational approach provides a clearer basis for deciding when semantic opposition genuinely belongs to one sign and when it does not.

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