Are Synonyms Ambiguous? Syntactic, Semantic and Cultural Relations Exemplifield for the Comparison of Synonyms and Their Usage

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this thesis is to explore synonyms in the English language and their syntactic differences, nuances in meaning, and usage in particular contexts. Synonyms have different forms, their position in sentences varies, they call for different modifiers but their meaning is nevertheless similar. Furthermore, they are an important part of language and vocabulary. Instead of using the same word every time, people use synonyms to convey their message using a variety of words. The question is whether this abundance of possibilities expands the vocabulary and makes communication easier or does it make synonyms ambiguous, their identification and usage more problematic? Why is it the case that people use completely different words which refer to the same concept, such as *lift* in the United Kingdom which is the equivalent of *elevator* in The United States? How do cultural relations and language used in different areas and regions influence the usage of words such as *autumn* and *fall*? The following sections of this paper will cover certain concepts concerning the definition, classification and analysis of synonyms, their substitutability in various contexts, as well as their similarity in meaning and differences concerning syntax and form, modification and usage.

Keywords: synonyms, similarity of meaning, ambiguity, syntax, semantics, cultural relations, context, substitutability, communication, vocabulary

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1. INTRODUCTION

Everyday communication consists of constant usage of words, whether in written or spoken form. New words, phrases and expressions enter vocabularies and dictionaries of languages so the possibilities for transferring the message and meaning expand along with this process. As a consequence, it is inevitable that synonymy as a semantic construct should arise. By using a variety of words which convey similar meaning, people both learn and practice languages more effectively. Using synonyms provides the opportunity for language to be more specific, formal and exciting instead of repetitive and monotonous.

However, it is difficult to define synonymy precisely because even minor differences can influence the meaning and usage of words in certain contexts. Learning new synonyms which convey similar meaning enables people to understand what they hear from others or read in texts and it also partially resolves the problem of ambiguity between synonyms. Every linguistic expression finds its usage as a part of a certain context and can, therefore, have a different sense and meaning in another sentence or context (Odell, 1984, p. 117). Odell mentions metaphrase which is "*an expression which can be interchanged for another expression in a given sentence without producing either an odd string or a sentence with different truth conditions from the original sentence*"[1].

Moreover, many linguists have proposed different definitions and approaches to synonymy by linking criteria for determining their syntactic and semantic correspondence. The aim of this paper is to provide a theoretical background of several such views, to make a comparison of synonyms and different approaches to synonymy as a semantic construct, and ultimately offer a possible solution concerning the ambiguity of synonyms and their usage.

[1] As defined in Kress and Odell, 1982, pp. 187-191

By using examples, this thesis will hopefully clarify why ambiguity appears, how synonyms are defined, classified and specified, and explain the consequences of the similarity of meaning. The section concerning syntactic relations will explain and exemplify the differences between synonyms concerning their form, how synonyms are modified and combined with other words in sentences, and how word order influences the grammatical structure of a sentence. The section concerning semantic relations will discuss the explanations of their meanings and how that affects their usage in certain contexts and among people. It will also clarify the ambiguity which arises between synonyms, how synonyms are learned and understood, and how substitutability influences synonyms and the similarity of meaning. The section on cultural relations will explore the comprehension of synonymous expressions among native speakers of English belonging to different cultures, their individual usage of such words, and how synonyms affect their beliefs both individually and conventionally in their communities.

The word *ambiguous* has been mentioned several times already. Dictionaries and thesauri offer many (although not all) expressions similar in meaning, and some of those are as follows: *dubious, cryptic, enigmatic, unclear, vague, questionable, indefinite, doubtful, opaque, obscure*. To be able to understand the meaning of the listed synonyms, one first has to be acquainted with the meaning of the word *ambiguous.* However, it is insufficient to know what a particular word means without knowing how to use it and in which context. This is precisely what makes synonymy a difficult area of research for many linguists because the nuances between them are sometimes barely discernible. Each point of view provides strong arguments which validate the fact that many factors determine synonymy and decide whether two expressions can be observed as synonymous or not. More importantly, neither of the factors which will be mentioned later is prevalent because each contributes to the process of understanding synonymy as a semantic construct and, ultimately, language acquisition itself.

2. DEFINITIONS AND CLASSIFICATION OF SYNONYMS

2.1. Perspectives of defining

Linguistics as a scientific discipline explores many aspects of language, including synonymy and the similarity of meaning. According to Murphy (2003, p. 146), it is important to observe the identity of senses which lexical units convey and the result of which is the sameness in extension. I disagree with this proposition because the identity of sense is practically impossible. It would take a great amount of time to find two words which are completely identical in sense and extension and such a research would probably be unsuccessful. It is more appropriate to observe the similarity of senses rather than identity because, in my opinion, words which are sufficiently similar in sense become candidates for synonymy and they usually result in the same extension, as many examples show.

The connection between meaning and reference in synonymy enables words to have different forms which nevertheless share the same extensions or referents. For instance, verbs *to die* and *pass away* both have characteristics which uniquely define and distinguish them from other verbs and expressions. They have features which involve, among others, semantic and syntactic aspects and thus enable us to define them (Anisfeld and Knapp, 1968, p. 178). Their meanings overlap regardless of the fact that they are not identical and both words have the same extensions and refer to the same concept.

Ferdinand de Saussure, however, had a widely known view of language where he introduced the terms *signifier* (or form) and *signified* (or meaning) with an arbitrary relationship between the two[2]. According to Bob de Jonge (1993, p. 521), such a view would exclude synonymy completely because one form would correspond to exactly one meaning. I agree with de Jonge because, for example, both *to die* and *pass away* share the same meaning,

[2] As defined in Saussure (1959)

and the interpretation of these verbs is universally accepted among speakers of English who undoubtedly understand the meaning of both although their forms are completely different. If every form had a unique meaning, language acquisition would be a difficult, even an impossible process because grasping the meaning of every word in a vocabulary and knowing exactly what it refers to is detrimental for language and communication.

Another interpretation is by Nelson Goodman (1949, p. 7) where he discusses terms and their meaning. He states that defining two terms by saying that they have the same meaning indicates that the likeness and degree of their meaning are sufficient for the communication purposes to be achieved. I think that approaching synonymy in such a way is simple and clear but it again excludes the contextual aspect, individual knowledge of speakers as well as the criteria for the likeness of meaning. I agree that the similarity of meaning between synonyms is sufficient for the purpose of communication, but sometimes even synonymous expressions might produce an odd sentence or utterance which results in an unclear message.

Divjak (2010, p. 3) defines synonyms as lexical terms having identical senses. In addition, she mentions that the criteria for these senses are semantic traits: central, which determine sameness, and peripheral, which determine differences.

Again, I disagree with the notion of identical senses because if two words were completely identical in sense, they would not have peripheral semantic traits which determine their differences, only central which determine their sameness. If identical senses existed, many examples would prove it. I believe that semantic traits are one of the criteria for synonymy since it is a semantic construct, but I do not think of them as the criterion for identical senses because finding examples of identical senses and meanings is very difficult. It is much easier to find examples of words which are similar in sense and meaning, easily interchangeable in different contexts and properly understood among speakers. If the usage of such words results in an effective communication, then the primary purpose of language is accomplished.

Conversely, Danglli (2011, p. 60) states that in the process of defining synonyms there must exist a clear separation between meaning and the referent in the first place. Meaning is studied within semantics and, as such, it is a linguistic category. A referent belongs to the extra-linguistic category and can be defined by different words which do not even share any meaning. For example, a referent *a man* can also be a father, a lawyer and a husband. Danglli (2011, p. 60) states that the concepts which synonyms convey are the same but they differ in the components of meaning. Although the concept of a man is the same for each of the synonyms, the components represent different roles and meanings because the meaning of *father* is clearly different from the meaning of *lawyer*.

Interestingly, Fenstad (1962, p. 47) first defines constants which are logical structures shared among speakers within their language domain. These constants should have the same element assigned by different interpretations in order to be logical and synonymous. This means that speakers actually determine the scope and logic of constants which start as an abstraction and eventually find their valid usage in language. As such, constants combine to form phrases which become synonymous if they share the same value in different interpretations (p. 48) and phrases form sentences which are synonymous only in cases of their complete equivalence (p. 49).

However, I believe that the notion of equivalence contradicts the most basic definition of synonymy which includes similarity of meaning, not necessarily the sameness of meaning. I will exemplify this in the following sentences:

1) She is very intelligent.

2) She is very smart.

Surely, these two sentences might be interpreted in different ways. Language users understand the meaning of both without a doubt, but how can they be sure that *intelligent* and *smart* share

the same value? If so, how can they conclude that they are synonymous if they are clearly not equivalent? There must exist factors and characteristics which determine why someone is intelligent and why someone is smart, in which context to use which term to convey the meaning and purpose of the statement. In British English, *smart* usually means tidy, clean, fashionable, well dressed. Therefore, speakers using British English would not perceive *intelligent* and *smart* as synonymous because they would use *clever* as a synonym for *intelligent*, rather than *smart*.

However, American English speakers use both *smart* and *intelligent* to express someone's intelligence which proves that these two words seem synonymous at first, but if we examine them in more detail it turns out that they convey different meanings and that these are influenced by cultural factors. As Murphy (2003, p. 134) proposes, candidates for synonymy must first be generated and then evaluated. This means that the process includes word identification followed by the evaluation of their similarities (p. 135).

I would like to add that two potentially synonymous words should first be defined as precisely as possible. Their definitions provide an explanation which enables people to understand their meanings. The next step should be observing these two words from the point of view of syntax, semantics, and culture because it is inevitable that, even though potentially synonymous, words will differ in some aspects. The final step should be comparing their similarities and differences which would ultimately determine whether they are candidates for synonymy or not.

Murphy (2003, p. 138) also states that "*synonymy is a symmetrical relation*". I disagree with this proposition because it would mean that *smart* has *intelligent* as its synonym and vice versa which is what most thesauri offer but I would like to add, as the example shows, that for British English speakers, *smart* does not mean the same as *intelligent* regardless of the fact that they surely understand the meaning of both and that they are considered synonymous in

American English. Synonymy would truly be a symmetrical relation if the cultural aspect was excluded and words observed in complete isolation.

2.2. Classification of synonyms

Firstly, as Herrmann (1978, p. 491) states, many authors divide synonyms into two groups. The first group includes total, true, absolute or exact synonyms which are extremely rare because their meaning is identical, it demands complete concordance and they often belong to the same part of speech.

Like many linguists, I disagree with the notion of absolute synonymy because the purpose of language economy as a principle is to provide clarity of meaning using a limited number of words. It is crucial to use words which express precise ideas but it is impossible to both learn and use all the words belonging to a certain vocabulary. Such an impractical approach would demand from the speakers to fully and precisely grasp the meaning of absolute synonyms and to use them in different contexts without any possibility of ambiguity.

Moreover, it would demand from the hearers to discern the implications of absolute synonyms which is practically impossible because a hearer might not even be acquainted with a particular word, let alone its absolute synonym(s). This contradicts the principle of the economy of language which dictates simplicity, clarity and effortless practice of communication.

Therefore, it is unlikely that this group even exists and has valid examples which exclude exceptions simply because the identity of meaning is very difficult to define. Even subtle nuances make a difference and absolute synonyms are not absolute anymore because they should be synonymous in every context and used in the same way. It is impossible for even just two words to completely match in all characteristics, whether syntactically, semantically or contextually. Some semanticists believe that associative characteristics which do not define

the meaning of a word should be rejected as criteria for synonymy (Herrmann, 1978, p. 491) precisely because of this improbability of complete concordance.

I believe that associative characteristics might not define meaning as such but they certainly influence it. It is easier to discern the meaning of a word based on the familiarity of association than without it, which is why I think that associative characteristics might be rejected as criteria for absolute synonymy but not for synonymy in general.

The other group includes partial or approximate synonyms which represent the most commonly used group, such as the previously mentioned synonyms of the word *ambiguous*. These synonyms make writing less repetitious and monotonous, they improve writing skills and stylistically influence a certain text. Their meaning is sufficiently similar for communicative purposes but I would like to emphasize that synonyms belonging to this group are easily confused and misinterpreted when placed in certain sentences and contexts simply because they are sometimes superficially interchangeable without their meaning being properly understood.

Divjak (2010, pp. 3-4) mentions another division[3]. Cognitive synonyms have the same propositional traits but differ in expression. These may also be referred to as stylistic synonyms because they usually involve some degree of (in)formality in certain situations. For example, words such as *dad* (neutral), *father* (formal) and *daddy* (colloquial, informal) belong to this group. Another group includes plesionyms or near-synonyms. Sentences containing them have different truth-conditions and their nuances are reflected in aspects (p. 4) such as degree (*nippy* and *chilly*), speaker's attitudes (*thrifty* and *stingy*), emphasis (physical virtues in *brave* and moral virtues in *courageous*), connotation (*mom* and *mommy*), denotation (a deliberate *lie* and possibly unintentional *untruth*) and such.

[3] Cruse, 2000, pp. 158-161

Murphy (2003, p. 146) also introduces a division, stating that synonyms may have identical (logical synonyms) or similar (context-dependent synonyms) senses. If they are identical, they are either full synonyms and correspond to the notion of the previously mentioned absolute synonyms or sense synonyms which can share one or more senses and differ in others. For instance, both *table* and *desk* share the sense of being a piece of furniture with a surface to do something on but the sense is not identical. They differ in their purpose – a table is mostly used for eating while a desk is mostly used for work. These sub-categories fall under the general category of logical synonyms which share lexical or semantic representations and are used in the same way (Murphy, 2003, p. 147).

I would like to make an observation and state that if logical synonyms with complete identity in sense existed, sense synonyms could not be their sub-category. Murphy states that sense synonyms share one or more senses but differ in other senses which contradicts the concept and category of logical synonyms where synonyms share all the senses and are used in the same way. As stated earlier, *table* and *desk* are similar, not identical, in sense. If synonyms have similar senses, they are categorized as previously mentioned plesionyms (near-synonyms). They represent what people usually consider as synonyms – words that are easily interchangeable and found in thesauri.

These various classifications can be even generalized in terms of synonymy. Odell (1984, p. 117) distinguishes between monotypical synonymy where an expression means the same in different contexts and multitypical synonymy where two expressions share the same sense in both the same and different context. The following example is a case of Odell's monotypical synonymy:

1) The colors she used are very bright.

2) She has a very bright personality.

The word *bright* has a similar but not the same meaning in both sentences. Odell states that a particular expression must mean the same in different contexts in order to be monotypically synonymous. I disagree with Odell because it would mean that such an expression must be observed in isolation. The word *bright* used in *bright colors* and *bright personality* does not have the same sense when observed contextually. The case of Odell's multitypical synonymy can be found in the next pair of sentences:

1) John will make a statement about the situation tomorrow.

2) John will make an assertion about the situation tomorrow.

The context of both sentences is the same and the expression *a statement* has a similar meaning as the expression *assertion*. Even though their meaning is easily understood if they are substituted for one another, they clearly do not share the same sense, as Odell proposes. It would mean that they are absolute synonyms, identical in meaning, which is not the case. A statement is usually followed by some sort of evidence which supports it while an assertion might be considered as an allegation or claim, even someone's opinion about a certain situation, not necessarily providing any evidence for it. The next section will provide even further explanations concerning the improbability of absolute synonyms and the identity of sense.

3. SYNTACTIC RELATIONS

3.1. Difference in form

Syntax and semantics are closely related, both being part of the language structure. It is therefore clear that grammatical aspects influence the meaning of synonyms and their interpretation. Murphy (2003, p. 133) introduces the topic of synonymy by using the "*Relation by Contrast*" principle in which differences between synonyms are observed rather than similarities between them. This principle states that a synonym set includes words that share relevant properties concerning context but they differ in form (p. 134).

It is logical that synonyms belonging to the same grammatical category are more easily interchangeable in sentences in such a way that the structure remains proper, syntactically and semantically. This is why some semanticists reject syntax and grammatical categories as valid criteria for synonymy and firmly propose that meaning is the only aspect that should be taken into consideration when defining synonyms. However, Murphy (2003, p. 153) states that a grammatical category is irrelevant only in cases where such changes do not change the perceptions of meaning or the possibility for substitution. I agree with Murphy because the difference in form alone shows that syntax and grammatical categories influence synonyms and their meaning.

For example, *scared* and *afraid* are synonyms when expressing a negative state and belong to the category of adjectives. While *scared* can occur in both the nominal (a scared person) and predicative (a person who is scared) position, *afraid* can only occur in the predicative position (a person who is afraid) because the structure of *an afraid person* seems odd. When these two words are observed only from the semantic perspective, the similarity of their meanings proves that they are synonymous. However, I used this example to support Murphy's claim and show that both the difference in form and position in a sentence influence

the way in which *scared* and *afraid* are used. Rejecting syntax and observing only the similarity of meaning of *scared* and *afraid* make the expression *an afraid person* perfectly acceptable in language. However, syntax has rules and principles which determine the structure of sentences. Ignoring these rules and ignoring syntax which is equally important as semantics would distort the structure of language.

Another interesting proposal concerning the grammatical aspect of synonyms comes from Harris (1990, p. 30) who states that even though the comparative form of *bad* is *worse*, the synonym, *harmful* for example, obviously does not have it. It shows that both similarities and differences between synonyms must be taken into consideration before stating that two words are synonymous. It is important to understand and use them properly to avoid ambiguity which arises even though their meaning is similar. It again proves that syntax and semantics both play an important role in the process of identification of synonyms.

Every grammatical construction serves as a vehicle of a particular semantic structure and, as such, determines its range of use (Hudson et al., 1996, p. 439). However, I would like to state that if relations between syntax and semantics are always exact, the conclusion would be that synonyms which share the same syntax should also share the same meaning and vice versa. Clearly, that is not the case. For example, possibility can be expressed using *likely* and *probable* as synonyms but their usage in sentences differs (Hudson et al., 1996, p. 440):

1) It is likely/probable that Jack will come.

2) Jack is likely/*probable to come.

Both synonyms conform well to the structure of the first sentence but the second example shows that *likely* can be used with a to-infinitive while *probable* does not allow it. Another example would be *talk* and *discuss*:

1) I will talk to her about it./*I will discuss to her about it.

2) I will discuss it with her./*I will talk it with her.

In the first sentence, the verb *talk* allows an indirect object, *discuss* does not. In the second sentence, however, *discuss* allows a direct object, *talk* does not. These examples demonstrate nicely how minor differences observed from the grammatical point of view influence synonyms and their meaning. Every single word finds a unique usage in a sentence or a context, it combines with different parts of speech and (dis)allows modifications and alterations.

Moreover, Hudson et al. (1996, p. 442) propose that valency differences involving lexical or syntactic patterns also facilitate learning and understanding synonyms. The following examples will show how valency influences sentences using similar expressions:

1) Maybe you will not succeed, but please try/*attempt.

2) Maybe you will not succeed, but please try/attempt to.

The verb *attempt* has a *to* complement as an obligatory element. Even though *try* is its synonym, the complement is optional when used with this verb.

3) She entered/*arrived the clinic.

4) She arrived/*entered to the clinic.

The verb *enter* calls for a bare infinitive and *arrive* calls for a *to*-infinitive.

5) Mary liked/enjoyed running.

6) Mary liked/*enjoyed to run.

Both verbs allow present participle but only *like* in the past form allows a *to*-infinitive.

7) I object/*disagree to this decision.

8) I disagree/*object with this decision.

These sentences show that the choice of prepositions also influences the choice of synonyms in a particular sentence. Similar cases include, for example, *complain about*/*disapprove of* and *agree with*/*conform to*. Even though synonymous, they call for different prepositions. It again proves that syntax and the choice of words which precede or follow synonyms must not be neglected. The wrong choice of words might produce an odd sentence or utterance, regardless of the similarity of meaning.

3.2. Modifying synonyms

As already mentioned, words preceding or following synonyms may greatly influence their usage in various contexts. Such modifications are not always clear when words belong to the same class and apparently mean the same. However, syntax serves as a coordinating factor, certain rules concerning the position and association of words in a sentence determine how synonymous expressions are used, why certain rules allow broader modifications and what the restrictions which contribute to the identification of synonyms are.

Modifiers are an important part of syntax since they alter, clarify and limit other words in sentences and their misplacement may lead to a completely different, even distorted, structure and meaning. For instance, modifiers combined with other words form interesting collocations but it is not always the case that two synonyms collocate with the same words, despite the similarity of meaning. The word *ambiguous* usually collocates with the words *concept, message*, *term*, *reference*. Its synonym *dubious* collocates with *claim*, *reputation*, *taste*, *value*, *character*. Another example is also *unclear* which is commonly combined with *point, situation, origin*, *relationship*, *reason*.

To emphasize the fact that synonyms and their meaning are never examined in isolation, it is important to state that, generally, all parts of speech influence one another, depending on

which category the synonyms as such find themselves in. Adjectives acting as modifiers, verbs preceding or following them, prepositions, nouns, and adverbs must be properly used with synonymous expressions in order to avoid ambiguity and distorted sentences. For example, the words *alike* and *similar* are synonymous. Their meaning, conveniently for the topic, expresses connection, analogy and relation. However, when acting as modifiers, their position in a sentence is different:

1) Jessica wrote two similar/*alike papers.

2) Jessica wrote two papers that are similar/alike.

The adjective *similar* can appear both in the attributive and the predicative position. However, *alike* calls for a predicative position. Similar situations might also occur in the case of synonyms belonging to different word classes:

1) He did not want to wake the sleeping/*asleep boy.

2) He did not want to wake the boy who was sleeping/asleep.

Also, adverbs expressing degree serve as modifiers. *Very* and *much* are synonymous adverbs expressing a high degree of something, but while it is correct to say *very tired*, the construction *much tired* is certainly incorrect. When used to modify other adverbs, *more* is used to express progression:

1) He has a new car and comes to work more quickly/*fast.

Fast can be interpreted as an adjective and in such a case it would not even need an adverb as a modifier since it has a comparative form, *faster*. In this sentence, *fast* acts as an adverb expressing manner. Combined with another adverb it results in an odd expression, *more fast*, which is not the case with *more quickly*.

3.3. Sentence structure and word order

Besides the position of modifiers, the position of synonyms in a sentence also varies, depending on the focus and emphasis. It is important to preserve the grammatical structure of the sentence because the structure itself influences the meaning. If words are misplaced, the whole sentence is distorted even though it might seem that a particular word belongs in a certain position. The result is not only a syntactically incorrect construction but also a semantically misinterpreted sentence which ultimately undermines the purpose of language. As an example, Hudson et.al (1996, p. 444) offer the following:

1) It rained also/too/as well.

2) It also/*too/*as well rained.

Only *also* can both precede and follow the focus of the sentence; *too* and *as well* strictly follow it. I would like to provide some more examples of sentences using synonyms which prove the importance of word order, such as:

1) She walked quickly/fast to catch the bus.

2) She quickly/*fast walked to catch the bus.

3) It will probably/*maybe snow.

4) Maybe/*probably it will snow.

5) Diana alone/*only managed to do it.

6) Only/*alone Diana managed to do it.

To conclude the chapter on syntax, Hudson et.al (1996, p. 445) state that syntax and semantics both have autonomous positions which correlate to form a complete area of study or observation. Therefore, they divide differences between synonyms into four groups: valency

pattern differences, functional differences between synonyms, differences concerning word classes and restrictions concerning word order.

4. SEMANTIC RELATIONS

4.1. The ambiguity of meaning

The previous section explained how ambiguity might appear when synonyms are observed from the syntactic perspective, within sentences and appearing in different positions. Obviously, misplacement and alterations influence their meaning so this section will explain and exemplify why and how this happens and what the possible solutions which contribute to the identification of synonymous meanings are.

To introduce the notion of ambiguity, I would like to state that two synonymous expressions might be ambiguous when they are placed in different contexts, despite the similarity of meaning. Odell (1984, p. 121) states that, in order for two expressions to be ambiguous, there must exist a certain semantic relationship between them. It is a logical observation because people easily make a distinction between expressions which have completely opposite meanings (for example, *chair* and *dog*). However, the following example shows that the similarity of meaning increases the level of ambiguity:

1) I saw Mary last night, she seemed very nervous.

2) I saw Mary last night, she seemed very anxious.

These sentences contain expressions which, though synonymous, appear ambiguous because their meaning is not sufficiently precise. Nuances in their meaning determine which expression will be used in which context and why. It is important to differentiate between ambiguity which appears solely within a sentence and ambiguity which appears contextually (Odell, 1984, p. 124). For example, these sentences containing two synonymous expressions seem ambiguous

because their meaning is very similar. However, if someone were observing another person's behavior in a certain situation, the difference between *nervous* and *anxious* would probably be obvious. Therefore, it is important to know what to say and choose an appropriate expression that fits the context in order for the meaning to be properly understood.

To resolve the problem of ambiguity, Danglli (2011, p. 61) proposes that denotation and connotation might be helpful. Denotation is usually defined as the reference, the extensional meaning of a word and connotation refers to the intensional, attributive meaning which expresses attitudes and emotions (Herrmann, 1978, p. 492). Moreover, Danglli (2011, p. 61) states that connotation accurately describes synonyms and makes their differentiation easier. Both aspects combined together form meaning as a general term. I will exemplify this in the following sentence:

Napoleon Bonaparte was a French military leader and an emperor leading France in the Napoleonic Wars.

The extension of this sentence, the exact referent or entity is *Napoleon Bonaparte*. The intesion, a set of constant properties which describe his role and define him, is the expression *a French military leader and an emperor leading France in the Napoleonic Wars.* Both parts refer to the same person even when used independently in different sentences and contexts.

Another interesting point of view comes from Hirshman and Master (1997, p. 214) who introduce synonymy judgment and state that such a process consists of two stages: the identification of words based on their visual properties followed by the comparison stage where semantic similarities are observed. Here it is important to point out that synonymy judgment is a process based on individuality and human conceptualization. An individual approach combined with visualization can definitely be helpful in eliminating ambiguity and determining whether words are synonymous or not.

When encountering certain words, each person first uses cognitive abilities to establish whether words look or sound familiar and what the meaning of each word is. In order to determine potential synonyms, a person compares these meanings, observes their semantic similarities and is ultimately able to conclude whether the similarities are sufficient to create candidates for synonymy. I would also like to emphasize that such an approach enables people to learn new words and look up their meanings. It facilitates language acquisition and at least partially eliminates ambiguity because synonymous expressions are used properly and more effectively when one is acquainted with the nuances of their meaning.

Haagen (1949, p. 454) approached the topic of synonymy by observing the similarity of meaning, association and connotation among pairs of adjectives. He defined the similarity of meaning as "*the degree to which words denote the same or similar objects, actions, or conditions*" (Haagen, 1949, p. 454). These words may be interchanged without producing a negative effect on their meaning.

In addition, it is important to observe how words are associated in the thoughts and minds of the speakers. This enables people to memorize synonyms and recall, for example, when the word *road* is mentioned, that *path*, *track*, *route*, and *street* are synonymous with it. Furthermore, each of these words has a vividness which is "*related chiefly to the number and intensity of the connotative connections which it possesses*" (Haagen, 1949, p. 455). If the intensity is high, words stir a lot of emotions, express attitudes and opinions which are based not only on memory and association but also on familiarity, experience and previous contexts in which they were used.

Murphy (2003, p. 138) states that the ambiguity of synonyms may occur in a context where words interact regardless of their differences in senses. These words are obviously similar enough in meaning, like *faith* and *trust* (p. 139). The author emphasizes the fact that a person might trust his/her bank but it is ambiguous whether one would have faith in it.

Furthermore, *faith* is mostly used as a noun while *trust* can serve both as a noun and a verb. She states that it is necessary to find a more suitable synonym for *faith* which finds a similar usage in a certain context. It can be achieved by observing situations in which this noun appears and since these situations mostly include religion, a better synonym would definitely be *belief* which resolves the ambiguity. It is demonstrated in a conversation where a person usually asks another person "*Do you believe in God?*" or "*Do you have faith in God?*" because using *trust* as a synonym of *faith* and saying "*Do you have trust in God?*" in such a context would indicate, for example, that a person questions whether God can be trusted, not whether someone believes in the existence of God.

However, when someone says "*I trust you*" or "*I believe you*", the nuances in meaning between these two utterances show that *trust* and *belief* are more synonymous in some other contexts than *trust* and *faith*, or *belief* and *faith*. It also shows that, although synonymous, *faith*, *belief* and *trust* convey either similar or different meanings when they are placed in certain sentences, utterances and contexts. Believing or having faith in someone means something completely different than believing or trusting someone. The matter and importance of context will be further explained and exemplified in subsection 5.1.

What Murphy (2003, p. 149) also analyzes is the previously mentioned denotation and explains that different denotations still express synonymy because the core meaning of words correlates and their peripheral meaning is either disregarded or the periphery additionally contributes to their complementation. I think that denotation is more likely to produce ambiguity than connotation. The difference in connotation, in my opinion, clarifies the ambiguity between synonymous expressions since denotation and connotation both form the general meaning and both must be taken into consideration.

For example, the denotation of *big* and *large* might seem ambiguous because they are very similar in meaning. However, their connotation is not the same. *Big* usually expresses size

and collocates with nouns such as *house* or *dog* and *large* commonly expresses an amount of something – a large number, quantity, proportion. Furthermore, children will grasp the meaning of *a big truck* faster than *a large truck* since the word *big* is more commonly used during their language acquisition. They are more familiar with the connotation of *big* than with the connotation of *large*.

As a conclusion, the ambiguity of meaning appears not only between two words but also among synonyms belonging to a set. Murphy (2003, p. 160) states that two members of such a set might seem more similar in meaning than the others which might lead to an observation that not all words in the set are necessarily synonymous with each other. Moreover, White (1958, p. 193) nicely explains that ambiguity appears when a word is synonymous with at least two other words which are not mutually synonymous. I agree with both Murphy and White because when confronted with an abundance of synonyms offered for a particular word, a person might observe them superficially and conclude that all of those words are synonymous with each other and are used in the same way in every context. When the contextual aspect is included as well, they might be synonymous to a lesser degree. For example, as synonyms of *angry* thesauri offer *mad, enraged, furious, bitter, irritated, infuriated* but in certain contexts and usages, *enraged* and *furious* might be synonymous while *mad* and *irritated* might not.

4.2. Understanding synonyms

A person might sometimes try to find synonyms of a certain word to improve their writing or speaking skills. Every person decides individually which word he or she wants to use. It happens either because, for example, the meaning of *questionable* is clearer than the meaning of *opaque*, or because of the fact that sometimes the meanings are not easily conveyed in a foreign language, even though words are synonymous. Moreover, sometimes the meaning of one word is simply more complex and therefore harder to understand (White, 1958, p. 201).

Every person has a unique perception of what a certain word means. For example, *among* and *between* are synonymous and one person might think that they convey the same meaning. Someone else might say that *among* expresses a relationship where objects are not necessarily separated and belong to a certain group while *between* as a preposition expresses separation and comparison of objects. Also, *among* and *amongst* are surely synonymous. However, *among* is commonly used in American English and *amongst* is its variant in British English. Regional differences will be further exemplified in the section on cultural relations.

Murphy and Andrew (1993, p. 304) state that meaning is based on human conceptualization which makes semantic and conceptual relations closely related. Antonymy as another semantic construct might be helpful in the process of finding the similarity of meaning between words. It is easier to understand the meaning of the synonyms *ascend* and *rise* if we know that their antonyms are *descend* and *fall* (Murphy and Andrew, 1993, p. 303). It is interesting how particular synonyms which are very similar in meaning offer completely different antonyms, as the example shows.

What Burge (1978, p. 136) nicely concludes is that people incorporate their personal beliefs when they make statements, sometimes using words which are not even synonymous. He states that the purpose of a certain report and beliefs influence the standards on which people decide which expression to use and when. As a result, an individual uses his beliefs which he transfers to others by using words. It enables them to understand not only what he meant to say, his communicative intention (Burge, 1978, p. 137), but also his beliefs. If changes in belief happen, the sense of the sentence will change as well (Putnam, 1954, p. 120). I would like to add that personal beliefs greatly influence not only the sense of a sentence but also the choice of words which an individual uses. People sometimes do not use synonyms appropriately because they do not understand their meaning properly.

Another interesting perspective about individuality is offered by Owens (1986, p. 363). He states that an individual uses certain expressions in order to formulate beliefs regardless of the conventions of their usage in communities. Additionally, the meaning of these words in usage is determined precisely by the mentioned conventions which serve as a factor for standardization "*and knowledge of them enables speakers (hearers) to encode (decode) nonlinguistic thoughts*" (Owens, 1986, p. 364). This is exactly why people do not use synonyms properly, as I pointed out earlier.

If individual beliefs were used regardless of the conventions in communities, every person would create a unique meaning for every word. As a result, every word belonging to a vocabulary would be used differently in different contexts. This would make communication almost impossible, there would not exist even two words with at least a slightly similar meaning and, thus, there would be no synonymy.

4.3. The influence of substitutability on meaning

Substitutability of synonyms is definitely a factor which contributes to their identification. As Owens (1986, p. 370) states, a person uses words interchangeably based on his or her reasoning and belief that these words are synonymous. If that is not the case in all contexts, these words are not conceptually the same and, therefore, not synonymous and it would mean that they cannot be substituted for one another in different sentences and situations.

Expressions are considered synonymous if people are "*psychologically disposed*" to use them interchangeably in contexts which preserve their truth values (Goldstick, 1980, p. 189). It means that their meaning remains similar enough to convey the same message and purpose in communicative aspects. Rieber (1992, p. 227) uses the word *lawyer* as an example. It can be substituted with *advocate*, *solicitor*, *attorney* and *counselor* in various contexts and

sentences but the meaning of each synonym must be applied in a way that preserves the truth value of the sentence.

Furthermore, Pagin (2001, p. 10) agrees and states that synonym substitution results in a statement preserving "*the distance to the periphery*" which means that it is unlikely to produce different truth values. If substitutability produced different truth values, it would mean that two words which are considered synonymous and are substituted for one another are not synonymous at all.

I would like to add that substitutability uses potentially synonymous expressions and, if they prove to be substitutable and preserve truth conditions of a sentence or utterance, they actually become synonymous and may be perceived as such. For example:

1) The square root of sixteen is eight halves.

2) The square root of sixteen is four.

Of course, in order to substitute these two expressions for one another, a person must be acquainted with the meaning of both. If they truly refer to the same concept, they are sufficiently similar in meaning to be synonymous. This is why I believe that substitutability is a valid criterion for synonymy. It proves that the contextual aspect must be taken into consideration when determining whether two expressions are candidates for synonymy. Without context, many words might seem synonymous just because some components of their meanings might be similar.

5. CULTURAL RELATIONS

5.1. The matter of context and recognition

The previous subsection which discusses substitutability is closely related to this section concerning synonyms in use. It is very important that speakers are able to recognize synonymous expressions and that they know when and how to use and substitute them for one another in different contexts. In order to emphasize the meaning and convey it properly, speakers must choose wisely. Not all synonyms are considered appropriate in all contexts because some situations demand formality and precision, especially in professional vocabularies. There is a difference between what is appropriate and what is substitutable. Synonyms are not easily and properly substituted in all contexts but if they were not substitutable at all, synonymy would not even exist.

It is often the case that the same expression means something completely different when used in different contexts. For example, *a clean shirt* means that it is a tidy shirt, washed and ready to be worn while *a clean record* means that no previous punishments have been registered. This shows that appropriate usage of words matters because meaning directly influences usage and vice versa. As Rubenstein and Goodenough (1965, p. 627) state, words which share a sufficient number of usages and contexts are usually semantically more related.

Herrmann (1978, p. 506) states that choosing synonyms depends on social factors which influence the choice semantically. From the social point of view, it is probably better to use a formal expression *residence* instead of *house* in a particular situation or to be polite and say *senior citizens* instead of *old people*. This explains how various contexts influence synonymy, the usage of such words in different situations, and it also proves that the similarity of meaning is not the only factor which needs to be taken into consideration when observing synonymous

words. Synonyms are thus very useful in language, they offer various possibilities of expression so speakers can choose what to say, how to say it and in which situations.

5.2. Synonymy in communication and vocabulary

The usage of synonyms in writing and speaking facilitates the primary purpose of language – communication. Language becomes more practical because having various terms with same references enables speakers to express themselves effectively. Vocabularies constantly change, new words enter and some become outdated. Language as such would not exist without speakers who constantly introduce and apply new ways of expression and, as de Jonge (1993, p. 534) nicely concludes, there exists "*a systematic functionality of language that causes it to function economically with a limited number of elements while producing an unlimited number of utterances.*"

This nicely conforms to the previously mentioned economy of language which is based on effortless communication and rejects the notion of absolute synonymy because it is impossible for two words to completely match in every possible sense, meaning and usage. If absolute synonyms existed, it would be less clear what someone wanted to say.

For example, one person might think that *a bachelor* and *an unmarried man* are absolutely synonymous while another person might say that they primarily differ in sense and cannot be used in the same way in all contexts. A bachelor is a mature man of a certain age who is not married and does not intend to get married. Unfortunately, most dictionaries define *a bachelor* precisely as an *unmarried man* without providing any further explanation of what the exact meaning of *a bachelor* is and what the characteristics of a man who is considered a bachelor are. For example:

1) My brother is a bachelor.

2) My brother is an unmarried man.

The first sentence proposes that my brother is of a certain age (usually in his twenties or thirties), that he has never been married and that he probably will not get married in the near future. The second sentence might apparently mean the same because my brother is simply unmarried, just like a bachelor is unmarried. However, being unmarried might mean that he used to have a wife and that they are now divorced or separated and that he is again unmarried and single. This is why I believe that absolute synonyms do not exist. Even the slightest difference in sense and meaning (never being married and currently not being married) alters the way in which such expressions are used.

Sometimes the abundance of synonyms might seem redundant, as though it has a negative effect on the vocabulary. Speakers are simply unable to grasp the meaning of every possible word and its synonyms so they fail to apply their knowledge in communication. This is the reason why language acquisition consists of constant learning, observing words in different contexts and how they correlate with other words, reading their definitions, learning collocations and so on. It is important to take all three aspects (syntactic, semantic and pragmatic) into consideration in order to emphasize the advantages of synonyms in language.

It is very useful to read newspapers, articles and magazines which constantly offer new and modern words and expressions. In such a way, speakers learn new synonyms and are able to place these words in both familiar and new contexts. Synonyms then enter vocabularies and dictionaries and become commonly used in speech and writing. Languages change along with new trends, inventions and standards so it is logical that communication demands new expressions which will enable speakers to transfer their ideas more effectively.

5.3. Synonymy and cultural relations

This final subsection will provide examples of how regionalisms and cultural relations affect synonymy. The most interesting observations are those concerning the differences between American English and British English because synonyms used in both are most easily confused in writing and speech. Since both regions have unique traditions and have been developing their vocabularies for centuries, it is clear that the variants of synonyms they use have unique historical origins.

Rieber (1994, p. 110) says that two expressions share a semantic structure only in a situation where their meaningful components match, that is, mean the same. This applies to standards which determine why American English prefers *defense* and why British English prefers *defence*. They differ in form, even though it is just one letter, but their meaning is nevertheless easily understood – their meaningful components match. Such alternatives are found in many more examples, for instance: British English uses *grey colour* in spelling while American English uses *gray color*.

These differences only show that no matter the choice, the meaning is understood. Both alternatives are grammatically and semantically correct and convey the same message among speakers belonging to certain regions. Murphy (2003, p. 155) states that social meaning includes aspects such as dialect, jargon, register, and attitudes so I will exemplify what synonyms ultimately mostly differ in:

1. general or specialized vocabulary – *salt*/*sodium chloride*

2. formality/register – *to die/pass away*

3. connotation – *dad/daddy*

4. affect (speaker's attitude) – *ignorant/stupid, homosexual/gay*

5. politeness – *senior citizens/old people*

6. regional aspects – *toilet/restroom, footway/sidewalk, flat/apartment, autumn/fall, biscuit/cookie*

7. language – *dog/pas*

6. CONCLUSION

The first section of the thesis concerning the definitions and classification of synonyms has shown that many authors have different opinions on synonymy. They define it based on their observations, using examples which provide strong arguments that, ultimately, synonymy is indeed similarity of meaning between words. It is a basic and short definition which authors agree upon but interpret differently.

However, defining synonymy precisely is difficult because many aspects need to be taken into consideration before a person concludes that two expressions are similar in meaning. Certainly, classifying and dividing synonyms into appropriate categories facilitates the process of their definition and comprehension precisely because differences among synonyms are often indiscernible.

The similarity of meaning, however, is not a sufficient criterion for synonymy. Of course, it is an important aspect but what must not be excluded is definitely syntax. Even words which are considered synonymous behave differently in sentences. First of all, they differ in form. If that were not the case and the form was completely the same, then synonymy would not exist because there would be no alternatives for the comparison of meaning if, for example, only the adjective *angry* expresses anger and its synonym is again *angry* (identical in form) and nothing else. Such a reflexive relation would result in a situation where every word has a unique meaning and, therefore, a unique reference. It would make language acquisition much more complicated, almost ruining its primary purpose – communication.

Moreover, syntax as such provides an explanation why synonyms sometimes call for different modifiers, how they collocate with other words and why their position in a sentence greatly influences the grammatical structure and word order. The difference in form influences not only their meaning but it also provides restrictions concerning their usage in sentences.

It is therefore important to know and learn how to use synonyms properly in order to avoid the ambiguity which might occur. This is precisely the reason why people sometimes use synonyms while not being aware that they might not even be synonymous at all. If they are synonymous, others will be able to understand them and grasp their meaning even in different contexts.

This applies to situations where words different in form convey similar meaning in different or same contexts and to situations where one word is properly understood in a different or same context, with its meaning not being distorted. The criterion for determining synonymy in these situations is their substitutability which is also often mentioned in various definitions as an important factor proving that similarity of meaning is insufficient and must not be observed in isolation.

It is important to constantly expand the vocabulary and execute the communicative purpose of language but not without knowing what to say, how to say it and when. Every context demands appropriate expressions which is why synonyms differ in register, politeness, and connotation. There is a great difference between a general and specialized vocabulary so every speaker must be acquainted with both the appropriate meaning and usage of a certain word or words.

Finally, synonyms definitely facilitate language acquisition. They enrich the vocabulary and enable speakers to express themselves precisely, stylistically or formally. As long as both forms convey similar meaning, it is not important, for example, whether a season is called

autumn or *fall*. It is a matter of convention among speakers in certain communities and regions, a matter of their individual and common choice which, if it preserves the meaning and sense of an expression and clearly determines its referent, is considered valid and appropriate in use.

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