SEMANTIC PECULIARITIES AND DEFINITIONS OF SYNONYMY

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Abstract: This article is devoted to the origin of the term "synonymy", semantic peculiarities of synonyms, interchangeability and substitution of synonymy and degrees of synonymy. The author intends to reveal the interchangeability and substitution of synonyms by means of examples.

Key words: definition, interchangeability, neutralization, substitution, valency, degrees of synonymy.

Introduction

A synonym is understood as a word or a phrase that we can substitute in a context for another word or phrase. Linguists agree that it is impossible to find an ideal or absolute synonym i.e. a word or a phrase that is identical in denotation, connotation, frequency and appropriateness. The result of the psycholinguistic experiment seems to suggest that in people's minds the notion of synonymy exists but its boundaries with other semantic relations are sometimes unclear and synonymy is not a concept of clear-cut category. Therefore synonymy is one of the most controversial problems. A prominent scholar J. A. Devlin defines the synonymy "as identity of meaning and interchangeability"(Devlin, 2002). The following definition was presented by the representatives of the traditional linguistics: " Synonyms are two or more words of the same language, belonging to the same part of speech and possessing one or more identical or nearly identical denotational meanings, interchangeable, at least in some contexts without any considerable alteration in denotational meaning, but differing in morphemic composition,

phonemic shape, shades of meaning, connotations, style, valency, idiomatic use"(Arnold,1986).

Recently, there has been introduced into the definition of synonymity the criterion of interchangeability in linguistic contexts. In this article the semantic features of synonymy such as interchangeability, substitution and neutralization is discussed and the paper synthesizes the data of the articles and works on this field of study and endeavors to discover the key focuses and create this proposal.

Materials and methods

To define synonymy is never easy. The earliest attempt to define synonymy seems to start in ancient Greek philosophy, which laid a foundation for definitions and descriptions of synonyms. Philosophers focused on different aspects of synonyms, and the inconsistency in their definitions and descriptions reveal the controversy and complexity of synonymy. The word 'synonymy' comes from ancient Greek 'syn' (with) and 'onama' (name), which might explain why definitions of synonymy involve expressions such as 'same names' or 'similar names'. However, the definition of synonymy is not as straightforward as we might expect. The earliest literature on synonymy seems to come back to ancient Greek philosophy, which laid a foundation for definitions and descriptions of synonyms. Linguistic and non-linguistic sciences have offered definitions, descriptions and analyses of synonymy. Long before the existence of the term 'synonymy', some Greek sophists and philosophers in their dialogues and writings deliberately use synonyms in their texts to achieve effects like persuasion and cognition (Hüllen, 2004). The inconsistency in their definitions and descriptions shows that the status of synonyms was controversial from the start and their description complex. Given the fact that synonyms prove to be practically important in the discussion that Plato reports, it is not surprising that other philosophers spend time trying to define synonyms. In various branches, Greek philosophy depended on the precise definition of terms. As terms cannot be expressed other than in other words, the linguistic

method of determining word meanings with the help of related word meanings becomes the vehicle of concept discussion.

In Roman times, synonymy was dealt with indirectly in the vast programmes of cultural and linguistic education which were devoted to the arts of writing and oratory (Hüllen, 2004). As a great thinker in the liberal arts tradition, Cicero inevitably dealt with synonymy in his writings. He was concerned with the proper language for the art of oratory, which had to 'follow the postulates of correctness and of stylistic elegance' (Borchert, 2006). In the passages of Quintilianus (c.35-- c.100 CE), functions of synonyms in rhetorical ornament are discussed. According to Quintilianus, 'several words may often have the same meaning (they are called synonyms); some will be more distinguished, sublime, brilliant, attractive or euphonious than others' (p. 218-219). This opens a wide variety of usages for synonyms in various text genres (Hüllen, 2004).

We have looked at how synonymy was dealt with by philosophers in the ancient Greek and Roman era. Their work laid the foundations for today's concept of synonymy. Teaching the synonymy began to pay attention to the XII century. In 1718, Gerard published a book called "Zestesse de la lengua francoise", and he tried to disseminate doubts in the immediate words. France was the first country to study the problem of synonyms and their meanings. By the end of the XIX century, due to the study of languages, speech culture, oral and written forms of communication, interest in the distinctive signs of synonyms has increased with the study of information and writers' language. By defining the nature and function of the synonyms, scientists began to determine its existence.

However, Hirsch (1975) points out 'the bulkiest literature on the subject of synonymy is to be found neither in literary theory, in linguistics, nor speech-act theory, but in analytic philosophy' (p. 562). Since the late 1940s, a number of philosophers including Carnap, Quine, Lewis and Goodman have debated the possibility of synonymity (the philosophical term for synonymy).. According to Quine, One of the most widely discussed contributions to the topic of synonymity is

Nelson Goodman's On Likeness of Meaning. Goodman (1952) proposes to explicate the notion of synonymity solely in terms of words and their 'extensions' – the object to which they apply. His account is confined to predicate expressions. In logical semantics (also referred to as analytical semantics), semanticists depend on synonymy in order to prove the truth of a statement. According to Miller & Charles (1991): two words are said to be synonyms if one can be used in a statement in place of the other without changing the meaning of the statement (the conditions under which the statement would be true or false) (p.1). Cruse (1986) states that 'the relation defined in terms of truth-conditional relations will be distinguished as propositional synonymy', which he defines and also provides an example for as follows: X is a propositional synonym of Y if (i) X and Y are syntactically identical, and (ii) any grammatical declarative sentence S containing X has equivalent truth conditions to another sentence S1, which is identical to S except that X is replaced by Y. An example of a pair of propositional synonyms is fiddle and violin: these are incapable of yielding sentences with different truth-conditions. For instance, He plays the violin very well entails and is entailed by He plays the fiddle very well. (p. 88).

According to the delimitation of the exact meanings of synonyms by interrelatedness with other elements of the same group comparison is considered as an important part in synonymic research. The interchangeability and neutralization serve as the means of testing by substitution. Substitution is a procedure which is borrowed by semasiology from phonology. The values of words can best be defined by substituting them for one another and observing the resulting changes.

In modern research **the criterion of interchangeability** is applied. According to it, synonyms are defined as words which are interchangeable at least in some contexts without considerable alteration in denotational meaning. But this theory has been much criticized. Synonyms are not, cannot and should not be interchangeable, or they would simply become useless ballast in the vocabulary. interchangeability of words as a criterion for their synonymy. In Uzbek

linguistics, the words that can be used interchangeably in a specific context. Despite the fact that separate works are devoted to the problem of word choice and the corresponding phraseological units, this feature as independent linguists does not stand out.

Thus, none of the above definitions of synonyms can be considered sufficient adequate due to the extreme complexity of this phenomenon. In this regard, it seems necessary to develop the basic criteria for synonyms. 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 (* meaning: he looked at her angrily). *He gazed at her* (he looked at her steadily and attentively; probably with admiration or interest). 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.

Consequently, it is difficult to accept interchangeability as a criterion of synonymy because the specific characteristic of synonyms, and the one justifying their very existence, is that *they are not, cannot and should not be interchangeable,* in which case they would simply become useless ballast in the vocabulary. Synonyms are frequently said to be the vocabulary's colours, tints and hues (so the term *shade* is not so inadequate, after all, for those who can understand a metaphor). Attempts at ascribing to synonyms the quality of interchangeability are equal to stating that subtle tints in a painting can be exchanged without destroying the picture's effect. All this does not mean that no synonyms are interchangeable. One can find whole groups of words with half-erased connotations which

can readily be substituted one for another. The same girl can be described as *pretty, good-looking, handsome* or *beautiful.* Yet, even these words are far from being totally interchangeable. Each of them creates its own picture of human beauty.

The results and discussion

Among the approaches used in the recognition of synonyms, substitution seems to be one of the most persistent criteria (Palmer, 1981; Lyons, 1981; Cruse, 1986; Sinclair, 1991; Stubbs, 2001). Dictionaries and thesauri often offer a number of synonyms circularly as the definition for each other; however, as discussed above, these words may not always be substitutable for each other in different contexts. Synonymy is a context-bound phenomenon. Firth (1957) emphasises the importance of context when he states, 'no study of meaning apart from a complete context can be taken seriously' (p. 7). W. E. Collinson (1939) suggests that 'one must never study synonyms as isolated items, but must always study their functions when they are embedded in suitable contexts and figure in clearly apprehended situations' (p. 58). Words similar in meaning may prove interchangeable in some contexts and not interchangeable in other contexts. It should be borne in mind that substitution in different contexts has for its objcct not only probing interchangeability but bringing into relief the difference in intellectual, emotional and stylistic value of each word. The meaning of each word is conditioned paradigmatically by the meaning of other words forming part of the same vocabulary system, and especially of those in semantic proximity, and syntagmatically by the words with which it can combine. *High* and *tall,* for instance, could be defined not only from the point of view of their valency (*tall* is used about people), but also in relation to each other by stating how far they are interchangeable and what their respective antonyms are. The area where substitution is possible is very limited and outside it all replacement makes the utterance vague, ungrammatical and even unintelligible. This makes the knowledge of where each synonym differs from another of paramount importance for correctness of speech.

The distinction between words similar in meaning are often very fine and elusive, so that some special instruction on the use of synonyms is necessary even for native speakers. This accounts for the great number of books of synonyms that serve as guides for those who aim at good style and precision and wish to choose the most appropriate terms from the varied stock of the English vocabulary.

Conclusion

The study of synonyms is especially indispensable for those who learn English as a foreign language because what is the right word in one: situation will be wrong in many other, apparently similar, contexts. It is often convenient to explain the meaning of a new word with the help of its previously learned synonyms. This forms additional associations in the student's mind, and the new word is better remembered. Moreover, it eliminates the necessity of bringing in a native word. And yet the discrimination of synonyms and words which may be confused is more important. The teacher must show that synonyms are not identical in meaning or use and explain the difference between them by comparing and contrasting them, as well as by showing in what contexts one or the other may be most fitly used. Translation cannot serve as a criterion of synonymy: there are cases when several English words of different distribution and valency are translated into mother tongue by one and the same word. Such words as *also, too* and *as well,* all translated by the Uzbek word *ham,* are never interchangeable. A teacher of English should always stress the necessity of being on one's guard against mistakes of this kind. Every writer has to make up his mind right from the start as to which of the possible synonyms he prefers, and stick to it throughout his text to avoid ambiguity. Thus, the interchangeability is, as it were, theoretical and cannot be materialized in an actual text. The same misunderstood conception of interchangeability lies at the bottom of considering different dialect

names for the same plant, animal or agricultural implement and the like as total (absolute) synonyms.

In conclusion, we can stress that even if there are some synonyms which *are* interchangeable, it is quite certain that there are also others which are not. A criterion, if it is a criterion at all, should be applicable to all synonyms and not just to some of them. Otherwise it is not acceptable as a valid criterion.

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