

COGNITIVE SYNONYMY: A GENERAL OVERVIEW

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Abstract. *This paper presents a general overview of cognitive synonymy from the cognitive perspective. It is concerned with the issues of lexical synonymy. The linguistic description is given on the semantic and pragmatic level. Cognitive synonyms have been defined as lexical units whose senses are the same in certain contexts and cognitive synonymy is presented on the scale of synonymity. The scale involves the notion of absolute synonymy (which is a theoretical concept because it cannot be proven), cognitive synonymy (which denotes the sameness of cognitive meaning) and near-synonymy (as the similarity of meaning). Furthermore, cognitive synonyms imply propositions with equivalent truth values. In addition, the distinction between cognitive and associative meaning, which affects the notion of cognitive synonymy, is analysed.*

Key words: *Synonym, cognitive synonymy, sense, cognitive meaning, associative meaning, near-synonymy*

1. INTRODUCTION

When it comes to giving a clear, precise and correct definition of synonymy, many difficulties arise. There are numerous approaches with numerous definitions of synonymy and types of synonyms, because there are different ways in which synonyms may differ. This article analyses synonymy from the perspective of cognitive linguistics.

It would be imprecise to define synonymy as identity of meaning since there are no two terms with completely identical meaning. Therefore, other definitions have emerged. Generally speaking, synonymy denotes the phenomenon of two or more different linguistic forms with the same meaning. Those linguistic forms are called synonyms, e.g. *peace* and *tranquility* can be substituted with one another in certain contexts.

Synonymy is the relation that holds between bound morphemes, lexemes, lexical units, phrases, clauses, sentences and propositions. Thus, synonymy can be classified either into lexical and propositional synonymy, or into lexical, phrasal and propositional synonymy. The first division, in which lexical synonymy comprises phrasal synonymy, can be explained in the following manner.

1. Lexical synonymy has to do with bound morphemes, lexemes, lexical units and phrases.

Lexical synonymy is a sense relation that holds between two or more lexical units with the same sense in the given contexts in which they are interchangeable.

2. Propositional synonymy has to do with clauses, sentences and propositions. It can be explained by means of paraphrase when the propositional contents of sentences are identical:

Mary fed the cat.

The cat was fed by Mary.

It was the cat that Mary fed. (Cann et al., 2009, 9)

Synonymy is a paradigmatic relation that enables lexically simple units to have the same meaning as lexically complex units, and vice versa, e.g. *ophthalmologist* and *eye specialist*.

This article is concerned with lexical synonymy and lexical synonyms. It is focused on lexemes and lexical units. Phrasal synonymy has not been the topic here. In addition, the article deals with words that belong to the same word class, even though Hurford and Heasley (1983:104) claim that synonymy is possible between words belonging to different parts of speech (as between the verb *sleeping* and adjective *asleep*).

2. COGNITIVE SYNONYMY ON THE SCALE OF SYNONYMYTY

Cruse (2000:157) claims that a scale of synonymity can be established. The scale which he has set up consists of absolute synonymy, cognitive synonymy and near-synonymy.

Absolute synonymy is set as the complete identity of all meanings of two or more lexemes in all contexts. However, it is unnatural for a language to have absolute synonyms, or lexemes with exactly the same meaning. Firstly, the function or use of one of them would gradually become unnecessary or unmotivated and, as a result, it would soon be abandoned or dropped. Secondly, their interchangeability in all the contexts can neither be demonstrated nor proved, for, on one hand, the number of contexts is infinite, and, on the other hand, the exceptions from absolute interchangeability are inevitable. Therefore, the lexicons of natural languages do not have absolute synonymy as their feature. It is generally accepted that absolute synonymy is impossible or non-existent. It is regarded only as a referential point on the alleged scale of synonymity or the initial criterion for the defining of synonymy. (Cruse, 2000, 157)

As there are no two lexemes with absolutely the same meaning and no real synonyms, cognitive synonymy is what most semanticists would regard as synonymy. Lyons (1996:63) claims that many theories of semantics would restrict the notion of synonymy to what he calls descriptive or cognitive synonymy, which is the identity of descriptive meaning.

Near-synonyms are lexemes whose meaning is relatively close or more or less similar (*mist/fog*, *stream/brook*, *dive/plunge*). However, the given definition of near-synonymy is vague, because there isn't a precise correlation between synonymy and semantic similarity.

Near-synonymy is associated with overlapping of meaning and senses. The senses of near-synonyms overlap to a great degree, but not completely. (Murphy, 2003, 155)

Moreover, unlike cognitive synonyms, near-synonyms can contrast in certain contexts:

He was killed, but I can assure you he was NOT murdered, madam. (Cruse, 2000, 159)

Near-synonymy is regularly found in dictionaries of synonyms or thesauri where most of the terms listed under a single dictionary entry are not considered to be cognitive synonyms (e.g. *govern - direct, control, determine, require*).

The scale presented by Cruse is the most general. There also are other views. Lyons (1981:148) claims that there are absolute synonymy, complete synonymy, descriptive synonymy and near-synonymy. According to him, complete synonyms have identical descriptive, expressive and social meaning in the range of the given contexts.

Since most lexemes are polysemous (have different senses in different contexts), Murphy (2004:146) introduces logical synonyms (which include full synonyms and sense synonyms) and near-synonyms. Denotationally equivalent words whose all senses are identical (*toilet/john*) are called full synonyms, whereas sense synonyms share one or more senses, but differ in others, i.e. they have at least one identical sense (*sofa/couch*). Near-synonyms, as words with similar senses, are context-dependent. Cognitive synonyms are arguably what Murphy (2003) regards as sense synonyms.

Cruse (2000:159) draws the conclusion that the border between cognitive synonymy and near-synonymy is in principle clear, even though difficult cases may arise, but it is much harder to draw a distinction between near-synonymy and non-synonymy. There are two possible solutions. Firstly, since speakers of a language can judge synonymy as language users, they should intuitively know whether or not certain lexemes are synonymous. Secondly, in order to consider lexemes as synonymous, they shouldn't stand in contrast with one another, i.e. it is necessary for the level of their contrastiveness to be explicitly low.

3. COGNITIVE SYNONYMY

Cognitive synonymy is the identity of cognitive (descriptive) meaning and it is also known as descriptive synonymy, propositional synonymy or referential synonymy. Cognitive synonymy is sometimes described as incomplete synonymy (Lyons, 1981), or non-absolute or partial synonymy (Lyons, 1996). The examples of cognitive synonyms are: *liberty/freedom, statesman/politician, hide/conceal, thrifty/economical/stingy*.

There are two definitions of cognitive synonymy and both of them should be equally taken into account.

1. Cognitive synonyms imply sentences with equivalent truth-conditions and propositions which are mutually entailing.

This is a semantic or logical definition of synonymy. It is presented by Kempson and Palmer (Murphy, 2003, 150). Palmer describes synonymy as symmetrical hyponymy. (Palmer, 1981)

2. Cognitive synonyms are described as words with the same cognitive meaning Lyons (1995:63), and as words with the same sense (Cann et al., 2009, 9). Therefore, cognitive synonymy is regarded as a sense relation. Moreover, this type of synonymy is concerned with sameness or identity, not similarity of meaning.

This is a pragmatic or context-dependent understanding of synonymy and it is the view presented by Murphy (2003).

Most writers in cognitive linguistics accept both definitions, e.g. Cruse (2000).

3.1 Truth-conditional equivalence and mutual entailment

Cognitive synonymy can be explained by virtue of relations that hold between sentences or propositions that contain pairs of cognitive synonyms. Cognitive synonyms require truth-conditional equivalence of the sentences which contain them.

Propositions are abstract entities which represent the semantic structure of sentences, and they are characterized by truth values (while sentences are characterized by truth conditions), i.e. they express something true or false.

Cognitive synonymy can be described through implication (Lyons, 1996, 63) and entailment. (Cruse, 2000, 158)

Implication is a logical operation. It is the relation between two assertions that can be true or false. X is the cognitive synonym of Y if, and only if, the proposition containing one of the synonyms X implies the proposition with identical syntactic structure in which X is replaced with Y. As a result, such propositions only differ in the presence of the given synonyms and they are mutually implied, for synonymy itself is a symmetrical relation (if X is synonymous with Y, then Y is synonymous with X, and vice versa). In other words, cognitive synonyms are propositionally equivalent.

Given that *statesman* and *politician* are cognitive synonyms, a substitution test, which is a diagnostic test for judging synonymy and contextual restrictiveness of lexemes, can be applied. Namely, interchangeability of synonymous pairs is tested by means of substitution of one synonym with another in the same context. Synonyms are interchangeable only in certain environments, so this test can be utilized to illustrate the difficulties in finding the pairs of absolute synonyms. The proposition *The statesman spoke at the conference* implies the proposition *The politician spoke at the conference*. Since the first proposition is true, the second one must necessarily be true, and vice versa.

Entailment is the relation between two sentences or propositions where the propositional content of one proposition includes that of the other. Mutual entailment is the relation in which the propositional contents of sentences are identical, so the truth of one requires the truth of the other, and vice versa. (Cann et al., 2009, 8)

A proposition containing one synonym is mutually entailed by the same proposition containing the other. The following propositions are "mutually entailing: *John bought a violin* entails and is entailed by *John bought a fiddle*; *I heard him tuning his fiddle* entails and is entailed by *I heard him tuning his violin*; *She is going to play a violin concerto* entails and is entailed by *She is going to play a fiddle concerto*. Notice that fiddle is less normal in the last example, while leaving truth conditions intact, which shows that *fiddle* and *violin* are not absolute synonyms." (Cruse, 2000, 158)

3.2 Cognitive vs. associative meaning

It is generally assumed that cognitive synonyms are lexemes with the same sense (*answer/reply*, *pullover/sweater*). In addition, synonymy is considered as one of the three basic types of sense relations, including hyponymy as sense inclusion, and antonymy as oppositeness in sense. (Cann et al., 2009, 8)

Lexical meaning is a complex unity which consists of cognitive and associative meaning. If synonymy has to do with two or more lexemes which are interchangeable in certain contexts in which they have the same meaning, it is necessary to emphasize that it is the cognitive meaning we are dealing with.

Pragmatics restricts synonymy to the identity of cognitive meaning (which is also called descriptive). Cognitive meaning consists of sense and denotation, and synonymy is usually defined as sameness of senses of two or more lexemes, e.g. *father*, *daddy*, *dad*, *pop*.

Cognitive meaning is also termed descriptive, conceptual, referential, denotative (denotational), propositional and logical. It is characterized by objectiveness and it does not necessarily depend on place and time. It consists of sense and denotation (that is why it is named denotational); it determines the truth value, i.e. whether the proposition is true or false (owing to that it is called propositional or logical meaning); it leads the hearer to identify referents which certain forms refer to in extralinguistic reality (therefore it is known as referential); and due to the fact that this type of meaning enables conceptual categorization, the term conceptual meaning is created.

Sense and denotation are of the utmost importance for the analysis of synonymy. Sense is an abstraction which relates one lexeme to other lexemes in the same language and it is internal to the language. Denotation of a lexeme is a relation that holds between the given lexeme and classes of entities in the external world (Lyons, 1996, 79). It is a set of entities in the world that a word can refer to. (Evans and Green, 2006, 210)

Denotation is the relationship between sense and reference. A lexeme outside the context has sense and denotation but when it is used in the context reference arises. It is the relation between the lexeme used in the context and the exact entity which is being talked about, called the referent. It is singled out from the classes of entities in the external world determined by denotation.

It should be underlined that cognitive synonyms, i.e. synonymous terms which have the same sense, do not necessarily have the same denotation or the same referent. Nevertheless, there are such cases. "Most speakers would agree that the words *bucket* and *pail* share the same denotation: the set of all cylindrical vessels with handles that can be used to carry water. These words share the same denotation because they are synonyms." (Evans and Green, 2006, 210-211)

In cognitive semantics, it is accepted that although cognitive synonyms have the same descriptive meaning, there are other aspects and dimensions of meaning in which they differ. Associative (non-descriptive or non-propositional) meaning generates differences between cognitive synonyms.

Associative meaning is very complex and has a number of classifications. In order to describe this type of meaning linguists use the following terms: connotative, emotional, expressive, socio-expressive, evaluative and affective meaning. The meanings of these terms overlap and a possible distinction is hard to find (Prčić, 1997, 22-23).

Associative meaning is subjective. It expresses emotions or attitudes, as well as approval or disapproval, and other subjective states. It shows that natural languages abound in emotional connotations and associations. Linguists have given different classifications of associative meaning, for it is not one-dimensional. Two of them are presented here.

"While definitions of synonymy often require similarity (or identity) of denotative meaning and part of speech, they frequently allow for (or even expect) differences among non-denotative elements of meaning, or expressive meaning. Expressive meaning includes connotation, affect, and other social information that gives denotatively similar words different significance without changing their contributions to a sentence's truth-conditions." (Murphy, 2004, 154)

Leech (1981:9) considers associative meaning as individual mental understandings of the speaker. He observes that associative meaning includes connotative, social, affective, reflected, collocative and thematic meaning.

4. THE WAYS IN WHICH COGNITIVE SYNONYMS DIFFER

Enumerating the ways in which synonyms might differ has been the preoccupation of many writers in classical semantics. (Murphy, 2003, 151)

The theory of componential analysis has been trying to prove that cognitive synonyms share core components (features), while their peripheral components differ. For example, synonymous terms "may contain the same referentially relevant diagnostic components but differ with respect to certain emotive and/or supplementary components." (Nida, 1975, 98)

The cognitive linguistics has adopted and developed certain views, and came up with new approaches.

In metalexical approach, "a synonym set includes only word-concepts that have the same contextually relevant properties, but differ in form." (Murphy, 2003, 134)

Hurford and Heasley (1983:102) claim that lexemes may differ in their stylistic, social or dialectal associations.

Cruse (2000:158) underlines that differences in meaning of cognitive synonyms comprise some aspects of non-propositional meaning, and the most important ones are differences in expressive meaning (*jolly/very, father/daddy, infant/baby, go on/continue*),¹ differences in style (on colloquial-formal dimension) and the field of discourse. According to Murphy (2003:155) synonym pairs may differ in connotation (*punish/discipline*), affect (*gay/homosexual*), register (*legs/gams*), dialect (*milkshake/frappe*), general use vs. specialized vocabulary (*word/lexeme*), or even language (*dog/perro*).

Some aspects of associative meaning in which cognitive synonyms may differ are going to be presented below.

(a) Cognitive synonyms may differ in their collocational range. When lexemes that belong to different parts of speech are combined into phrases, collocations are restrictions imposed upon linguistic units and their relations in a sentence or discourse, which allow a limited number of lexical combinations to take place. Interchangeability is restricted, as well. The most common examples are *pretty* and *handsome* as two different forms which have the same sense. However, *pretty* collocates with *girl* and *handsome* collocates with *man*. Palmer (1981:62) explains collocational restriction of *rancid*, which occurs with *bacon* or *butter*, and *addled*, which is combined with *eggs* or *brains*.

(b) Synonyms may belong to different styles or levels of formality. Consider *obtain/get, provide/give, procure/get*, where the first member of the synonymous pair belongs to formal, and the second one belongs to informal style, respectively. Choosing between synonyms is sometimes transferred to the field of stylistics. Lexemes may vary from formal, over informal to colloquial style, and even belong to slang (*pass away, pass on, die, kick the bucket, pop off*). However, it would be too simplified to reduce style to formality and informality, as it is much more complex than that. Style can also be viewed in terms of functional styles.

¹ Examples taken from Cruse, 1986, 277.

The style is the choice made by language users in different situations. It is a language variant that depends on the subject matter, the roles of the speaker and the hearer, their relationship, their social status and the positions they hold, their age and gender, as well as the environment and situation they are involved in. Therefore, cognitive synonyms may be defined as lexemes whose cognitive meaning is the same, but their stylistic differences reflect in variations in the lexis.

(c) Cognitive synonyms may belong to different registers or fields of discourse in which they typically appear. Register is a language variety determined by the use of a language in the given situation, and it is especially associated with the use of language among the people of the same profession. The typical examples are *matrimony*, *marriage* and *wedlock* (*marriage* belongs to legal register, *wedlock* is in the religious register, and *matrimony* belongs to both legal and religious register).

(d) Cognitive synonyms may belong to different dialects of the same language. Dialects are regional or social language varieties determined by the language users (*autumn/fall*, *lift/elevator*, *glen/valley*). Geographical borders play important roles distinguishing the dialects. In addition, sociolects (*kitchen/kitchenette*, *settee/sofa*, *serviettes/napkins*) might form synonymous pairs. (Cruse, 1986, 283)

(e) Certain terms are synonymous with their euphemisms. These are lexical units or phrases which create circumlocution primarily in order to avoid negative connotations of certain terms (*drunk/intoxicated*, *pass away/depart this life*).

Euphemisms used as synonyms are mainly regarded as polite, mild or neutral terms which replace the terms which are unpleasant (*illness/disease*) or controversial. Some circumlocutions belong to slang. They are being used to avoid the taboo (*mentally challenged/retarded*), to create comical or jocular effects, both intentionally and unintentionally (*bean counter/accountant*). Nowadays more and more euphemisms are used by politicians in order to attain political correctness or instead of pronouncing unpleasant facts (*economically disadvantaged/poor*).

5. CONCLUSION

The general account of cognitive synonymy provides two possible definitions. The definitions have been presented. Both of them should be taken into consideration when it comes to determining the phenomenon of cognitive synonymy. Substitution of one cognitive synonym with another should not alter the truth-conditions of sentences which contain them. Both objective factors and subjective attitudes should be taken into account, as well, because lexical meaning consists of both cognitive and associative meaning. Various aspects of associative meaning give slightly different significance to the words that can be described in the same way (have identical descriptive meaning). Cognitive synonyms differ in various aspects of associative meaning, such as expressive meaning, stylistic meaning, collocative meaning, etc. In that respect, considering different argumentations, cognitive synonyms might be differentiated on the basis of different registers, styles or dialects they belong to, or by virtue of different connotations, collocations, etc. What they have in common is the same sense.

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KOGNITIVNA SINONIMIJA: OPŠTI PREGLED**Maja Stanojević**

U radu je predstavljen opšti pregled kognitivne sinonimije predložen iz kognitivne perspektive. Rad se odnosi na probleme leksičke sinonimije. Lingvistički opis je prikazan na semantičkom i pragmatičkom nivou. Kognitivni sinonimi su definisani kao leksičke jedinice čiji je smisao istovetan u određenim kontekstima i kognitivna sinonimija je predstavljena na skali sinonimnosti. Skala obuhvata pojam apsolutne sinonimije (koja predstavlja teoretski pojam jer se ne može dokazati), kognitivne sinonimije (koja označava istovetnost kognitivnog značenja) i približne sinonimije (kao sličnosti značenja). Uz to, kognitivni sinonimi impliciraju propozicije sa ekvivalentnim vrednostima istinitosti. Pored toga, analizirana je razlika između kognitivnog i asocijativnog značenja, koja određuje pojam kognitivne sinonimije.

Ključne reči: sinonim, kognitivna sinonimija, smisao, kognitivno značenje, asocijativno značenje, približna sinonimija