

SCALAR MEANING AND EVALUATIVE INTENSITY IN EMOTIONAL ENGAGEMENT: A STUDY OF INTEREST, PASSION, AND OBSESSION

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Abstract

Emotional experience is frequently encoded in language through lexical items that express varying degrees of psychological involvement. This study investigates scalar meaning and evaluative intensity within the lexical field of emotional engagement, focusing on the expressions interest, passion, and obsession. Drawing on insights from Lexical Semantics and the theoretical principles of Scalar Semantics, the study explores how these lexical items function as gradable expressions representing increasing levels of emotional attachment. The analysis also considers the role of semantic prosody in shaping the evaluative interpretations associated with each term. Using qualitative semantic analysis, the study examines the conceptual relationships, evaluative meanings, and typical contextual associations of the three lexical items. The findings suggest that interest, passion, and obsession form a structured semantic continuum representing progressive degrees of emotional intensity. While interest denotes mild curiosity or engagement and is generally interpreted as neutral, passion reflects a stronger and positively valued emotional commitment. In contrast, obsession represents an extreme level of emotional attachment that often carries negative evaluative implications due to its association with excessive or compulsive behaviour. The study demonstrates that emotional lexical items are not isolated semantic units but are organized within graded structures that encode both conceptual intensity and social evaluation. By highlighting the interaction between scalar meaning and evaluative interpretation, this research contributes to ongoing discussions in lexical semantic theory concerning the representation of affective meaning in language. The study further underscores the importance of examining emotional vocabulary through scalar and evaluative frameworks in order to better understand how speakers linguistically conceptualize varying degrees of emotional engagement.

Key words: Scalar Meaning, Evaluative Intensity, Lexical Semantics, Semantic Prosody, Emotional Intensity

Introduction

Language is used only by human beings for communication. Since these human beings consist of different groups characterized by the frequent use of different linguistic behaviors and other extra-linguistic norms that guide their social interaction, it is normal and expected that variation exists in their use of language across different situations. According to Ofoegbu (2022), language is the general human system of communication. Ofoegbu and Ishima (2024) opine that it is a means by which humans alone communicate. This means that language is purely a human attribute which, serves primarily as a means of communication. Language is a system and this means that it is an organised human behaviour built on inherent structures.

Human language provides speakers with sophisticated resources for representing emotional experience. Rather than expressing emotions as fixed and discrete categories, language frequently encodes emotional states along gradual semantic continua, allowing speakers to indicate subtle differences in the intensity of feelings and psychological involvement. Within this perspective, lexical items that appear conceptually related may differ significantly in the degree of emotional force they convey. Such gradations in meaning have been widely examined within the field of Lexical Semantics, which investigates how words encode conceptual distinctions and how these distinctions are organized within the mental lexicon.

One important framework for understanding such variation is scalar semantics, which describes how lexical items are structured along ordered scales that represent differences in magnitude, intensity, or evaluation. Research on gradable meaning has shown that many linguistic expressions function by locating a concept at a particular point on an underlying semantic scale (Kennedy & McNally, 2005; Kennedy, 2007). While gradability is most frequently associated with adjectives such as *big*, *small*, or *expensive*, more recent studies suggest that nouns and verbs may also encode graded conceptual relationships, particularly in the domain of emotions and psychological states (Paradis, 2011; Glynn & Robinson, 2014).

Language in its multifunctional ways, plays crucial roles in human life (Nweke & Nweke, 2025). Emotional vocabulary offers a particularly rich site for examining scalar meaning because emotional experiences naturally vary in intensity and evaluation. Words such as *interest*, *passion*, and *obsession* appear to belong to the same semantic field of emotional engagement, yet they differ in the degree of commitment, affective involvement, and psychological intensity they imply. While *interest* generally denotes mild curiosity or attention, *passion* expresses stronger emotional dedication, and *obsession* suggests an overwhelming or excessive form of attachment. These lexical distinctions indicate that emotional states may be conceptualized linguistically as points along a continuum of emotional intensity.

Another important dimension in the interpretation of lexical meaning is evaluative intensity. Language not only describes emotional states but also conveys attitudes toward those states. Such could be some kinds of interaction, which result in high proportion of negative communicative acts perceived or intersection of interests in a certain situation (Nweke, 2024a cited in Nweke, 2025a). As a result, words that represent similar emotional experiences may differ in the degree of positive or negative evaluation they evoke. Within this framework, lexical meaning incorporates both conceptual content and affective orientation, reflecting the speaker's stance toward the described phenomenon.

In addition to scalar organization and evaluative meaning, the interpretation of lexical items is also influenced by semantic prosody, a concept widely discussed in Corpus Linguistics. Semantic prosody refers to the evaluative associations that words acquire through recurrent patterns of collocation in discourse (Partington, Duguid, & Taylor, 2013). Through repeated co-occurrence with particular types of words or contexts, lexical items gradually develop positive, negative, or neutral attitudinal meanings. Consequently, two words that appear conceptually similar may evoke different interpretations depending on the collocational environments in which they typically occur.

Acquiring knowledge pays off in numerous ways, ranging from personal growth and professional advancement to societal benefits and economic growth (Nweke, 2025b). Thus, despite the growing interest in scalar semantics and semantic prosody, relatively little research has focused on how these concepts interact within emotional lexical fields. Specifically, there is limited systematic analysis of how emotional lexical items encode differences in emotional intensity, evaluation, and contextual usage simultaneously. Understanding these relationships is important for explaining how language structures emotional experience and how speakers choose among semantically related lexical items to express different degrees of engagement.

This study therefore examines the lexical items *interest*, *passion*, and *obsession* as members of an emotional semantic scale. By analyzing their scalar organization, evaluative intensity, and semantic prosody, the study seeks to demonstrate how language represents emotional involvement as a graded conceptual phenomenon rather than a set of discrete categories.

Statement of the Problem

Traditionally, it is argued that language is a tool to interact or mechanism to communicate to others, or rather, a means of conveying thoughts, ideas, concepts, or even a feeling (Nweke & Nweke, 2025). Language does not only describe emotions but also encodes degrees of emotional intensity. Many lexical items that refer to emotions are not isolated in meaning; rather, they occur along semantic scales that represent increasing or decreasing levels of emotional involvement. Linguistic theories of scalar semantics explain how such words occupy different points on a conceptual continuum (Kennedy & McNally, 2005; Paradis, 2011). Despite these theoretical insights, the gradable relationships among emotional lexical items are often underexplored in practical linguistic analysis, particularly in relation to evaluative meaning and semantic prosody.

Lexical items such as *interest*, *passion*, and *obsession* appear to describe related emotional states, yet they differ significantly in intensity, evaluation, and contextual usage. While *interest* typically indicates mild engagement, *passion* reflects stronger emotional commitment, and *obsession* suggests excessive or overwhelming attachment. These distinctions demonstrate how language structures emotional experience along graded semantic dimensions. Recent studies in corpus linguistics and lexical semantics highlight the role of semantic prosody in shaping evaluative interpretations of words through patterns of collocation (Partington, Duguid, & Taylor, 2013). However, few studies integrate scalar semantics, gradable meaning, evaluative intensity, and semantic prosody within a single analytical framework for emotional lexical fields.

Consequently, there remains a need for a systematic linguistic analysis of how emotional lexical items are organized along a semantic scale and how their meanings differ in terms of intensity, evaluation, and contextual associations. This study therefore investigates the scalar relationship among the lexical items *interest*, *passion*, and *obsession* in order to understand how language encodes different degrees of emotional engagement.

The main objective of this study is to analyze the scalar semantic relationship among the lexical items *interest*, *passion*, and *obsession*.

The specific objectives are to:

1. Examine the semantic scale that organizes the lexical items *interest*, *passion*, and *obsession*.
2. Identify the differences in emotional intensity expressed by these lexical items.
3. Analyze the evaluative meanings associated with each lexical item.
4. Investigate the semantic prosody of the lexical items based on their typical contextual usage.
5. Demonstrate how gradable meaning operates within this emotional lexical field.

The study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. How are the lexical items *interest*, *passion*, and *obsession* organized along a semantic scale?
2. What differences in emotional intensity exist among these lexical items?
3. How does evaluative intensity vary across the lexical scale?
4. What patterns of semantic prosody characterize the usage of these lexical items?
5. How does gradable meaning operate within the emotional lexical field represented by these words?

Theoretically, the study is anchored in lexical semantic theory, specifically drawing on insights from scalar semantics, gradable meaning, and semantic prosody to explain how emotional lexical items encode graded intensity and evaluative meaning.

The concept, “Scalar semantics” refers to the organization of lexical meanings along a continuum of conceptual intensity or degree. Instead of representing isolated semantic categories, many lexical items are structured through ordered relationships that reflect relative magnitude. In lexical semantic theory, words within the same semantic field often form hierarchical or gradable structures that allow speakers to communicate subtle distinctions in meaning.

Early work by Alan Cruse established that lexical items may be organized through gradation within semantic fields (Cruse, 1986). More recent research, however, has expanded this idea by examining how scalar meaning interacts with cognition, discourse, and degree semantics. Contemporary scholars argue that scalar relationships reflect underlying conceptual ordering mechanisms in the mental lexicon (Kennedy & McNally, 2005; Paradis, 2011). Within the lexical field of emotional engagement, the items *interest*, *passion*, and *obsession* illustrate this scalar organization. All three terms describe psychological attachment, but they differ in the degree of emotional intensity encoded by each lexical item. The relationship can therefore be conceptualized as:

Interest → Passion → Obsession.

This progression reflects increasing intensity of emotional involvement. In scalar semantics, such relationships enable speakers to convey nuanced differences in affective experience by selecting lexical items that correspond to particular degrees on the scale.

Recent work in lexical semantics also suggests that scalar structures are cognitively salient and widely used in natural language because they allow speakers to encode comparative information efficiently (Paradis, 2011; Kennedy, 2015).

Gradable meaning refers to the property of linguistic expressions that allows them to vary along degrees of intensity or magnitude. While gradability is most commonly associated with adjectives, research in contemporary semantics demonstrates that gradability extends beyond adjectives to include nouns, verbs, and even discourse expressions (Kennedy & McNally, 2005; Kennedy, 2015).

Gradable expressions typically possess three defining characteristics:

1. They permit comparison between different degrees.
2. They form part of a conceptual scale.
3. Their interpretation depends on contextual standards of comparison.

According to Kennedy and McNally (2005), gradable expressions are interpreted relative to a scale that measures the degree of a particular property. In the case of emotional nouns such as *interest*, *passion*, and *obsession*, the underlying dimension is emotional involvement.

Although these nouns are not directly modified by comparative morphology (such as *more* or *most*), speakers nevertheless interpret them as representing different degrees of the same conceptual property. This indicates that gradability operates at a **conceptual level**, not solely at the level of grammatical morphology.

It is argued as human beings communicating our ideas using language, there expects obedience to the structure rules of the chosen language for our listeners or readers to clearly understand our message (Nweke (2021 cited in Nweke, 2025). Recent studies in cognitive linguistics also suggest that speakers mentally represent emotional states along conceptual continua, enabling them to interpret lexical items as expressing varying degrees of affective engagement (Paradis, 2011). This suggests Ideational meaning of language function, which reflects the

product of the interaction of human intellectual (cognitive) system and language system (Nweke, 2024a). In a similar view, the linguists affirm that mood choice reveals the relationship between the addresser and the addressee (Nweke, 2024b)

Evaluative intensity refers to the degree of attitudinal or affective force conveyed by a lexical item. Language not only describes experiences but also communicates speakers' evaluations of those experiences. Similarly, Yang contends that human recognises the phenomena in the real world through the cognitive system, categorises and conceives the pieces of experience in the brain through the language system'' (Yang 2012, cited in Nweke, 2024). In modern linguistic research, evaluation is often analyzed through frameworks such as Appraisal Theory, developed by scholars such as James R. Martin and Peter R. R. White (Martin & White, 2005). Within this framework, evaluative meaning is divided into several dimensions, including attitude, engagement, and graduation. Graduation refers specifically to the scaling of intensity or force within evaluative language. In the lexical field examined in this study, evaluative intensity increases across the scale:

Interest → Passion → Obsession

At the lower end, *interest* indicates moderate curiosity or engagement. The term generally carries a neutral or mildly positive evaluation. *Passion* expresses stronger emotional involvement and often conveys admiration or commitment. At the highest level, *obsession* signals extremely intense emotional involvement. While the intensity is clear, the evaluation may shift toward ambivalence or negativity because excessive emotional attachment is frequently perceived as socially problematic.

Recent studies on evaluative language emphasize that lexical items differ not only in conceptual meaning but also in the strength of evaluative stance they encode (Bednarek, 2009; Hunston, 2011).

Semantic prosody refers to the evaluative associations that lexical items acquire through repeated patterns of co-occurrence in discourse. The concept was originally proposed by John Sinclair but has been widely developed in corpus linguistics and discourse analysis (Sinclair, 1991; Hunston, 2011). Also, the social purpose of a text determines the language choice existing between the people interacting, appropriately to the situation of things (Nweke & Okeke, 2025). Semantic prosody, here thus, explains why words with similar conceptual meanings may evoke different emotional reactions. This occurs because repeated collocational patterns create consistent evaluative environments.

For example:

- *Interest* frequently appears in neutral contexts such as *academic interest* or *public interest*.
- *Passion* often collocates with positive activities such as *music*, *art*, or *career*.
- *Obsession* frequently appears in contexts involving addiction, psychological fixation, or excessive behavior.

Because of these patterns, *obsession* tends to develop a more negative semantic prosody than the other items in the scale.

In order to meet the communicative demands, Nweke and Okeke (2023) argue that meaning is of premium importance considering the role it plays its linguistic effect. Thus, recent corpus-based research confirms that semantic prosody plays a crucial role in shaping how speakers interpret lexical evaluation (Hunston, 2011; Bednarek, 2009). It therefore provides an important explanation for the evaluative differences observed among lexical items within the same semantic field.

Emotional intensity refers to the strength of affective experience represented by a lexical item. Human emotions vary in magnitude, and language reflects these variations through differentiated lexical expressions. Nweke and Nweke (2022) link this explanation to the definition of language which means of conveying thoughts, ideas, concepts, or even a feeling. In cognitive linguistics, emotional concepts are often represented as **conceptual scales** in which different lexical items correspond to different degrees of emotional force (Paradis, 2011). Within the emotional engagement field, the scale examined in this study reflects increasing levels of psychological involvement:

Interest

→ mild attraction or curiosity

Passion

→ strong enthusiasm or dedication

Obsession

→ overwhelming or compulsive attachment

This progression demonstrates how lexical systems capture variations in emotional experience. According to Kennedy (2015), such gradational structures are fundamental to natural language because they allow speakers to communicate subtle differences in meaning without expanding the lexicon unnecessarily. This in a similar view

encodes the definition of lexicogrammar, entailing the system of wording representing the linguistic materials for transferring meanings through words and structures (Sanhirdin 2013 cited in Nweke, 2024).

Emotional intensity therefore functions as the conceptual dimension underlying the scalar relationship among the lexical items analyzed in this study.

Analysis

Table 1: Scalar Semantic Structure of Emotional Engagement

Lexical Item	Scalar Position	Emotional Intensity	Degree of Commitment	of Evaluative Orientation	Semantic Prosody
Interest	Low	Mild curiosity	Limited engagement	Neutral / positive	Neutral
Passion	Middle	Strong enthusiasm	Deep commitment	Strongly positive	Positive
Obsession	High	Extreme emotional involvement	Compulsive attachment	Often negative	Negative

Table 2: Gradability and Intensity Characteristics

Feature	Interest	Passion	Obsession
Emotional strength	Low	Moderate–high	Extreme
Cognitive involvement	Attention / curiosity	Deep motivation	Fixation
Behavioral implication	Occasional engagement	Persistent dedication	Compulsive focus
Social perception	Acceptable / normal	Admired	Often problematic

Table 3: Typical Collocational Patterns (Semantic Prosody)

Lexical Item	Frequent Collocations	Prosodic Effect
Interest	academic interest, public interest, growing interest	Neutral / positive
Passion	passion for music, passion for art, passion for learning	Positive
Obsession	dangerous obsession, unhealthy obsession, obsessive behavior	Negative

Interpretation of the Structural Analysis

The tables demonstrate that the lexical items under investigation form a clear semantic progression of emotional intensity. At the lowest point on the scale, *interest* represents a relatively mild form of psychological engagement characterized primarily by curiosity or attention. The behavioral implications of this lexical item are limited, and its evaluative orientation remains largely neutral.

The lexical item *passion* occupies an intermediate position on the semantic scale. Compared with *interest*, it signals significantly greater emotional involvement and sustained commitment. Due to *passion* frequently appears in contexts associated with creativity, ambition, and personal dedication, it tends to carry a strong positive semantic prosody.

At the highest point of the scale lies *obsession*, which denotes an extreme form of emotional attachment. While it shares the conceptual domain of emotional engagement with the other lexical items, the degree of intensity associated with *obsession* often leads to negative evaluation. This is reflected in its frequent collocation with expressions referring to compulsive behavior, psychological fixation, or unhealthy attachment.

Taken together, the analysis demonstrates how lexical meaning can be understood as the interaction of several semantic dimensions: scalar position, emotional intensity, evaluation, and contextual usage.

Overall, the study illustrates how emotional lexical items encode not only conceptual meaning but also graded levels of emotional intensity and evaluation. Here, the linguistic philosophy plays an important role, it enables users to make up their own minds about how they would talk, and it enables users to be aware of the choices that are available (Nweke & Okeke, 2023). This invariably encodes the interpretation that the grammatical choices enable speakers to enact their complex and diverse interpersonal relations, and on the other hand, it reveals that users of language establish, negotiate and assume their position in social relationships (Nweke, 2024a).

Conclusion

This study examines the scalar semantic relationship among the lexical items interest, passion, and obsession. The analysis demonstrates that these words form a graded lexical scale representing increasing levels of emotional engagement. The progression from interest to obsession reflects a gradual increase in psychological involvement, evaluative intensity, and contextual associations. This scalar organization illustrates how emotional lexical items encode graded conceptual meaning within the English lexicon.

The findings reveal that differences among these lexical items are not merely formal but involve variations in emotional intensity, evaluative meaning, and semantic prosody. While interest reflects mild curiosity, passion expresses strong enthusiasm, and obsession denotes an extreme level of emotional attachment that may carry negative evaluative implications.

By integrating scalar semantics, gradable meaning, evaluative intensity, and semantic prosody, the study provides a comprehensive account of how language represents emotional experience along a continuum of intensity.

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