

SYNONYMY AND SAMENESS OF MEANING: AN INTRODUCTORY NOTE

Fredric Dolezal: *University of Georgia, USA* (fdolezal@uga.edu)

“Robert said to me, he said, ‘Coach, there’s a difference between injured and being hurt. I can guarantee I’m hurting right now — give me a chance to win this football game, because I can guarantee I’m not injured.’” Shanahan said. “That was enough for me.” (Sally Jenkins and Rick Maese, *Washington Post*, March 16, 2013)

“Most synonymes have some minute distinction that deserves notice.” (Thomas Reid, 1785, as quoted in the *Oxford English Dictionary*)

Two years ago Paul Bogaards wrote to me suggesting a special issue on synonymy. In his message, he noted that ‘a special issue of *IJL* devoted to the central concept of synonymy, or more broadly, sameness of meaning, could be of utmost interest. In my view, synonymy is a central issue in lexicography indeed: definitions try to describe the meaning of lexical units in other terms, in bilingual dictionaries equivalents should have, as far as possible, the same meaning as the lexical units in the source language, alternative translations of a given lexical unit in another language are more or less synonymous.’

I agreed with Paul. Of course, the ‘problems’ with devising a meaningful thematic issue on synonymy as it pertains to lexicography are much the same as considering synonymy as it pertains to the theory and practice of lexicography: (1) one can say that since absolute synonymy is rare—and when found mostly fleeting—the discussion must focus on the user’s perception of synonymy, or on the identification and treatment of partial- and near-synonymy. This then becomes a discussion of homography, polysemy, and the distinguishing of senses (etc): for example, lexical items are related to a general meaning (one entry); or they are presented in separate entries (the distinguishing of general meanings: lexical items with distinguishable general meanings); and (2) from another perspective one can say that people recognize the phenomenon, and dictionary makers exploit the user’s understanding of synonymy to create explication, and lexicographic definition. How does a lexicographic

metalanguage represent linguistic competence/intuition in relation to synonymy (or, better, 'sameness of meaning')?

It seemed to me that synonymy is not a term of art, but an ordinary English word that finds its way into the linguistic and lexicographical literature (and then back again?). For this reason we added 'sameness of meaning' to our general approach. The uninvestigated phrase does not solve any problems, but at least it indicates the ordinary and intuitive understanding of the speaker; and it allows us to range more freely and opens the possibility for a critique of concept and use as it applies to 'synonymy'.

Taken together this collection begins with standard ideas of synonymy in the lexicographical and related literature of the past forty or so years with particular critiques of those ideas through the prism of actual dictionary practice and theory. The grouping of articles then combines practice, theory, metalexigraphers, and practicing lexicographers with the prospect that out of the dialectic we hope to open new programs for research and gain insight into the idea of synonymy. Taking select dictionaries (bilingual and monolingual) and corpora of written and spoken language as the basis for case studies of lexicographic synonymy (with all the theoretical permutations, as partially referred to above) helps to bring focus to the thematic issue.

Bogaards concluded his initial statement saying that since absolute synonymy is rare 'it is dependent on context. This makes synonymy a difficult item in dictionaries, where lexical items are presented without context. Can it ever function there?' The breadth and scope of what we mean when we say 'context' provides one focus for the essays here, though it must be said that focus does not imply or describe agreement of conclusions and approaches.

It may seem naïve that we still use the word as a basic linguistic unit in our analyses; notwithstanding that the readers of this journal will know that lexical unit or some other term always stands behind the ordinary usage 'word'. Our theoretical approaches to understanding linguistic units, such as the lexical item, immediately calls to our attention the level of linguistic analysis we intend: Is the word identifiable as a phonological unit? Is it identifiable as a morphological unit? Does it have syntactic valence? And we might even include a question concerning the psychological and/or cognitive reality of the word as linguistic unit.

If we were engaged purely in a discourse on the nature and representation of the so-called mental lexicon (and any other term that is a synonym of mental lexicon), we might want to abandon altogether questions regarding the relationship among words as understood by ordinary speakers of a language. Rosamund Moon in her essay, 'Braving synonymy: From data to dictionary', refers to the 'counsel of despair' arising from both the relative paucity of sustained research into synonymy and Stephen Ullmann's observation that 'ordinary speakers will not always abide by... rules [of synonym distinction]', surely his oblique admission that linguistic analysis may describe an idealized

ordinary usage. It is an underlying reason that she calls for synchronic analysis of data drawn from contemporary corpora as distinct from what is for her the inadequate intuition of the researcher.

In a complementary approach, Lynne Murphy, in 'What we talk about when we talk about synonyms (and what it can tell us about thesauruses)', continues to develop her hypothesis that 'synonymy is a metalexical relation', which matches 'real life' uses of synonymy with linguistic theoreticians' intuitive understanding of synonymy along with the actual practice of labeling synonyms. The multiple uses of synchronic corpora (for usage patterns and for insight into users' perceptions) produce some illuminating and interesting points for continuing analysis.

We are interested in the dialectic of linguistic theory and lexicographical practice; and lexicographical practice most generally means a consideration of theory that 'makes sense' to a dictionary user. Therefore, it falls to the dictionary maker to either accept the common linguistic knowledge of the intended dictionary user, or to help bring that user to a more skillful understanding of the principles of linguistic theory that underlie the practice.

Notwithstanding what may be occurring in classrooms, we find a growing concern for using more discursive text as data and as evidence in lexicographical practice. Corpus-driven analyses have the attribute of collecting and presenting an array of contextual and cotextual linguistic data. When dictionaries were solely a product of the printed book tradition, the idea of 'word' as a guiding principle for lexicography made sense if only in the domain of readability and accessibility. Now that the born-digital and digitized print dictionaries have become a commonplace in the world of dictionary makers and dictionary users, we would expect that theoretically naïve notions of 'the word' might be replaced by phonological, morphosyntactic, conceptual and onomasiological units in order to mine data for meaning and definition. In other words, it would make more sense to look up syntactic units and even derivational, inflectional and phonological units rather than be tied to the residue of a print artifact, the physically represented word.

On the other hand, looking back at the history of dictionaries in the Western tradition the phraseological unit has always been, if not foregrounded, at least hiding in plain sight. Bilingual dictionaries of the 16th century are replete with phrases and sentences that not only illustrate definitions, but provide meaning discrimination. It was not just a word that was being defined, but a word in a particular context, be it a canonical piece of literature, a proverb or an idiom. It is here that we may find insights into the correlation of the translational equivalent and synonymy, and the textual evidence (sometimes with an appeal to etymology) for distinguishing synonyms. This set of ideas correlates with the generally accepted practice of considering 'lexical item' as a hyperonym of both 'single words' and 'idioms', as Gabriele Knappe, in her essay 'Phrasal and phraseological synonymy in the *Historical Thesaurus of the*

Oxford English Dictionary', emphasizes in her analysis of synonymy across time as found in the *Historical Thesaurus of the Oxford English Dictionary*. Among other inquiries into the historical residues of current understandings of synonymous items, she makes phraseological units the central concern of her study of categorizing and retrieving embedded set phrases (whether semantically transparent or not) in lists of synonyms.

With the proliferating number of electronic dictionaries we can see an argument for de-emphasizing word based collection and retrieval lexicography, and a parallel development that emphasizes more discursive context as a basis for cognitive models of semantics that are not tied to the structuralist ideas of interdependent and hierarchical systems. As Arleta Adamska-Sałaciak observes in her contribution to this issue titled 'Equivalence, synonymy, and sameness of meaning in a bilingual dictionary', questions of semantic identity and sameness of meaning need to be explored beyond 'the structuralist model of sense relations... [that seem] to fit the assumptions of the traditional bilingual dictionary rather well.' She calls for the study of 'sameness of meaning... between longer stretches of text...' The large amount of lexical anisomorphism between languages does not preclude recognizing that linguistic identity and sameness of meaning between languages can be a profitable area of research into the viability of synonymy as term and concept.

At this moment of transition from hard copy to electronic copy, the dictionary user is still lightly skilled in recognizing the word as a linguistic unit (phonological, morphological, syntactic sequences) as opposed to the widespread understanding of a word as a printing convention bounded by white space (research into how people use their 'devices' to retrieve lexicographic content is beginning to be developed; this assertion is based on my own classroom observations).

How lexicography, as practice and product, makes sense to a learner is addressed by Rufus Gouws in his research on the use of synonyms and the need for contextual and cotextual guidance for retrieval and production. In his essay 'Contextual and co-textual guidance regarding synonyms in general bilingual dictionaries', the cognitive function is contrasted with the communicative functions of text production and translation, thereby concentrating his attention on collocations rather than single lexical units.

Electronically presented dictionaries that are organized beyond the boundaries of the lexical unit still have to be aware of the skillfulness of the end user. In the early bilingual tradition of lexicography, and subsequent monolingual dictionaries, there was an assumption of the 'skilled' readership (while these particular words referred distinctively to an English terminology, some of those general premises can be found across European dictionaries). The more 'powerful' the linguistic search engine, the more skillful the reader needs to be.

Whether the guidance that a bilingual dictionary can offer is valued by language teachers of beginning learners is investigated by Prisca Schuler, who

offers a critique of foreign language pedagogy that makes clear the continuing focus on a restricted idea of the lexical unit removed from larger contexts in her essay '*No dictionaries in the classroom: Translation equivalents and vocabulary acquisition*'. The usefulness of understanding translational equivalents and issues of sameness of meaning that are taken for granted in bilingual lexicography seem to meet with resistance in many foreign language classrooms.

Lexical meaning assumes the presence of the lexical unit; the lexical unit is an abstract item that is realized as a dictionary entry constructed on a principle that a definition puts forward a generality of meaning. In 'The explanatory technique of translation' Robert Ilson offers a pithy lexicographic expostulation of the stated and underlying ideas relevant to distinguishing definition and translation in bilingual and monolingual dictionaries. From this we will find an argument (and reply) for the usefulness of dictionaries attempting to find sameness across linguistic and cultural boundaries.

We hope that the essays presented here, a selection of the many possible methods and principles that would be of interest to the discipline, will be an impetus to question and investigate the issue of synonymy (lexical; phraseological; and lexicographic), semantic identity and value, sameness of meaning, and equivalence in the context of constructing definitions that indicate a generality of lexical meaning which are sound in theory and useful for personal consultation.