

A Comprehensive Narrative Literature Review of Linguistic Inflation: Concept Evolution, Typical Forms and Interdisciplinary research Characteristics

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Abstract

This study adopts content analysis and comparative research methods to sort out relevant linguistic studies and finds that linguistic inflation originates from the concept of inflation in economics and was originally understood by scholars as semantic weakening or lexical attrition. As the Internet has developed, it has become an interdisciplinary topic of interest, and this study identifies five common forms, such as vocabulary devaluation and semantic inflation. This study also identifies the interdisciplinary research trend of linguistic inflation and the diversity of its analytical perspectives, which can provide a theoretical basis for further in-depth study of its formation mechanisms and social impacts.

Keywords: Linguistic Inflation, Concept Evolution, Typical Forms

Introduction

The term “inflation” is a core concept in economics, describing the devaluation phenomenon caused by the mismatch between currency supply and actual circulation demand (Friedman, 1970). With the evolution of society and the popularization of the internet, this economic concept has been transplanted into the linguistic field, giving birth to the concept of linguistic inflation. Linguistic inflation refers to the gradual weakening or loss of a word’s original semantic intensity, emotional coloring, or rhetorical effect due to overuse or functional generalization. For instance, when a teacher indiscriminately praises every student’s assignment as “excellent,” the word gradually loses its strong commendatory force, forcing speakers to resort to stronger alternatives such as “outstanding” or “brilliant” (Dahl, Ö., 2001). Similarly, in contemporary Chinese Internet communication, the word “haha” has degenerated from a standard expression of joy to a token perceived as perfunctory; users now prefer to stack multiple instances of the character (e.g., “hahahahaha”) to convey the simple happiness originally expressed by a single “haha” (Li & Yu, 2024). This unique linguistic phenomenon has gradually attracted extensive academic attention.

In the early stage of previous research, scholars such as Lyu Shuxiang interpreted similar linguistic phenomena as semantic weakening (Lyu, S. X., 1952), and Li Anzhai was the first to formally borrow the economic term “inflation” to define this linguistic trend in 1945 (Yue, Y. Y., 2020). Since then, scholars from different fields have conducted in-depth explorations on linguistic inflation, forming diverse research perspectives. However, previous research presents a multi-perspective interpretation characteristic, with scholars analyzing its manifestations from semantic, pragmatic, and rhetorical angles, respectively, and there is a lack of an integrated sorting of its theoretical development and a

unified summary of its classification criteria.

In the context of internet communication, linguistic inflation shows more prominent and diverse manifestations, affecting social communication and cultural dissemination to a certain extent. Therefore, this study conducts a comprehensive narrative literature review to comb the theoretical origin and development of linguistic inflation, clarify its diverse manifestations and classification, and position the research status of this concept in the broader linguistic academic context. This study's results can supplement the theoretical framework of linguistic inflation research, provide a clear analytical perspective for the study of modern linguistic variation, and also offer reference for the standard use of language in social communication.

The theoretical basis of this study is semantic change theory (Lyu, S. X., 1952), which posits that the meaning of language units is not fixed but that it changes as the needs of social communication and cultural contexts change, which is consistent with the basic characteristics of linguistic inflation (i.e., language devaluation caused by long-term use and functional expansion). Consider for instance the English words “gentleman” and “lady,” which in their original meaning denoted persons from the nobility but today are often used synonymously with “man” and “woman” (Dahl, Ö., 2001).

Moreover, the theory of grammaticalization (Dahl, Ö., 2001) also supports this study of linguistic inflation, as many manifestations of linguistic inflation (e.g., the evolution of emphatic constructions) are closely associated with the grammaticalization of language units. For example, in Mandarin Chinese, scalar predicates such as “*kuai*” (fast) are quasi-obligatorily modified by the intensifier “*hen*”, whose traditional meaning is “very”. The word “*hen*” has thus undergone a shift, in which it has moved from being an intensifying modifier to being an obligatory part of the scalar predicate construction (Dahl, Ö., 2001).

This study seeks to maintain originality by presenting an integrated sorting and synthesis and integration of previous research results. Different from previous single-perspective studies, this study comprehensively combs the theoretical origin, developmental evolution, and multi-typological manifestations of linguistic inflation; summarizes the universal laws and individual characteristics of this phenomenon; and points out the previous research gaps and future research directions, providing a comprehensive theoretical reference for subsequent research.

Research Objectives

1. To trace the theoretical origin and developmental evolution of linguistic inflation from the perspective of interdisciplinary concept migration.
2. To clarify the multi-typological manifestations and scientific classification of linguistic inflation by sorting out previous academic research results.

Scope of this research

1. Population Scope: No specific human population is involved; this study focuses on the academic literature of “linguistic inflation” in the field of linguistics, covering cross-language research cases in Chinese and English.
2. Variable Scope: The core research variable is linguistic inflation, with sub-variables including its theoretical evolution characteristics, manifestation types, semantic change mechanisms, and cross-linguistic concrete examples.
3. Time Scope: This study covers linguistic studies related to linguistic inflation and its similar phenomena from the 1940s (the early research of semantic weakening) to 2025 (the latest research of Márquez on semantic inflation critical points).

In the early stage of linguistic inflation research (1950s-1980s), due to the lack of a unified definition, scholars equated its similar phenomena with semantic weakening or lexical attrition. Lyu Shuxiang (1952) expounded the concept of “semantic weakening” in *A Course in Grammar and Rhetoric*, noting that adverbs expressing high degrees will gradually lose their original expressive intensity with frequent use, and he concluded that “all words that express high degrees will eventually lose their edge” — this is essentially the early manifestation of linguistic inflation.

In the middle stage (1990s-2000s), scholars linked linguistic inflation with grammaticalization. Traugott and König (1991) explored the concept of semantic weakening within a research framework of grammaticalization, and they explicitly pointed out that grammaticalization “involves semantic weakening, also known as bleaching.” As they defined this typical semantic change, over the course of historical language development, the inherent meaning of individual words or phrases will gradually become less strong and less specific, and this whole process is fundamentally driven by pragmatic inference in daily language use.

Later, Östen Dahl (2001) explored the concept of inflation within the concept of linguistic change, and he explicitly pointed out that inflationary processes are not merely confined to the economic sphere but are also prevalent in human language. As he defined this typical linguistic phenomenon, linguistic inflation arises from people’s pursuit of immediate benefits in daily communication, and this whole process is fundamentally shaped by the conflict between individual behavioral motives and the long-term operation of the entire language system. In their discussion, Dahl, Ö. (2001) also emphasized that this kind of inflationary effect is an extremely common phenomenon emerging alongside the evolution of titles, evaluative phrases, and grammatical constructions, and his systematic discussion of this linguistic feature has laid a solid theoretical foundation for a large number of subsequent academic research studies on rhetorical devaluation and grammaticalization mechanisms.

In the in-depth development stage (2010s-present), with its prominent performance in internet society, research entered a multi-disciplinary stage. Bo Shousheng & Lai Huiling (2009) concentrated on modern Chinese “vocabulary inflation”; Semantic inflation was defined by Jae-Hak Yoon (2021) as a gradual weakening of word meaning with the expansion of communication scope. Baes et al. (2023) proposed a method for evaluating vertical inflation of harm-related concepts. Yao & Jianhua (2024) applied critical discourse analysis to study internet linguistic inflation. At the frontier of this research trajectory, Márquez and Postoutenko (2025) proposed a unified definition of semantic inflation across natural, monetary, and verbal codes, conceptualizing it as the increase of energy required to transmit or decode one bit of information. Their work explicitly addresses verbal inflation through case studies of over-politeness (e.g., the curvilinear relationship between politeness investment and interactional outcome), providing a macro-theoretical framework that situates linguistic inflation within broader cross-system dynamics of self-organization and systemic self-destruction. The work of Márquez and Postoutenko (2025) expands the scope of linguistic inflation research by incorporating insights from biology, economics, linguistics, and political science, demonstrating the inherently interdisciplinary characteristics of this field.

To summarize, the study of linguistic inflation has experienced the change of economic concepts moving to interdisciplinary research, the change from being synonymous with semantic weakening to an independent concept, and the change from qualitative description to empirical analysis. Early research laid the groundwork and contemporary research enriches the theoretical framework.



Multi-typological Manifestations of linguistic inflation

Drawing on the work of previous scholars such as C. Baes, Östen Dahl, and Yoon, this study classifies linguistic inflation’s manifestations by “category-subtype-example” to clarify its multi-typological characteristics. These previous studies have analyzed the phenomenon from semantic, pragmatic, rhetorical, and structural perspectives, providing a comprehensive theoretical basis.

From the semantic perspective, semantic expansion is the core manifestation of linguistic inflation, and this expansion is a long-term dynamic process accompanying language development (Ting Li, 2025). From the pragmatic perspective, the overuse of extreme words and superlative adverbs leading to the weakening of emotional intensity is the key performance of linguistic inflation in communication practice (Lyu, S. X., 1952; Cao, C. J., 2022); from the structural perspective, the stacking of language elements is a typical form of linguistic inflation, and part of the stacking forms are standardized into formal expressions while the other part leads to language redundancy (Sun, P. H., 2025); from the rhetorical perspective, the overuse of exaggerated rhetoric is an important manifestation of linguistic inflation, and excessive exaggeration will reverse the original expressive effect of rhetoric (Li, Y. & Yu, J. H., 2024).

To clarify its specific manifestations, this study summarizes five typical types of linguistic inflation from a multi-typological perspective, with their examples and references shown in Table 1, covering lexical, semantic, grammatical, pragmatic, and rhetorical levels.

Table 1: Classification of Linguistic Inflation in a Multi-typological Perspective

Category	Subtypes	Specific Examples	References
Lexical Devaluation	Semantic Generalization	1. English <i>gentleman / lady</i> evolve from nobility-specific titles to generic address terms for adult men and women; 2. English <i>awesome</i> shifts from “inspiring profound awe” to a casual, all-purpose praise term	Dahl, Ö. (2001)
	Label Upgrading	Commercial classification inflation: hotel room tiers are upgraded from <i>basic</i> → <i>standard</i> → <i>premium</i> with no corresponding improvement to the actual product or service	Yoon (2021)
Grammatical Intensifier Wear	-	The Chinese degree intensifier <i>hěn</i> (originally meaning “very”) has grammaticalized into an obligatory syntactic marker for scalar predicates, losing most of its original degree-enhancing meaning. For example, <i>hěn kuài</i> now functions as the default form of “fast”, rather than emphasizing “very fast”.	Dahl, Ö. (2001)
Semantic Inflation	Vertical Expansion	The clinical term “ <i>trauma</i> ” is extended to describe non-severe, ordinary negative experiences, such as disappointing exam results or minor daily frustrations.	Baes et al. (2023)
	Horizontal Expansion	The concept of “ <i>trauma</i> ” expands beyond clinical psychology into everyday discourse, covering new phenomena such as cyberbullying, workplace criticism, and mild emotional discomfort;	Baes et al. (2023)



Category	Subtypes	Specific Examples	References
		The term “ <i>bullying</i> ” to name different situations that exceed the phenomenon of school violence.	Napoli, P. N. D., & Saez, V. (2022)
Rhetorical Devaluation	Hyperbole dilution	Overuse of hyperbolic rhetoric leads to weakened expressive force: e.g., “ <i>for ages</i> ” originally conveyed an extremely long period, but through frequent use it now simply means “ <i>for a long time</i> ,” losing its original dramatic impact.	McCarthy & Carter (2004)
Pragmatic & Discursive Inflation	Hyperpoliteness & Formal Overloading	1. Overuse of highly formal polite formulas in casual daily communication (e.g., “ <i>I hope you would not mind...</i> ”) 2. Overgeneralization of Korean honorifics in informal, equal-status interactions	Locher & Watts (2005) Yoon (2021);
	Information Dilution & Discursive Stacking	1. Nonsensical verbal stacking with no practical information content (empty verbiage) 2. Digital communication phenomena: redundant emoji stacking, excessive punctuation, and “nonsense literature” that expands formal length without increasing effective information	Li,T (2025); Yu,D (2024); You,K(2025)

As shown in Table 1, lexical devaluation and semantic inflation are the most typical manifestations: lexical devaluation involves expanded usage scope and weakened original semantic value (e.g., English “gentleman” and “lady”); semantic inflation includes vertical and horizontal expansion of conceptual meaning (e.g., the term “trauma”). Grammatical intensifier wear, pragmatic & discursive inflation, and rhetorical devaluation further reflect its performance at the grammatical, pragmatic-discursive, and rhetorical levels respectively. These manifestations interact with one another in actual language use.

Discussion

Based on the above results, this part discusses core findings of linguistic inflation research, combining literature data to clarify its theoretical and practical value.

Discussion on the Developmental Evolution and Core Characteristics of linguistic inflation

Previous research shows that linguistic inflation research has evolved with “concept migration, interdisciplinary expansion, and theoretical improvement,” closely related to social development and research methods. The migration of economic “inflation” to linguistics is not accidental—this is because both economic inflation and linguistic inflation have the core characteristic of “devaluation”: economic inflation causes currency devaluation, while linguistic inflation weakens language’s expressive function and semantic value, providing a logical basis for cross-disciplinary migration (Friedman, 1970; Dahl, Ö., 2001).

The evolution from “equating with semantic weakening” to “independent concept” reflects more profound understanding. Early scholars (e.g.,Lyu, S. X.) equated it with similar phenomena due to insufficient research; multi-disciplinary participation later enriched its connotation, forming an independent research field.



Interdisciplinarity and multiple perspectives are key characteristics of recent research. Interdisciplinarity integrates linguistics with economics, sociology and psychology: economics provides the conceptual origin, sociology analyzes social causes and impacts, and psychology explores users’ language use mechanisms (Yao & Jian hua, 2024; Márquez, 2025). Multiple perspective analysis avoids one-sidedness.

Discussion on the Multi-typological Manifestations of linguistic inflation

The five typical manifestations reflect linguistic inflation's complexity, with vocabulary devaluation and semantic inflation as core types—vocabulary and semantics are basic language components whose changes are easily perceived.

Table 1 shows most examples come from daily and internet communication, indicating linguistic inflation is closely related to actual use scenarios: frequent use weakens expressive intensity (e.g., Chinese “hěn”), and internet communication accelerates semantic expansion (e.g., “trauma”) (Baes et al., 2023; Yao & Jianhua, 2024). Different manifestations interact, forming a vicious circle occasionally.

Not all “expansion” or “weakening” of language is inflation. The core criterion is whether it devalues language’s expressive function: normal evolution does not affect communication accuracy, while inflation causes ambiguity or reduced expressiveness. A case in point is the divergent trajectories of “very” and “awesome” in English: the grammaticalization of “very” from its source meaning “true” to a mere intensifier represents normal semantic weakening—it remains functionally stable and communicatively unambiguous. In contrast, “awesome” originally denoted “awe-inspiring” (e.g., majestic natural landscapes) but has been inflated through overuse to a generic term of mild approval (e.g., “the coffee was awesome”), thereby diluting its expressive force so severely that speakers must now resort to “breathtaking” or “mind-blowing” to convey genuine astonishment (Dahl, Ö. 2001).

Discussion on research Gaps and Practical Implications

Despite the in-depth development of linguistic inflation research, the previous research results indicate that there are still obvious research gaps, which restrict the further development of this field. Firstly, the lack of a unified definition and classification standard leads to the divergence of research perspectives: some scholars (e.g., Baes, Dahl, Ö, Lyu, S. X) focus on semantic changes, while others (e.g., Yoon, Sun, Yao et al.) focus on pragmatic performance, making it difficult to compare and integrate different research results. Secondly, the absence of empirical research based on a large-scale corpus results in research conclusions that lack universality. The majority of the previous studies used qualitative descriptive methods. Few quantitative analyses have been conducted on the frequency of occurrence and the development trend of linguistic inflation (Baes et al. (2023) is an exception, proposing an empirical evaluation method that is applicable only to the concept of “trauma”). Thirdly, there is a lack of comparative research across languages, making it impossible to reveal the commonalities and individualities of linguistic inflation in different languages. Finally, the in-depth research on linguistic inflation on the internet is not enough, and the formation mechanism and social impact of linguistic inflation within the framework of the internet need to be further explored.

This study has theoretical implications for the evolution of linguistic inflation and the classification of its manifestations that can form the theoretical basis for further research. The identified gaps in this study can help guide future research directions: establishing unified standards, reinforcing corpus-based empirical studies, broadening cross-language

comparison, and deepening the research on internet linguistic inflation.

Conclusion

This study summarizes and organizes the literature on linguistic inflation, clarifies the characteristics of this research field, the research gaps, and theoretical implications of this field, and explores the theoretical origin, developmental evolution, and multi-typological manifestations of linguistic inflation. Linguistic inflation is a language phenomenon that originated from the economic concept of inflation, and its theoretical development has gone through three clear stages from the embryonic stage to the in-depth development stage. There are five typical multi-typological manifestations of linguistic inflation: vocabulary devaluation, grammaticalization processes, excessive formal expressions, rhetorical devaluation, and two subtypes of semantic inflation (vertical expansion and horizontal expansion). These manifestations are linked to each other and create a more complex linguistic picture, the core of which is the degradation of the expressive function or the semantic value of the language.

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