

PROBLEMS OF SYNONYMY IN MODERN ENGLISH

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INTRODUCTION. This course paper is devoted to the problems of synonymy in Modern English. The actuality of this work caused by some crucial points. We can say that the problem of synonyms is one of the main tricky ones for learners. It can be most clearly seen in the colloquial layer of a language, which, in its turn at high degree is supported by development of modern informational technologies and simplification of alive speech. As a result, a great number of new meanings of one and the same word appear in our vocabulary.

The aim of the work is to present an overview of the problems of synonymy in Modern English and their types, degree and changes through history and consider them in more detail.

The tasks of the investigation include:

- to teach the problem of synonymy to young learners.
- to show the importance of the problem for those who want to brush up their English.
- to mention all the major of linguists opinions concerning the subject studied.
- to study, analyze, and sum up all the possible changes happened in the studied branch of linguistics.

What is Synonymy?

Synonymy in a language can be viewed as a basic concept in lexicology. When meaning relations of words are studied, most researchers are inclined to prioritize the concept of synonyms in their investigation. Etymologically speaking, the term *synonymy* originates from a Greek word *synonumon* meaning having the same name.¹ Linguists interested in a study of meaning in language, known as semanticists, use this term to refer to a relationship of similarity or sameness of meaning between two or more words.

Cambridge Advanced Learners Dictionary defines *synonym* as a word or phrase which has the same or nearly the same meaning as another word or phrase in the same language, such as *small* and *little*. In a study of synonyms, two major types, strict and loose synonyms, are worth being discussed.

¹ Jackson & Amvela. Words, Meaning and Vocabulary: An Introduction to Modern English Lexicology. 2000.

In Modern English a great number of synonyms serve to differentiate the meanings of words, their colloquial or bookish character. Most of bookish synonyms are of foreign origin, while popular and colloquial words are mostly native. Many native synonyms were either restricted in meaning or ousted altogether by foreign terms.

Still, according to the above definition, such strict synonyms are extremely rare or not existent. As a matter of fact, strict synonymy is considered uneconomical since it leads to unnecessary redundancy in a language.

Normally if a language begins to have a word which can fully replace another in every context of use, one of them tends to somehow change its meaning or become out of use. For example, according to Fromkin, Rodman, and Hyams², in the history of English, the Old English word *frumsceaft* was widely used. Then with the flood of French words in the late 14th century, the word *creation* was borrowed and it was used alongside with *frumsceaft*. Later on, *creation* took over *frumsceaft* completely in all contexts, making *frumsceaft* become obsolete. Such phenomenon is claimed to prevent the occurrences of strict synonyms in English.³

The above examples indicate that synonyms can be interchangeably used where their meanings overlap, but where a meaning is beyond the shared area, one cannot substitute for the other.⁴

Types of Synonymy

According to Cruse, there are four types of synonyms: "absolute", "contextual", "cognitive" and "plesionymy". Synonyms could be placed on a scale of synonymity where different degrees of semantic overlap could emerge.

Cognitive Synonymy

Cognitive synonymy is a type of synonymy in which synonyms are so similar in meaning that they cannot be differentiated either denotatively or connotatively, that is, not even by mental associations, connotations, emotive responses, and poetic value. It is a stricter (more precise) technical definition of synonymy, specifically for theoretical (e.g., linguistic and philosophical) purposes. In usage employing this definition, synonyms with greater differences are often called near-synonyms rather than synonyms.⁵

If a word is cognitively synonymous with another word, they refer to the same thing independently of context. Thus, a word is cognitively synonymous with another

² Rodman & N. Hyams. The study of language. 2003.

³ Jackson & Amvela. Words, Meaning and Vocabulary: An Introduction to Modern English Lexicology. 2000.

⁴ Thornbury. The Mental Lexicon and Vocabulary Learning. 2002.

⁵ Shunnaq. Linguistics and Language Behavior Abstracts. 1992.

word if and only if all instances of both words express the same exact thing, and the referents are necessarily identical, which means that the words'

Contextual Cognitive Synonymy

This type of synonymy refers to lexical items which are cognitive synonyms in certain contexts but not in most contexts. Lyons (1969: 452) calls this type "context-dependent synonymy". This type of synonymy is best illustrated by discussing the lexical items buy and get in the following context: I'll go to the shop and get/ buy some bread.

These two words get and buy are used interchangeably in this context, so they are cognitive synonyms only in such a context. However, buy and get are not interchangeable in all contexts. Only get can be used in the sentence below: I will get my son from his office.

Lyons⁶ mentions that "context-restricted synonymy may be relatively rare, but it certainly exists". For example, broad and wide are not absolutely synonymous, since there are contexts in which only one is normally used and the substitution of one for the other might involve some difference of meaning. For example, wide and broad are not interchangeable in a sentence like "The door was three feet wide", or in a sentence like "He has broad shoulders".

However, Lyons notes that there are also contexts in which they appear to be completely synonymous as it is the case in a sentence like "They painted a wide/ broad stripe across the wall"

Cruse⁷ uses the term "pseudo-synonymy" instead of "context dependent synonymy". He differentiates between cognitive and pseudo-synonyms: Two sentences differing only in respect of cognitive synonymy occupying a parallel syntactic position are in general logically equivalent. However, logical equivalence between sentences differing only in respect of lexical items occupying a particular syntactic position does not guarantee that the lexical items in question are cognitive synonyms- they may well be pseudo-synonyms.

Plesionymy (Near-Synonymy)

Near-synonyms bring forth or give sentences with different propositional content. They refer to lexical items that share some aspects of meaning and differ in others. Therefore, near-synonyms are expressions that are more or less similar, but not identical, in meaning. The difference between a plesionymous pair and a hyponymous one is that the lexical items in the former deny one another, as in: "He is not just fearless; but more exactly, he is brave", but in the latter (hyponymous pair) the lexical items involve inclusion and entailment, e.g., bus, car and truck are included in vehicle, and tulip and rose are included in flower. In fact, plesionyms differ from one another

⁶ John Lyons. Language and Linguistics. 1981.

⁷ Cruse. Lexical Semantics. 1986.

only in respect of "subordinate traits": subordinate traits are those which have a role within the meaning of a word analogous to that of a modifier in a syntactic construction, e.g., red in a red hat and quickly in ran quickly.

Absolute Synonymy

Absolute synonyms are rare in the vocabulary and, on the diachronic level, the phenomenon of absolute synonymy is anomalous and consequently temporary: the vocabulary system invariably tends to abolish it either by rejecting one of the absolute synonyms or by developing differentiation characteristics in one or both (or all) of them. Therefore, it does not seem necessary to include absolute synonyms, which are a temporary exception, in the system of classification.

Cruse admits that absolute synonymy is also described by some words as perfect, total, complete, genuine, actual, real or full synonymy. Most semanticists agree that real synonymy is a non-existence: that no two words have exactly the same meaning. Absolute synonymy is "two lexical units which would be absolute synonyms, i.e., would have identical meanings if and only if all their contextual relations were identical". Cruse mentions that having absolute synonyms is impossible and impractical since we cannot check their relations in all conceivable contexts.

Synonymy is Linguistic Problem

Are Their Meanings the Same or Different?

Synonymy is one of modern linguistics' most controversial problems. The very existence of words traditionally called *synonyms* is disputed by some linguists; the nature and essence of the relationships of these words is hotly debated and treated in quite different ways by the representatives of different linguistic schools.

Even though one may accept that synonyms in the traditional meaning of the term are somewhat elusive and, to some extent, fictitious it is certain that there are words in any vocabulary which clearly develop regular and distinct relationships when used in speech. In the following extract, in which a young woman rejects a proposal of marriage, the verbs *like*, *admire* and *love*, all describe feelings of attraction, approbation, fondness:

"I have always *liked* you very much, I *admire* your talent, but, forgive me, I could never *love* you as a wife should love her husband." ⁸

Yet, each of the three verbs, though they all describe more or less the same feeling of liking, describes it in its own way: "I like you, i. e. I have certain warm feelings towards you, but they are not strong enough for me to describe them as "love", " so that *like* and *love* are in a way opposed to each other.

The duality of synonyms is, probably, their most confusing feature: they are somewhat the same, and yet they are most obviously different. Both as

⁸ V. Holt. The Shivering Sands. 1969

pects of their dual characteristics are essential for them to perform their function in speech: revealing different aspects, shades and variations of the same phenomenon.

"Was she *a pretty* girl?

I would certainly have called her *attractive*."⁹

The second speaker in this short dialogue does his best to choose the word which would describe the girl most precisely: she was good-looking, but *pretty* is probably too good a word for her, so that *attractive* is again in a way opposed to *pretty* (*not pretty*, only *attractive*), but this opposition is, at the same time, firmly fixed on the sameness of *pretty* and *attractive*: essentially they both describe a pleasant appearance.

Here are some more extracts which confirm that synonyms add precision to each detail of description and show how the correct choice of a word from a group of synonyms may colour the whole text.

The first extract depicts a domestic quarrel. The infuriated husband shouts and glares at his wife, but "his *glare* suddenly softened into a *gaze* as he turned his eyes on the little girl" (i. e. he had been looking furiously at his wife, but when he turned his eyes on the child, he looked at her with tenderness).

The second extract depicts a young father taking his child for a Sunday walk.

"Neighbours were apt to smile at the long-legged bare-headed young man leisurely strolling along the street and his small companion demurely trotting by his side."¹⁰

The synonyms *stroll* and *trot* vividly describe two different styles of walking, the long slow paces of the young man and the gait between a walk and a run of the short-legged child.

In the following extract an irritated producer is talking to an ambitious young actor:

"Think you can play Romeo? Romeo should *smile*, not *grin*, *walk*, not *swagger*, *speak* his lines, not *mumble* them."¹¹

Here the second synonym in each pair is quite obviously and intentionally contrasted and opposed to the first: "... *smile*, *not grin*." Yet, to *grin* means more or less the same as *to smile*, only, perhaps, denoting a broader and a rather foolish smile. In the same way *to swagger* means "to walk", but to walk in a defiant or insolent manner. *Mumbling* is also a way of speaking, but of speaking indistinctly or unintelligibly.

Problem of Criteria of Synonymy

Synonymy is associated with some theoretical problems which at present are still an object of controversy. Probably, the most controversial among these is the problem of criteria of synonymy.

⁹ Nikolenka A.G. English lexicology – Vinnytsya Nova Knyha. 2007.

¹⁰ B. Lowndes .Some Men and Women.

¹¹ Nikolenka A.G. English lexicology – Vinnytsya Nova Knyha. 2007.

Synonyms in English can be differentiated according to the following criteria:

The first criterion one can use to distinguish synonyms is the regions where these words exist. English-speaking people speaking different dialects often use different words to refer to the same person, thing, or concept. For example, British children in a theme park would urge their parents to buy them *candyfloss*, a type of sweet made from sticky threads of sugar around a stick. In contrast, American children in the same situation would ask for *cotton candy* and get the same kind of sweet. Accordingly, it may be concluded that both *candyfloss* and *cotton candy* are the same, differing only in that the former is used in British English, whereas the latter belongs to American English.

The list below provides sample pairs of British-American synonyms.

British	American
football	soccer
American football	football
windscreen	windshield
aeroplane	airplane
vest	undershirt
lift	elevator
tram	streetcar

In modern research on synonyms the criterion of interchangeability is sometimes applied. According to this, synonyms are defined as words which are interchangeable at least in some contexts without any considerable alteration in denotational meaning.

This criterion of interchangeability has been much criticised. Every or almost every attempt to apply it to this or that group of synonyms seems to lead one to the inevitable conclusion that either there are very few synonyms or, else, that they are not interchangeable.

It is sufficient to choose any set of synonyms placing them in a simple context to demonstrate the point. Let us take, for example, the synonyms from the above table.

Cf.: *He glared at her* (i. e. He looked at her angrily). *He gazed at her* (i. e. He looked at her steadily and attentively; probably with admiration or interest).

He glanced at her (i. e. He looked at her briefly and turned away).

He peered at her (i. e. He tried to see her better, but something prevented: darkness, fog, weak eyesight).

These few simple examples are sufficient to show that each of the synonyms creates an entirely new situation which so sharply differs from the rest that any attempt at "interchanging" anything can only destroy the utterance devoiding it of any sense at all.

Conclusion. Synonymy has been an active topic in a variety of language processing tasks. Synonymy is one of the most controversial issues of modern linguistics. Practically, synonymous words convey the same meaning if taken separately but they can not be substituted in any context. Accordingly, the meanings of synonymous words can be the same or almost the same. That is why it is accepted to qualify synonyms as similar, but not identical words. It is possible to draw conclusions that the synonymy decorates the speech not only Uzbek, but also English and does it interesting and easy in understanding.

One of the difficulties of synonymy is to choose proper synonyms. Synonyms are different words with similar or identical meanings and are interchangeable. Native speakers feel that some pairs of synonyms are more synonymous than others. This gives us the idea of a scale of synonymy. Obviously, the idea behind synonymy is that of sharing meaning that is that two words share (part of) their meaning. It has become a problem to establish how much overlapping do we need for two words for being considered synonyms.

Having said about the perspectives of the work I hope that this work will find its worthy way of applying at schools, lyceums and colleges of high education by both teachers and students of English. I also express my hopes to take this work its worthy place among the lexicological works dedicated to synonymy.

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