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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the sense relation of synonymy, taking the view that this phenomenon should be understood as a gradual concept, a cline along which there are different degrees of synonymy. This view is consistent with the widely held opinion among semanticists that strict or absolute synonymy is rare in human language. A further step is taken to demonstrate that synonymy exist not only as an intra-linguistic sense relation but also as a cross-linguistic phenomenon. Cross-linguistic synonymy is explored through the analysis of French-English cognates, finding that many cognates are partial or incomplete synonyms, with only a few qualifying as strict or true synonyms. (Contains 15 references.)
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Measuring Synonymy as an Intra-Linguistic and Cross-Linguistic Sense Relation

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MEASURING SYNONYMY AS AN INTRA-LINGUISTIC AND CROSS-LINGUISTIC SENSE RELATION

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Abstract

This paper discusses the sense relation of synonymy. It takes the view that the phenomenon of synonymy should be understood as a gradable concept, a 'cline' along which there are different degrees of synonymy. This view is consistent with the widely held opinion among semanticists that 'strict' or 'absolute' synonymy is rare in human language. A further step is taken to demonstrate that synonymy exists not only as an intra-linguistic sense relation but also as a cross-linguistic phenomenon. Thus, based on the criteria for synonymy, a more specific aim of this paper is to attest cross-linguistic synonymy, drawing evidence from French-English true cognates¹.

1. Introduction

Synonymy is one of the sense relations that semanticists have extensively written about. However, in spite of the amount of literature available on the phenomenon of synonymy, our understanding of it remains somewhat vague because it encompasses far more dimensions than our common sense actually perceives. This observation was made about two decades ago by Tutescu (1975:108) well before we saw the publications of the last one and a half decades or so in the field of semantics² :

La synonymie est la relation sémantique qui a fait couler beaucoup d'encre, relation que le sens commun estime claire, mais que les logiciens ne cessent de proclamer crucifiante³

Synonymy exists as a phenomenon in everyday communication and in every language. Tze (1983) mentions two important functions that synonyms serve. First, they add flexibility to language by enabling its users to express the same meaning by different means. Second, they add variety and expressiveness to the language by enabling its users to exercise stylistic choices in conveying the same message. These two functions justify an investigation of synonymy as an intra-linguistic sense relation. Since sense relations normally hold between lexemes in the same language, looking at synonymy cross-linguistically is an unorthodox way adopted in this paper to try to illuminate the problem of classifying the so-called French-English true cognates. The question we need to answer in connection with the aim of this study is the following : Can French-English true cognates be described as synonyms, and to what extent? This discussion covers three stages. First, we define synonymy as a continuum with a view to demonstrating that 'strict' or 'absolute' synonymy is a rare

phenomenon in language. Second, we discuss the arguments put forward by semanticists against strict synonymy. Third, we examine a sample of French-English true cognates to attest cross-linguistic synonymy and to identify which criteria are useful for measuring synonymy.

2. Synonymy as a continuum : Defining criteria

We take as the starting point of our discussion two semantic intuitions. The first is that certain pairs or sets of lexical items bear a special sort of semantic resemblance to one another. It is customary to call items having this special similarity synonyms. The second intuition is that some pairs or sets of synonyms are more synonymous than others. In the introduction to *Webster's New Dictionary of Synonyms* (1968), it is made clear that, because there are too many factors involved in the selection of synonyms to make for absolute certainty or perfect accuracy in their choice, lexicographers do not always agree in their choice of synonyms. It is suggested that the only satisfactory test of synonymy is their agreement or likeness in *denotation*, even if this agreement is seldom so perfect as to make the words absolutely similar in meaning. There is, unfortunately, no neat way of characterising synonyms. It is obvious that synonyms must have a significant degree of semantic overlap, as evidenced by common semantic traits. However, it does not follow that the more semantic traits a pair of words share, the more synonymous they are. The assessment of synonymy rests on the nature of the differentiating characteristics because synonyms must not only manifest a high degree of semantic overlap, they must also have a low degree of implicit contrastiveness. In this respect, synonyms are lexical items whose senses are identical with regard to 'central' traits, but differ, if at all, only in respect of what we may describe as 'minor' or peripheral traits. This view seems to point to something like a scale of synonymy.

It is a widely held view that there are few, if any, 'real' synonyms in natural languages. To quote Ullmann (1957:108-9), 'it is a truism that total synonymy is an extremely rare occurrence, a luxury that language can ill afford'. Lyons (1981) proposes a schematic classification which allows three possible kinds of synonymy :

- (i) Full synonymy : synonyms are *fully synonymous* if, and only if, *all their meanings* are identical.
- (ii) Total synonymy : synonyms are *totally synonymous* if, and only if, they are synonymous *in all contexts*.
- (iii) Complete synonymy : synonyms are *completely synonymous* if, and only if, they are identical in *all (relevant) dimensions of meaning*.

According to Lyons's definitions, *absolute* synonyms are expressions that are fully, totally, and completely synonymous, whereas *partial* synonyms are synonymous but not absolutely so. Partial synonymy, which should not be confused with near-synonymy⁴, meets the criterion of identity of meaning and is distinguished from absolute synonymy in terms of the failure of synonymous expressions to satisfy one or more of the conditions in (i), (ii), and (iii). He stresses that absolute synonymy, full synonymy, total synonymy, and complete synonymy (not to mention exact synonymy) are frequently employed as synonyms, whether absolute or partial, in

standard works, usually without definition. In general, it is complete and total synonymy that most semanticists have in mind when they talk of 'real' or 'absolute' synonymy but, in fact, it is true that there are very few such synonyms in language. The conclusion to draw from Lyons's discussion of the scale of synonymy is that some pairs or sets of synonyms are more synonymous than others, but, as will be shown in Section 4, there are difficulties to be contended with in the application of Lyons's criteria to pairs or sets of synonyms. In general, however, we tend to regard synonymy as a non-gradable concept.

3. Arguments against strict synonymy

Although the meanings of words may be the same or nearly so, there are three characteristics of words that rarely coincide: *frequency*, *distribution*, and *connotation*. Jackson (1988) presents two arguments against strict synonymy. One is economic, the other historical. Firstly, the economy of a language will not tolerate, except perhaps for a short period, the existence of two words with exactly the same range of contexts of use; and it certainly will not tolerate a proliferation of them. Secondly, historically, it has been noted that if strict synonyms occur in the language, whether by borrowing or for some other reason, then one of two phenomena tends to happen. The first phenomenon is that a differentiation of meaning takes place and one of the words begins to be used in contexts from which the other is excluded, perhaps through semantic specialisation. For example, Jackson (1988:66) points out that when *mouton* was borrowed into English from French, during the medieval period, it was absolutely synonymous with the Anglo-Saxon word *sheep*. Today, it still exists in the vocabulary of English as *mutton*, but with a specialised meaning referring to the meat of the animal consumed as food, while the animal is still called *sheep*. The second phenomenon is that one of the words in a synonym pair may be stylistically restricted. As far as borrowings into English from French are concerned, the borrowed word tends to be associated with more formal style. It is a well known fact that synonyms often differ in their etymological origin and stylistic use. Ullmann (1962:145-6) argues for this point in the following lines:

... There are in English countless pairs of synonyms where a native term is opposed to one borrowed from French, Latin, or Greek. In most cases the native word is more spontaneous, more informal and unpretentious, whereas the foreign one often has a learned, abstract, or even abstruse air. There may also be emotive differences: the 'Saxon' is apt to be warmer and homelier than its foreign counterpart... There are many exceptions to this pattern; yet it recurs so persistently that it is fundamental to the structure of the language

Formality is but one dimension along which French-English true cognates differ as near-synonyms. And formality itself is far from being an all-or-none phenomenon but should rather be conceived as a 'cline' with various degrees of formality (see Tze 1983).

Finally, strict synonymy can also be countered by one of the words falling out of use or becoming obsolete or highly restricted, leaving the other as the sole lexeme with that meaning. For example, the word *enemy* was introduced into English from

Norman French, but English already had the word *foe* with the same meaning. Although *foe* is still employed in some contexts, mainly of a literary nature, *enemy* is much more used in most contexts. In British English, *foe* is regarded as an old-fashioned or formal word.

There is another dimension invoked by many semanticists in their discussion of synonymy, the distinction between 'cognitive' and 'emotive' or 'affective' synonymy. The former refers to the logical, cognitive or denotative content of a word and the latter refers to what is communicated of the feelings and attitudes of the speaker/writer. In the actual use of language, it is true that one word may be preferred to the other because of its emotive or evocative associations. However, the extent to which this is of importance varies considerably; from one style or situation to another. For instance, the pairs *liberty/freedom* and *hide/conceal* are cited by Ullmann (1957) as examples of English words which are cognitively, but not emotively, synonymous. Although there are occasions when a speaker or writer might deliberately use one rather than the other of these synonyms, and make his choice on the basis of the 'connotations' that the words are likely to evoke, there are also many contexts in which either one or the other might be used without any noticeable difference of effect. Therefore we should not assume that the emotive connotations of a word are always relevant to its use. The truth is that in all cases, it is 'cognitive' synonymy which is defined first and no one ever talks of words as being 'emotively', but not 'cognitively', synonymous. Thus when we talk of synonymy, we do not generally have 'strict' or 'absolute' synonymy in mind. We are thinking much rather of pairs of words that can substitute for each other in a wide range of contexts but not necessarily absolutely, or that we think of as having the same general denotation or reference.

Since the description of meaning in a dictionary is an indication of the meaning potential of a word (only in a linguistic and situational context is the meaning actualised), synonymy also needs to be defined in terms of contexts of use. Two words are synonymous if they can be used interchangeably in all sentence contexts (see Jackson 1988; Lyons 1981 Ullmann, 1957). The pairs *discover/find*, *retain/keep*, and *occupied/busy* are commonly thought of as synonyms. Yet *discover* and *find* are synonymous in a sentence like 'We *discovered/found* the thieves hiding in a car park', but *find* could not substitute for *discover* in 'Sir Alexander Fleming *discovered/*found* penicillin in 1928'. Similarly, *retain* and *keep* are synonymous in the sentence '*Retain/keep* your ticket for further inspection', but *retain* could not substitute for *keep* in the sentence '*Keep, *retain* the door shut all the time'. The same observation applies to *occupied* and *busy* in the sentences 'The Prime Minister is *occupied/busy* at the moment' and 'The seat is *occupied/*busy*'. It appears therefore that 'likeness in denotation' is the most useful criterion for attesting synonymy.

4. Cross-linguistic synonymy between French-English true cognates

We need now to answer the question we posed in the Introduction. Can French-English true cognates be described as synonym, and to what extent? To answer this twofold question, we need to show that certain French-English true cognates have a significant degree of semantic overlap, evidenced by common semantic traits, and

that, following the various degrees and types of synonymy discussed above, some pairs of French-English true cognates are more synonymous than others.

4.1 Problems of applicability of the criteria

The real problem lies in establishing some objective measure of the semantic overlap between French-English true cognate pairs. On the one hand, some of the definitions and types of synonymy discussed above make it impracticable to prove that two items are synonymous. First, Lyons's definition of 'total synonyms' as those which are synonymous in all contexts would require checking the relations between synonymous items in all conceivable contexts, which would be theoretically and practically impossible. Second, his definition of 'complete synonyms' as those which are 'identical on all relevant dimensions of meaning' leaves open the question of how many dimensions there are, and how to determine whether the words are identical on any particular dimension. Different analysts (semanticists) would not automatically agree on those two issues. Third, Lyons's definition of 'full synonyms' in terms of 'all their meanings being identical' poses a problem of knowing how many meanings each of the synonyms has. Fourth, it is not precisely clear where his category of 'near-synonyms', defined as those which are 'more or less similar, but not identical in meaning', would start and end because the phrase 'more or less' used in the definition is vague. Lastly, although he insists that near-synonymy is not the same as 'partial synonymy', he does not suggest a clear-cut criterion for differentiating between the two, and, by his definition, near-synonyms qualify as incomplete synonyms, and, therefore, as partial synonyms.

On the other hand, there are further difficulties to be contended with to attest synonymy and establish degrees of cross-linguistic synonymy. The first difficulty stems from the principles of the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis, namely that language determines the way we think - *linguistic determinism* - and that the distinctions encoded in one language are not found in any other language - *linguistic relativity* - (cf. Mandelbaum 1949; Carroll 1956). Without going into the complex issue of what these principles imply, it is expected that the meanings of words in two languages rarely coincide totally, except highly technical words. Cognates are no exception to this rule. The second difficulty has to do with restrictions in the usage and distribution of cognates in two languages. Cognate lexemes may be more frequent, grammatically marked, sociolinguistically and collocationally restricted in one language than in the other.

4.2 Exemplification

With the above observations in mind, let us now examine an illustrative sample of French-English true cognates to see where they belong on the scale of synonymy in accordance with the criteria discussed Sections 2 and 3. The following examples will serve : *commencer/commence*, *restaurant/restaurart*, *inaugurer/inaugurate*, *succéder/succeed*, *terrible/terrible*, *brillant/brilliant*, *mar:handise/merchandise*, and *sabotage/sabotage*. We shall use the symbols N for normal, LN for less normal and AN for abnormal.

I. *Commencer vs commence*

- a. L'année académique/ *commence*/ en Octobre. (N)
- b. The academic year/ *commences*/ in October. (N)

- c. Le match/*commence*/ dans une heure de temps. (N)
- d. The match/ *commences*/in an hour's time. (N)

- e. Il *commence*/ à comprendre. (N)
- f. He *commences*/ to understand. (LN)

- g. Il *commence*/ à pleuvoir. (N)
- h. It *commences*/ to rain. (LN)

In these pairs of sentences, the cognates *commencer* and *commence* are used synonymously but as we go down the list, we start getting a 'less normal' use of English *commence* whereas the use of French *commencer* is normal in all the four sentences. We have here an example of French-English cognates which share a common denotative and cognitive meaning but differ according to the register of formality, English *commence*, unlike French *commencer*, being mostly used in formal contexts. Therefore *commencer* and *commence* are not total synonyms because they are not synonymous in all contexts. They are partial synonyms. Additionally, there is a grammatical point to be made, namely that English *commence* rarely occurs with a non-finite clausal complement and that, when it does, the non-finite verb tends to be in the present participle form rather than the infinitive (e.g. They *commenced* eating). *Commence* seems to be mainly restricted to taking NPs as subject and object (e.g. The ceremony *commenced*/They *commenced* the ceremony).

II. *Restaurant vs restaurant*

- a. Nous allons/ manger/ dans un *restaurant* (N)
- b. We are going/ to eat/ in a *restaurant*. (N)

- c. Ce *restaurant*/ est/ cher.
- d. This *restaurant*/ is/ expensive.

- e. Ils aiment/ les *restaurants* français. (N)
- f. They like/ French *restaurants*. (N)

The cognate term *restaurant* has exactly the same meaning in all the three pairs of sentences and one cannot think of any context in which or any dimension on which they have different meanings. They satisfy the criteria for full synonymy, total synonymy, and complete synonymy and are therefore absolutely synonymous cognates.

III. *Inaugurer vs inaugurate*

- a. *Le Président Clinton/ a été *inauguré*/ le 20 Janvier 1993 (AN)
- b. President Clinton/ was *inaugurated*/ on January 20th 1993. (N)

- c. Le Premier Ministre/ *inaugurer*/ le Palais du Parlement. (N)

- d. The Prime Minister/ will *inaugurate*/ the Parliament Building. (N)

In English you can inaugurate things as well as people but in French you can inaugurate things but not people. In French, when talking about 'the inauguration of people', the terms *investir* (to invest) and *investiture* (investiture) are used. Thus *inaugurer* and *inaugurate* fail the test of total synonymy because they are not synonymous in the two contexts. They are partially synonymous cognates.

IV. *Succéder vs succeed*

- a. Qui/ va *succéder*/ à la reine? (N)
b. Who/ will *succeed*/ the queen?(N)
c. He/ has *succeeded*/ in his business. (N)
d. *Il/ a *succédé*/ dans ses affaires. (AN)

French *succéder* does not have the meaning that English *succeed* has in (c), that is, 'to achieve the intended result or goal'. French uses a different lexeme *réussir* to express this meaning. Therefore *succéder* and *succeed* are not synonymous in all contexts and all their meanings are not identical. They are not totally or fully synonymous. They are not completely synonymous either because they are not identical on all relevant dimensions of meaning in that *succéder* in (d) does not have the denotative meaning that *succeed* has in (c). We cannot call them partial synonyms because they do not satisfy any of the criteria for full, total, and complete synonymy. We cannot call them near-synonyms because there is a meaning they do not share in (c) and (d). It is here that Lyons's distinction between partial synonymy and near-synonymy poses a problem. The cognates *succéder* and *succeed* share some but not all denotative meanings. They are synonyms of some kind. I propose to call them **incomplete synonyms** in contradistinction to Lyons's partial synonymy but incomplete synonymy is not the opposite of complete synonymy. Incomplete synonymy here refers to synonyms which differ by at least one denotative meaning. There are many other pairs of this type such as French *histoire* (which means both 'history' and 'story') and English *history* (which never means 'story') and French *siège* (which means 'siege, seat, and headquarters') and English *siege* (which does not have the last two meanings).

V. *Terrible vs terrible*

- a. Quel/ *terrible* /accident! (N)
b. What/ a *terrible*/ accident! (N)
c. Tous les Marseillais/ regardaient/ la Télévision/ quand/ leur équipe/ a l'emporté/ la Coupe d'Europe. Le match/ était/ *terrible*. (N)
d. All people from Marseilles/ were watching/ 'Television'/ when their team/ won/ the European Cup 'The match/ was/ *terrible*. (AN)

French *terrible* in (c) has an emotive meaning of 'great' which English *terrible* does not have in (d). This meaning is expressed by *terrific* in English. English *terrible* also has an emotive meaning which can be the opposite to the French meaning as in 'Le film était *terrible*' (the film was terrific) and 'The film was *terrible*'. In these

examples, the item *terrible* can be viewed as an isolated example of cross-linguistic antonymy.

VI. *Brillant vs brilliant*

- a. C'est/ un étudiant *brillant*. (N)
- b. He is/ a *brilliant* student. (N)

- c. Elle/ a/ une carrière *brillante*. (N)
- d. She/ has/ a *brilliant* career. (N)

- e. *Comment/ était/ votre congé? C'était/ *brillant*. (AN)
- f. How/ was/ your holiday? It was/ *brilliant*. (N)

In (f) English *brilliant* has an emotive meaning of 'fantastic' which French *brillant* does not have in (e). I propose to call the pairs *terrible/terrible* and *brillant/brilliant* incomplete synonyms because they share their cognitive meaning but not their emotive meaning.

VII. *Marchandise vs merchandise* ^{5a}

- a. Cette *marchandise*/ est chère. (N)
- b. This *merchandise*/ is expensive. (N)

- c. Ces *marchandises*/ sont/ chères. (N)
- d. *These *merchandises* are expensive. (AN)

The use of *merchandise* in (d) is abnormal because *merchandise* is an uncountable noun, unlike French *marchandise*, which is a countable noun. We have here a pair of French-English true cognates which differ in their grammatical meaning. They are partial synonyms because although their denotative meaning is identical (we can therefore call them full synonyms), they are not synonymous in all contexts because of their 'count/uncount differentiation.

VIII. *Sabotage vs sabotage* ^{5b}

- a. Ils/ veulent/*saboter* (**sabotage*)/ les Jeux Olympiques. (N)
- b. They/ want/ to *sabotage*/ the Olympic Games. (N)

- c. Le *sabotage* des négociations/ va/ continuer. (N)
- d. The *sabotage* of the negotiations/ will/ continue (N)

Owing to the phenomenon of conversion⁶, English *sabotage* functions as both a verb and a noun whereas French *sabotage* is a deverbal noun from the verb *saboter* (to sabotage). Therefore French *sabotage* and English *sabotage* are not synonymous in all contexts and so are not total synonyms, they are not full synonyms because all their meanings are not identical and they are not complete synonyms because they are not identical on the dimension of their grammatical meaning (synonyms must belong to the same word class). They are not partial synonyms. They are incomplete synonyms because of their word class differentiation.

5. Conclusion

The above discussion has demonstrated that it is erroneous to think of synonymy as a monolithic phenomenon. Synonymy covers so many dimensions and aspects of semantic equivalence that its measurement is more complex than it appears to be. It has also been shown that synonymy is an important cross-linguistic sense relation between French-English true cognates. However, as is true of intra-linguistic synonyms, many French-English true cognates are 'partial' or 'incomplete' synonyms and only a few of them qualify as 'strict' or 'absolute' synonyms. From the sample of cognates discussed above, it can be concluded that 'agreement' or 'likeness' in denotation is the most useful criterion for measuring cross-linguistic synonymy. Most French-English true cognates share their denotative meaning but tend to differ in terms of formality, emotive meaning, and grammatical traits and it is these dimensions that run counter to the criterion of 'absolute semantic equivalence' of cross-linguistic synonyms.

Notes

1. In the area of lexis, cognates are items which exist in two or more languages, always present some resemblance in form (orthographically, phonologically and/or phonologically, and morphologically), are usually but not always etymologically related, and may but need have similarity in meaning. There are two main categories of cognates, commonly known as true cognates and false cognates. True cognates are words which are etymologically related and whose meanings and ranges of meanings completely or almost completely overlap, e.g. English *hotel* and Spanish *hotel*, English *restaurant* and French *restaurant*. False cognates are words which are etymologically related but whose meanings and ranges of meaning do not overlap, e.g. English *tutor* (lecturer or teacher) and French *tuteur* (guardian), English *auditorium* (place for gathering) and Spanish *auditorio* (an audience).
 2. See the following collections : Cruse 1986; Hurford and Heasley 1983; Lyons 1977; Palmer 1976/1981)
 3. Synonymy is the semantic relation that has so much been written about, a relation that common sense perceives as clear but which logicians constantly find 'crucifying'.
 4. Near-synonyms are 'expressions that are more or less similar, but not identical in meaning' (Lyons 1981:50).
- 5a and 5b. The items *marchandises/merchandise* and *sabotage/sabotage* belong to a separate category of cross-linguistic synonyms from the preceding types because the English and French forms differ only in grammar. These items do not collocate syntagmatically with the same range of other lexemes and so are not synonymous in all contexts. On the one hand, French *marchandise* is a countable noun but English *merchandise* is not. On the other hand, the pair *sabotage/sabotage* is only synonymous insofar as they belong to the same word class. In English the noun *sabotage* and the verb *sabotage* are the same orthographic word but are separate lexemes because they belong to different word classes.

6. *Conversion* is the change in word class of a word without any corresponding change in form. That is, a stem is derived without any change in form from one belonging to a different class (see Bauer 1983; Huddleston 1988).

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