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ФИЛОЛОГИЯ

Nguyen Thi Cuc

Hanoi University of Mining and Geology,
Vietnam**USING SYNONYMY IN TEACHING ENGLISH VOCABULARY****Abstract**

The paper aims to explore the phenomenon of synonymy in English, emphasizing its significant role in enhancing vocabulary acquisition and its impact on vocabulary teaching and learning. The investigation is accompanied by recommendations regarding the effective incorporation of synonyms into English language instruction. Notably, it is suggested that the utilization of synonyms in English vocabulary should be valued for the potential advantages it offers to both educators and learners. Moreover, it is proposed that the integration of synonyms should be implemented during the advanced stages of English language acquisition. Additionally, the study advocates for the combination of this method with other skill-development processes, particularly through incidental learning, to maximize its benefits.

Key word

synonyms, absolute synonymy, cognitive synonymy, vocabulary.

1. Introduction

Sense relation or lexical relation is an internal meaning relation that holds between words within the vocabulary system of the language. It is the paradigmatic relation (i.e.: the relation between different words that might have been chosen on the vertical axis). There are a great number of sense relations, the three most significant among which are synonymy (i.e. the relation of sameness), antonymy (i.e. the relation of oppositeness) and hyponymy (i.e. the relation of including).

Synonymy is a typical and remarkable type of sense relation, the relation of sameness that holds between two or more words. Since the matter of synonymy and the use of synonyms in vocabulary learning and teaching have been a very controversial issue of semantics, almost all books on semantics and vocabulary mention the studies on synonymy. It can be concluded that synonymy is an effective means to develop English learners' vocabulary with a certain group of learners – immediate/advanced ones.

2. Theoretical basis**2.1. Definitions of synonyms**

Numerous researchers have attempted to define synonymy, resulting various definitions of synonymy; for example: John Lyon, W. Kreidler, Michael McCarthy, Norbert Schmitt, etc. According to Kreidler (1998:97), synonymy is an instance of mutual entailment, and synonyms are instances of mutual hyponymy. He takes two examples: (a) *Jack is a seaman*, (b) *Jack is a sailor*, and explains that because the truth of (a) entails the truth of (b) and vice versa, and also the falsity of (a) entails the falsity of (b) and vice versa, *seaman* and *sailor* are synonyms.

Similarly, McCarthy (1990:16) says "synonymy means that two or more words have the same meaning" by sharing a lot of examples as *begin* and *start*, *sofa* and *settee*, *below*, *beneath* and *under(neath)*, etc. In the same vein, Palmer (1981: 88) defines synonymy as "symmetric hyponymy" since synonymy is a special kind of sense relations between the words which is based on the sameness of their meanings. Synonymy is also sometimes defined as "mutual entailment and the meaning is the same when the truth conditions are identical" (Kempson, 1977: 40).

Furthermore, synonyms are considered a paradigmatic relation, so, they can substitute for each other in a particular context. The context "can supply the specific information that is lacking in one of the

synonyms”, thus, synonyms are context – dependent (Palmer, 1981: 93). In agreement with this author, Bolinger and Sears (1981: 123) takes the point of view that the closeness of synonyms allows the speaker to choose between them in many contexts because they are often replaceable.

Considering this issue from different angle, Katz (1972: 48) distinguishes the two concepts of “semantic similarity” and “semantic distinctness” and defines synonymy as the “limiting case of semantic similarity”. A similar point of view is held by Harris (1973: 2) who also investigates synonymous statements into ‘semantic sameness’ versus ‘semantic difference’. By assessing their linguistic meanings, he defines synonymous expressions as expressions that have different form, but their meaning is the same (Harris, 1973:2).

Cruse (1986: 266) asserts that “synonyms must have a high degree of semantic overlap and a low degree of implicit contrastiveness”. He considers *truthful* and *honest* as synonymous because they have a relatively high degree of semantic overlap. On contrary, the words *alsatian* and *spaniel* are not synonymous for they both stand for a breed of dog, but they differ by their “implicit contrast sets”. He adds that “synonyms are lexical items whose senses are identical in respect of central semantic traits, but differ, if at all, only in respect of what we may provisionally describe as minor or peripheral traits” (Cruse, 1986:267). A synonym is often used to explain or clarify the meaning of another word, as in “*he was cashiered, that is to say, dismissed*”. Synonyms can also be used contrastively, as in “*he was murdered, or rather executed*”.

What is more, Cruse (1986:265) defines synonymy as a special similarity where “certain pairs or groups of lexical items bear a special sort of semantic resemblance to one another”. He mentions a ‘scale of synonymity’ whose end – point is absolute synonyms to characterize synonyms. Only Lyons uses the term “expressions” to define synonyms as “expressions with the same meaning” (Lyons, 1995:60). He explains that this definition does “not restrict the relation of synonymy to lexemes, so lexically simple expressions may be synonymous to lexically complex expressions” (Webb, 2007).

2.2. Concept of absolute synonymy

According to Lyons, absolute synonymy is very rare and he defines three conditions that the expressions must satisfy in order to be called absolute synonyms: (1) all their meanings are identical, (2) they are synonymous in all contexts and (3) they are semantically equivalent on all dimensions of meaning, descriptive and non-descriptive (1995: 61). Lyons (1968: 448) also distinguishes two concepts - “complete synonyms” (i.e. two synonyms are equivalent in both their cognitive and emotive senses) and “total synonymy” (i.e. two synonyms are interchangeable in all contexts).

Cruse (1986: 270) explains that absolute synonyms is infrequent in a language due to a lack of motivation for their use. Absolute synonymys are related unstably either because one of the lexemes becomes obsolete, or a difference in semantic function develops. He takes the examples of the words *sofa* and *settee* which are often seen as absolute synonyms; however, different speakers consider a different member of this pair to be the more elegant one. “It seems probable, and many semanticists have maintained, that natural languages abhor absolute synonyms just as nature abhors a vacuum” (Cruse, 1986:270).

Taking the same viewpoint as Cruse, Collinson lists nine possible differences between the synonyms as quoted in Harris (1973: 14-15):

- One term is more general and inclusive in its applicability, another is more specific and exclusive, e.g. *refuse/reject*
- One term is more intense than another, e.g. *immense/great*
- One term is more highly charged with emotion than another, e.g. *louring/threatening*
- One term may imply moral approbation or censure where another is neutral, e.g. *thrifty/economical*
- One term is more “professional” than another, e.g. *decease/death*
- One term belongs more to the written language, it is more literary than another, e.g. *passing/death*

- One term is more colloquial than another, e.g. *turn down/refuse*
- One term is more local or dialectical than another, e.g. *Scots flesher/butcher*
- One term belongs to child-talk, is used by children or in talking to children, e.g. *teeny/tiny*

However, as synonymy is context-dependent, the distinction between the synonyms may be neutralized by the context (Lyons, 1968: 452). For example, the two synonymous words - *dog* and *bitch* are interchangeable without distinction in the sentence “*My ... has just had pups.*”

2.3. Concept of cognitive synonymy

Cruse (1986: 270) points out that if two lexical items have certain semantic properties in common, they can be treated as cognitive synonyms, and only few of these cognitive synonyms are absolute synonyms. Many synonymists make a distinction between “cognitive” and “emotive” meaning to distinguish the intellect and emotions. Cognitive or conceptual or denotative meaning has an essential function in linguistic communication (Webb, 2007). Leech (1983: 14) states that: “there is much convenience in restricting the term synonymy to equivalence of conceptual meaning so that we may then contrast conceptual synonyms with respect to their varying stylistic overtones”. The synonyms thus may differ in the socio-stylistic variation in the dimension of status (formal, poetic, colloquial or baby language) (Webb, 2007).

Concerning this issue, Lyons adds that: “No one ever talks of words as being emotively, but not cognitively synonymous” (Lyons, 1968:449). The emotive meaning can, for instance, influence the selection of a synonym in a particular context. Therefore, many semanticists restrict the term “synonymy” to “cognitive synonymy”. Furthermore, Cruse (1986: 273) claims that “if two lexical items are cognitive synonyms, then they must be identical in respect of propositional traits, but they may differ in respect of expressive traits”. For example, *father* and *daddy* are cognitive synonyms since both words mean the same, but *daddy* is more expressive and emotional.

What is more, propositional meaning in a statement “is the presented meaning which determines the truth-conditions”; whereas, “in questions, the propositional meaning determines the range of utterances which constitute truthful answers; in commands, it determines the range of actions that count as compliance with or obedience to the command” (Cruse, 1986:271). In contrast, expressive meaning conveys emotions or attitudes or an “inner experience” (Alexander, 1969: 4). Alexander also distinguishes three types of meaning: conceptual, emotive and active, in connection with understanding, feeling and action aspect of experience accordingly (Alexander, 1969:3).

2.4. Using synonyms in teaching English vocabulary

Despite a large volume of published studies describing synonyms, there are hardly any serious works or projects on the effects of synonymy on vocabulary learning as a system. Tinkham (1993) and Waring (1997) indicate that learning sets of semantically related words is more difficult than learning words that are not linked by meaning and suggest that learning synonyms together may reduce the likelihood of vocabulary acquisition. Considering this aspect, Higa (1963) points out that pairs of synonyms took longer to learn than pairs of unrelated words and learners are more likely to confuse words that are similar in meaning than words that do not have close semantic links (as cited in Webb, 2007).

It is found out that the closer the semantic relationship between words, the more difficult it may be to learn the words in a set (Higa, 1963). In addition, Higa (1963) also finds out that teachers are unlikely to teach pairs of unknown synonyms together because it is confusing for learners and learners are unlikely to learn synonyms together because they may lack the motivation to learn two words that convey similar information. As a result, a synonym for a known word may be easier to learn in the later stages of vocabulary learning.

In agreement with Higa (1963), Laufer (1990) reports that synonymy is one of seven interlexical factors that can reduce the chances of vocabulary acquisition for two reasons. The first reason is that learners often

make mistakes using synonyms because some of them may be substituted effectively in some contexts but not in others. For example, we have a synonymous pair *strong* and *powerful*, but we often make a sentence like: *the engines are powerful.*, but rarely, *the engines are strong.*; since *powerful* and *strong* are synonymous only in a certain contexts (Webb, 2007).

The second reason is that less advanced learners are unlikely to try to learn words with similar meanings when they have a greater need to learn unknown L2 meanings. Learning words with known synonyms may be easier than learning words without known synonyms because learners may be able to transfer their knowledge of syntax and collocation from known synonyms to less frequent synonyms. Webb (2007) explains that: "Typically, when learning a non-synonym, L2 learners use their first language (L1) knowledge of that item and information from the context in which it was encountered to help learn that word. While on some occasions, this combination of L1 and L2 knowledge may be sufficient to use or understand the word quickly, more often, learning the word is likely to be a slow process that involves repeated encounters of the word in context."

Then Webb adds that learning the synonyms of known words may be faster than learning non-synonyms because learners may gain substantial L2 vocabulary knowledge of syntagmatic association and collocation, paradigmatic association, and grammar from known synonyms (Webb, 2007). This transfer of L2 knowledge from known words to their less-frequent synonyms could make it relatively easy to use and understand the synonyms.

To explain why learning words with known synonyms may be easier than learning a non-synonym, Nation (2001) use the concept of "learning burden". He states that the amount of effort required to learn a word is not the same for different words and for different learners: "The general principle of learning burden is that the more a word represents patterns and knowledge that the learners are already familiar with, the lighter its learning burden" (Nation, 2001: 23).

Investigating the effects of synonymy on vocabulary learning, Web (2007) indicates that synonymy may facilitate vocabulary learning since the learners' scores were significantly higher for words with known synonyms than those without. The results indicate that the learning burden for synonyms of known words is less than for non-synonyms because synonyms represent knowledge of syntagmatic association that has already been acquired. He considers this outcome a "very useful finding, suggesting that learning burden might be an important criterion when teaching or learning vocabulary" (Webb, 2007).

3. Discussions

From the above – mentioned literature on synonymy as a lexical relation and studies on the effects of using synonyms in vocabulary learning and teaching, some remarkable findings can be drawn as follows:

First, using synonyms as an efficient and beneficial means of English vocabulary teaching has been exploited for a long time by English teachers to develop and expand learners' vocabulary bank. This method, however, is most suitable and effective for English immediate or advanced learners who have learnt a great number of English words with the understanding of different aspects of the word knowledge (i.e. meaning, form, syntagmatic association and grammatical function, etc.). This group of learners can make the difference between synonyms they learn to use effectively in various context since synonymy is context – dependent and the absolute synonyms are scarce. For example, with a considerable vocabulary bank, immediate or advanced learners can distinguish between synonyms – *father*, *dad*, *daddy* to use them in formal or informal contexts.

Furthermore, synonymy may facilitate English vocabulary learning and consequently, the learners' scores are significantly higher for words with known synonyms than those without as L2 words that have known L2 synonyms may be easier to learn than those that do not. For example, it is much easier to study the word *revolver* than *spear* because it has a high-frequency synonym *gun* that represents vocabulary

knowledge that can be used to learn *revolver*. The word *revolver* can be substituted for *gun* in many sentences (Webb, 2007). Because *spear* does not have a high-frequency synonym, a greater amount of vocabulary knowledge may need to be acquired, and therefore, it may be more difficult to produce in a sentence. This phenomenon can be explained by the concept of learning burden proposed by Nation (2001).

In addition, synonymy should be exploited wisely to enlarge learners' English vocabulary to welcome the optimum outcomes. As young learners usually find it confusing to study synonyms and would turn to use their mother language rather than synonyms to explain the meanings of the new words; it is advisable that in the earlier stages of English learning, learners should be encouraged to study synonyms in terms of their form and synonymous meaning. The older the learners become, the more synonyms they are provided. Take the word *nice* as an example, its synonyms can be numerous like *incredible*, *super*, *wonderful*, *stunning*, *brilliant*, *beautiful*, *fantastic*, *fabulous*, etc. Teachers should provide some of them to their young learners, especially in form of games or puzzles to attract attention; whereas, in the latter stages, learners should be motivated to use as many synonyms as possible with a special focus on their different semantic, syntactical, grammatical and stylistic features by making different sentences to show the differences in meanings of the synonyms. In other words, immediate or advanced English learners should be directed to learn synonyms in contexts.

Finally, teaching and learning synonyms should be integrated in different language skills like listening, speaking, reading and writing and considered an ongoing process during the language acquisition process. For example, during English reading class hour, the teachers ask students questions like: "*What kind of revolver or gun is used in the reading text?*" "*What does the word resolver mean?*" etc. By doing so, the teacher is using English synonyms not explaining words in English to explain the meanings of the unfamiliar words to students and help students to expand their vocabulary. The same situation can happen at any class hour of English teaching and learning to develop learners' vocabulary. This process is called by many semanticists as "incidental vocabulary learning" which is the most frequent and efficient vocabulary acquisition since students can get familiar with the different contexts in which the synonyms are used.

4. Conclusions

The paper is targeted at investigating English synonymy, a powerful device of vocabulary building and its influence on vocabulary teaching and learning. The study is followed by some recommendations about teaching synonyms. The most significant ones are that using synonyms in English vocabulary should be highly appreciated for the outcomes it may bring to English teachers and learners; and then should be applied in the latter stages of English acquisition. Furthermore, this method will bring its highest benefits if it is combined with other skill developing processes, in the form of incidental learning.

It is undeniable that with only short paper of about 3000 words, the author can only have a very quick look at the issue. However, thanks to the author's experience of using synonyms in teaching English vocabulary for years, the results of the paper may be incredible enough to apply in building vocabulary for English learners. Hopefully, the paper will be of some use to English teachers and learners.

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