



Semantic and stylistic features of the synonymous group of the English adjective “big”

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Abstract. In contemporary linguistics, the study of lexical semantics – particularly synonymy – has gained renewed importance due to its role in enhancing language precision and expressiveness. The ability to select contextually appropriate synonyms is essential for both effective communication and stylistic variation. This study aimed to explore the semantic and stylistic properties of the English adjective “big” through an analysis of its most common synonyms. Unlike previous studies, this research placed particular emphasis on metaphorical extensions and contextual distinctions within the synonymous group. The methodology combines componential analysis with descriptive and interpretative approaches, supported by data from the British National Corpus via the Sketch Engine tool. Continuous sampling was used to extract relevant lexical items, while collocational patterns and stylistic markers were analysed to uncover distinctions in usage. The findings demonstrated that although “big” and its synonyms share a general notion of largeness, they differ in tone, register, and frequency. For instance, “big” is more informal and emotionally charged, whereas “large” is more frequent in formal and technical contexts. Other adjectives such as “huge”, “enormous”, and “great” exhibit emphatic, metaphorical, or evaluative nuances. The practical significance of this study lies in its applicability to English language

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teaching, vocabulary development, and the refinement of synonym dictionaries. The results may also be of value to translators, lexicographers, and corpus linguists aiming to enhance lexical precision and stylistic clarity

Keywords: synonymic range; lexical and semantic analysis; lexical synonymy; stylistic variation; cognitive linguistics; metaphorical meaning

Introduction

One of the defining features of an individual's linguistic competence is the richness of synonymy in their speech, which serves as an important lexical and semantic resource, enabling the precise and varied expression of meaning. The system of synonymous devices plays a significant role in shaping linguistic expressiveness, as it allows for the articulation of subtle semantic nuances, enriches the lexical texture of a text, and enhances its stylistic sophistication. Furthermore, synonymy is a key element in artistic and figurative expression, contributing to the creation of vivid imagery, expressive language, and a multifaceted representation of reality in literary discourse.

A central challenge in acquiring English vocabulary, particularly for learners of English as a foreign language, lies in grasping the nuanced differences between near-synonyms. Although a word such as “big” may appear simple and frequently used, its synonyms can vary considerably in meaning, tone, and contextual appropriateness. Thus, synonymy is not merely a lexical detail but a vital component of accurate, expressive, and contextually appropriate communication. The ability to select the most suitable synonym directly affects both clarity and stylistic effectiveness in spoken and written language, underscoring the need for a detailed study of synonymic relationships.

Research into lexical synonymy has become increasingly nuanced, often drawing on corpus data, distributional semantics, and applied linguistic contexts. For example, Y.A. Jarar *et al.* (2024) conducted a corpus-based analysis comparing verbs such as “explore”,

“investigate”, and “examine”, highlighting how semantic overlap still allows for functional distinctions based on context and collocation. Similarly, T.T.M. Phan (2024) examined the use of WordNet in teaching lexical semantics, demonstrating how visualising semantic relationships enhances vocabulary acquisition among English learners.

Other studies have explored the broader semantic dynamics of synonymy. B. Liétard *et al.* (2023) investigated diachronic changes in synonyms, presenting empirical evidence supporting the Law of Differentiation – the idea that truly synonymous words tend to diverge in meaning over time to avoid redundancy. G. Carling *et al.* (2023) proposed a cross-linguistic model of semantic change, illustrating the roles of metaphor and specialisation in meaning divergence – a process directly relevant to understanding subtle variations within synonymic groups.

Over the past five years (2020-2025), Ukrainian scholars have been actively investigating synonymous lexical units in English, focusing on their function within different terminological subsystems. In particular, O.A. Lytvynko (2021) analysed the phenomenon of synonymy in modern English pump-construction terminology, highlighting factors influencing its prevalence and its impact on terminological precision. N.A. Lebedieva *et al.* (2022) conducted a comparative analysis of Ukrainian and English lexicology, exploring synonymic relationships between words. Their findings contribute to a deeper understanding of synonymy in English and its role in ensuring clarity and accuracy in

professional communication. A. Taran (2023), examines the potential of the language corpus as a tool for researching word semantics. The analysis carried out using the corpus demonstrates how words appear in different combinations, allowing semantic shifts to be traced. The article also illustrates how text corpora can be applied in semantic research.

Several Ukrainian scholars have recently focused on synonymy in English within educational and applied linguistic frameworks. L.A. Semak (2022) investigated the stylistic functions of synonyms in contemporary Ukrainian women's prose, with particular attention to the emotional and narrative potential of synonymic variation. S.M. Albota (2024) used corpus-based analysis to examine how English-language media represent Ukraine through lexical choice, including the strategic use of synonyms. L. Diachuk (2024) conducted a comparative study of synonym usage in Ukrainian and English fiction, emphasising stylistic nuance and figurative complexity.

Moreover, lexical resources such as *Ukrainet 1.0* – a Ukrainian WordNet launched by M. Siegel *et al.* (2023) – are opening up new avenues for the systematisation of synonymic relationships in Ukrainian and their integration into multilingual lexicographic tools. These developments reflect a growing trend in Ukrainian linguistics to approach synonymy not only as a theoretical concern but also as a practical one, relevant to translation, language instruction, and corpus-based analysis. This study aimed to analyse the synonymic range of the lexeme “big” in terms of meaning and collocational compatibility.

Materials and Methods

The object of this study was the synonymous group of the English adjective “big”, while the focus was placed on the individual lexical units comprising this group. Particular emphasis was placed on identifying shared core meanings as well as distinguishing components such as

tone, register, emotional connotation, and collocational behaviour.

The study was carried out in several stages. In the first stage, a working list of synonyms was compiled using data from authoritative English dictionaries (Wehmeier, 2015). The most commonly listed near-synonyms of “big” included “large”, “great”, “huge”, “enormous”, “massive”, “gigantic”, “tremendous”, “immense”, among others. This list was refined by comparing dictionary entries to ensure that only those adjectives with overlapping core meanings were retained for more detailed analysis.

In the second stage, the method of continuous sampling was employed to gather contextual examples of each synonym. These examples were drawn from the BNC (British National Corpus, n.d.), allowing for authentic observations of usage across various communicative contexts. The third stage involved componential analysis to identify semantic features such as [+size], [+emotion], [+evaluation], or [+formality], which differentiate each word in the group. A descriptive method was then applied to interpret these distinctions, focusing on collocations, syntactic roles, and register.

Finally, elements of quantitative analysis were included to support the findings, using word frequency data obtained from online corpus tools. Attention was also given to metaphorical extensions of “big”, particularly in expressions such as “big boss”, “big name”, or “you’re a big girl now”, which illustrate cultural and pragmatic shifts from literal size to notions of social importance or emotional maturity.

This multi-step approach ensured a comprehensive understanding of how the adjective “big” and its synonyms function semantically, stylistically, and contextually in modern English.

Results and Discussion

Drawing on dictionary data and lexical databases such as WordNet (n.d.), a core list of synonyms for “big” was compiled: “large”, “great”,

“huge”, “enormous”, “massive”, “gigantic”, “tremendous”, “immense”, “colossal”, “sizable”, and “bulky”. These items were selected for further componential and contextual analysis. The lexeme “big” typically denotes large size or significant volume in relation to objects, phenomena, or abstract concepts. In this sense, “big” is used to describe physical dimensions (“a big house”, “a big tree”), to refer to substantial quantities or scales (“a big amount of money”, “a big crowd”), and to highlight personal or societal or significance (“a big decision”, “a big achievement”).

“Big” is considered slightly more informal than “large” and is generally avoided in formal writing. It is also commonly used in collocations such as “big eater” or “big spender” to describe someone who frequently engages in a particular action. In contrast, “large” is often used to denote numbers or quantities relative to what is average or expected. It is also employed in reference to general clothing sizes. It is somewhat more formal than “big” and, like “big”, can be used with both abstract and concrete nouns. “Great” is typically used with abstract concepts and is common in formal writing. When referring to something very large in size, amount, or degree, adjectives such as “enormous”, “huge”, and “massive” are appropriate. In more formal contexts, one may also use “immense” or “vast”. The word “gigantic” similarly means very large, but is primarily employed for emphasis. Other intensifiers such as “gargantuan”, “mammoth”, and “colossal” are also used, particularly in journalistic and literary contexts. The adjective “ginormous” appears in informal usage. Large quantities may also be described using adjectives such as “sizeable”, “substantial”, “hefty”, and “considerable”. “Sizeable” is the standard spelling in British English; in American English, it is spelled “sizable”.

When a large amount or degree is viewed positively, adjectives such as “tidy”, “respectable”, “generous”, “handsome”, or “good” may be employed. A collection or group that is large and varied may be referred to as

“extensive”. Objects that occupy a great deal of space and are awkward to lift or carry are commonly described as “bulky”. The English adjective “big” is traditionally associated with the core meaning of “large in size or amount”. However, in contemporary English, it displays a broad polysemy, extending to meanings associated with age and social characteristics. Specifically, when used in the sense of “older” or “more adult-like”, “big” performs an evaluative function that transcends physical dimensions, instead emphasising maturity, experience, or social standing. This meaning is characterised by a set of semantic features that form a distinct subtype within the figurative use of the adjective. The adjective “big” is frequently used to indicate that one person is older than another, typically within familial or friendly relationships. In such contexts, it functions as an age-related modifier preceding kinship nouns, for example: “my big brother”, “her big sister”. This usage is especially common in children’s speech or parental language referring to older children. Here, “big” does not relate to physical size, but rather serves as a cognitive marker of hierarchical positioning.

Another significant meaning of “big” is its function as an indicator of emotional or psychological maturity, responsibility, or independence – traits typically associated with adulthood. For instance: “you’re a big girl now”, “he thinks he’s a big man”. This usage is often emotionally charged and may convey encouragement or irony, depending on the speaker’s intent. In such cases, “big” functions as an informal, colloquial synonym for “mature”, “responsible”, or “independent”, while retaining a casual register. In other contexts, “big” denotes social significance, high status, or authority. For example: “he’s a big boss in the company”, “she’s a big name in journalism”. This usage combines notions of influence, recognition, and prestige, while maintaining the core metaphorical association of “bigness” with prominence or importance.

By contrast, the adjective “adult” is used in formal and neutral contexts to refer to a person who has reached legal maturity or to behaviour considered appropriate for grown-ups: “The victim was an adult male”; “We offer adult education courses”; “It’s time to start being adult about this”. In the sense of “adult in age”, “adult” performs a descriptive function that is devoid of emotional colouring. The term “grown-up” often functions as a synonym for “adult”, but is more commonly used in children’s vocabulary or emotionally intimate contexts: “Her children are all grown up now”; “She has three grown-up children”. The expression “grown person” is typically used to highlight a discrepancy between expected and actual behaviour, particularly in cases of immaturity or emotional responses from adults: “I’ve seen grown men cry at that film”. The adjective “mature” denotes emotional development or full physical growth. It is also widely used in educational contexts, as in “mature student”: “She is now a mature adult”; “Mature students formed the majority on the course”. The use of the adjective “big” in such contexts illustrates linguistic economy and emotional coding, features characteristic of English. Its usage is especially prevalent in informal communication, children’s speech, and popular culture, where the emphasis shifts from chronological age to perceived social or emotional maturity.

In the phrase “You’re a big bully!”, the adjective “big” sheds its literal meaning of “large in size” and assumes the role of an emphatic intensifier. In this context, it does not refer to physical size but instead to the intensity of a negative characteristic, namely aggressive or oppressive behaviour. Thus, “big” operates as a synonym for intensifiers such as “especially”, “obviously”, or “irrefutably”: “You are clearly a bully!”; “You’re a total bully!”; “He fell for her in a big way”. The use of “big” in “You’re a big bully!” exemplifies a semantic shift from literal to emotional and evaluative meaning – a phenomenon typical of natural language. This

mechanism serves to express the speaker’s attitude, amplify emotional tone, and produce a more expressive utterance. In contemporary English, this pattern frequently appears in everyday communication, children’s speech, and popular media.

In English, “big” is often employed metaphorically, particularly in the sense of “significant”, “important”, or “influential”, acquiring the function of an evaluative adjective. This figurative usage is common in colloquial speech, as well as in journalistic and fictional writing. It represents a semantic shift from physical dimension to conceptual weight, as in: “a big decision”, “a big moment”, “a big opportunity”, “a big name in politics”. In such expressions, “big” does not indicate literal size but instead conveys a high degree of importance, influence, or prominence. This is an example of metonymic semantic transfer, whereby size is associated with the weight or importance of an object. In modern English, the adjective “big” is widely used figuratively to denote a high level of popularity, influence, or market success of a particular phenomenon, product, or individual. In expressions such as “TikTok is really big right now”, “That film was big last summer”, and “She’s big in Japan”, the word “big” functions as a colloquial synonym for “extremely popular”, “successful”, or “trendy”, forming part of a semantic field related to mass appeal, social visibility, and media presence. Synonymy, as a type of paradigmatic relation, plays a significant role in the study of the lexical and semantic system of the English language. The analysis of synonymous collocations made it possible to identify semantic relations between words that share a common core meaning but differ in stylistic or contextual nuances.

Before conducting a detailed componential analysis of synonyms, corpus data were examined to trace the actual frequency and contextual distribution of the lexeme “big”. Figure 1 below summarises the corpus findings, presenting the word’s distribution across various positions

in texts based on British National Corpus (BNC) data. As illustrated in the visualisation, the use of “big” remains relatively stable across texts, yet its frequency tends to increase in the middle and latter parts of discourse units. This uneven distribution suggests a functional specificity of “big”, indicating that it is more frequently

employed in elaborative descriptions, narrative development, or evaluative commentary rather than in initial expository sections. The graph thus highlights the contextual behaviour of the adjective, reflecting its metaphorical and emphatic potential beyond its primary denotation of physical size.

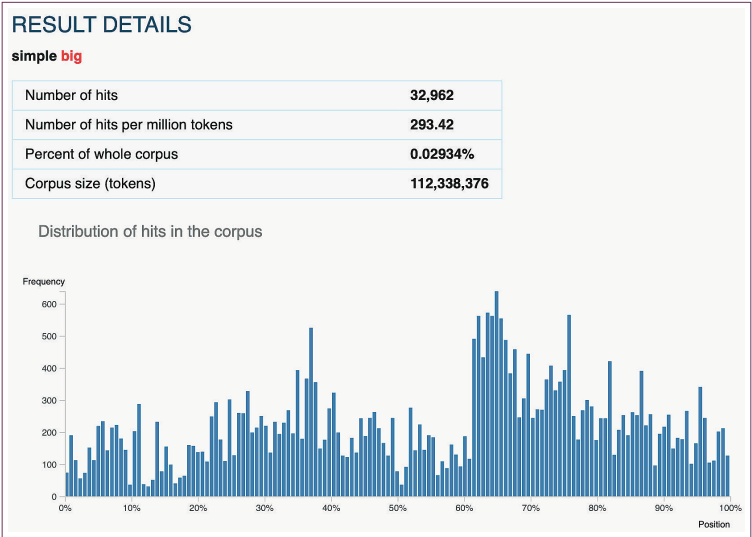


Figure 1. Quantitative distribution of “big”

Source: compiled by the author based on British National Corpus (n.d.)

The study of synonymous lexical units in English linguistics has been conducted by several prominent scholars. For example, in the seminal work *Semantics*, J. Lyons (1977) considered synonymy as a key aspect of the semantic structure of language, analysing it from the perspectives of logical and cognitive linguistics. Lexical synonymy, while often defined as the presence of words with similar meanings, is in fact a highly structured and nuanced phenomenon. According to Lyons, perfect synonyms – words that are interchangeable in all contexts – are extremely rare. Instead, nearsynonymy predominates in natural language use, whereby lexical items share a core meaning but diverge in stylistic, emotional, or contextual features.

F. Palmer (1981) focused on the challenges of synonymy from a functional perspective,

analysing them through the lens of contextual usage. Later, F.R. Palmer (1997) similarly emphasised that the richness of English synonymy is largely attributable to historical layering, particularly the coexistence of Germanic and Romance roots. The researcher J. Miller (1985), while developing WordNet, created a unique lexical base that enabled the systematisation of synonymous relations in the English language on the basis of cognitive models. D. Crystal (2003), in the conducted research – which is one of the most comprehensive encyclopaedias on the English language – addresses a wide range of aspects concerning the functioning, structure, development, and variation of English, including the study of synonymy in terms of linguistic variation and stylistic features. The works of these linguists laid the foundation for

further research in the field of lexical semantics and contributed to the formation of modern approaches to the analysis of synonymous relations. The author J.R. Taylor (2017) explored the nature of lexical semantics, emphasising the connection between words and their meanings in practical use and their relation to conceptual worldviews. The article promotes an understanding of word meaning not as a fixed entity, but as a dynamic construction shaped by context and conceptual networks.

The most renowned printed dictionaries of synonyms were compiled by V. Collins (1952) and R. Soule & G. Smith (1946). They offered a comprehensive guide to English synonyms, including explanations of shades of meaning, stylistic distinctions, and examples of usage. These dictionaries also systematised lexical groups by analysing the contexts in which words could be used synonymously or exhibit subtle semantic distinctions. They served as practical resources for vocabulary development, offering synonyms and synonymous expressions to enhance clarity and stylistic variety in communication.

I.K. Bilodid (1973) and A. Buriachok *et al.* (2001) contributed to the Ukrainian theoretical understanding of synonymy as a system characterised by polysemy, stylistic differentiation, and paradigmatic relations. This systemic view is important when analysing synonymous ranges such as that of “big”, where lexical items are not merely alternatives but constitute a structured set governed by rules of compatibility and semantic scope. The lexeme “big” is one of the core adjectives of the English language, with a semantic structure encompassing several shades of meaning: physical size, quantity or volume, and significance or influence. N. Kovalenko & U. Zhornokui (2025) have conducted a comparative analysis of modern technologies for constructing thesauri in Ukrainian and English, identifying their common and distinctive features. They explored the application of natural language processing and machine learning tools for each language and outlined the

prospects for the development of thesaurus lexicography in the digital era.

Thus, the application of componential analysis and contextual interpretation has made it possible to establish that although the adjectives in this semantic range share a general sense of size or importance, there are substantial differences among them in tone, register, and metaphorical usage. The analysis has shown that synonymy in English is not a simple set of interchangeable units, but rather a hierarchically organised system in which the dominant word “big” functions as the semantic core. Within this framework, synonymous relations are understood as structured semantic links shaped by contextual and communicative conditions.

Conclusions

An analysis of the synonymous range of the word “big” considered how different lexemes reflect varying degrees of intensity of this concept, noting differences in connotation and spheres of use. For example, the synonyms “huge”, “enormous”, “immense”, “massive”, and “extensive” can emphasise different aspects of size – ranging from physical magnitude to symbolic meaning. Thus, the study of synonymic relations within this range has made it possible to better understand the peculiarities of the functioning of lexical units in the language system.

The adjective “big”, when used to mean “older” or “similar to an adult”, is a vivid example of semantic shift and metaphorical usage that expands its functional potential. It conveys age-related, emotional, and social connotations that are closely linked to cultural norms and communicative expectations. Comparing it with other adjectives in this semantic field reveals an extensive system of evaluative vocabulary that helps to express different aspects of maturity and adulthood in English discourse.

As a result, synonymy enables the selection of the most appropriate expression. Synonyms can enhance the componential, syntactic, and stylistic composition of a sentence

while maintaining general meaning. They help to specify and clarify a statement, allowing the selection of the most accurate semantic variant to define a concept and avoid repetition. Future research may benefit from expanding the set of synonyms to include additional dimensions (e.g. humorous or ironic uses of “giant”) or from applying distributional semantics to trace the behaviour of synonyms across genres and time periods. Cross-linguistic comparisons – for example, between the English “big” and Ukrainian equivalents such as “великий”

(“velykyi” – big) – may also provide insight into how semantic fields develop differently across languages.

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Conflict of Interest

None.

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Семантико-стилістичні особливості синонімічної групи англійського прикметника «big»

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Анотація. У сучасній лінгвістиці вивчення лексичної семантики, зокрема синонімії, набуло нового значення через її роль у збагаченні точності та виразності мови. Здатність вибирати контекстуально доречні синоніми має важливе значення як для ефективної комунікації, так і для стилістичної варіативності. Метою дослідження було вивчення семантичних та стилістичних властивостей англійського прикметника «big» через аналіз його найпоширеніших синонімів. У цьому дослідженні акцентувалась увага на метафоричних розширеннях і контекстуальних відмінностях між одиницями синонімічної групи. Методологія дослідження поєднувала компонентний аналіз з описовим та інтерпретаційним підходами, підкріплений даними з Британського національного корпусу за допомогою інструменту Sketch Engine. Для вилучення релевантних лексичних одиниць використовували суцільну вибірку, а для виявлення відмінностей у вживанні аналізували колокаційні патерни та стилістичні маркери. Результати показали, що хоча слово «big» та його синоніми мають спільне поняття масштабності, вони відрізняються за тональністю, регістром і частотністю вживання. Наприклад, «big» є більш неформальним та емоційно забарвленим, тоді як «large» частіше вживається у формальному та технічному контекстах. Інші прикметники, такі як «huge», «enormous», and «great», мають емоційні, метафоричні або оцінні відтінки. Практичне значення дослідження полягає в тому, що його результати можуть бути застосовані у викладанні англійської мови як іноземної, укладанні словникових матеріалів та вдосконаленні словників синонімів. Результати дослідження також можуть бути використані перекладачами, лексикографами та корпусними лінгвістами, які прагнуть вдосконалити лексичний вибір та стилістичну точність

Ключові слова: синонімічний ряд; лексико-семантичний аналіз; лексична синонімія; стилістичне варіювання; когнітивна лінгвістика; метафоричне значення