

SYNONYMS IN CONTEXT

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1976/78¹

"The question is," said Alice "whether you *can*
make words mean different things."
(Lewis Carroll)

In English dictionaries one can encounter the following definitions of the term *synonym*:

A word having the same meaning or nearly the same meaning in one or more senses as another in the same language: opposed to *antonym*.²

Word with the same meaning as another in the same language but often with different implications and associations.³

Strictly, a word having the same sense as another (in the same language); but more usu., either of any two or more words (in the same language) having the same general sense, but possessing each of them meanings which are not shared by the other or others. or having different shades of meaning appropriate to different contexts, e.g. *serpent, snake; Min, vessel; glad, . hover; to kill slay, slaughter*⁴

These excerpts show clearly the lexicographical difficulties connected with the definition of *synonym*. But the lexicographer's problems only reflect our knowledge (or ignorance) of what synonymy is: "When the nature of things is unknown, or the notion unsettled and indefinite, and various in various minds, the words by which such notions are conveyed, or such things denoted, will be ambiguous and perplexed" (Johnson 1755: Preface). Nevertheless, it can be seen that the definitions quoted agree on certain points, which are collected in the following provisional definition:

DEFINITION 1

SYNONYMS ARE WORDS HAVING THE SAME MEANING (IN THE SAME LANGUAGE).

The semantically interesting point in def. 1 is, surely, sameness of meaning. But there is little reason for considering sameness of meaning to be confined to words only. Shorter and longer syntagms, sentences and even texts may be said to have the same meaning, and often it will be found that words have the same

¹ This article was first pre-published by L.A.U.T. (Linguistic Agency University of Trier) in 1976, and subsequently published in *Working Papers in Language and Linguistics* 7 (1978): 8-21, which are difficult to access. The present version is left substantially unchanged. Revisions are stylistic and made with a view of improving readability and clarifying the argument. Note that no attempt has been made to update the bibliography.

² *Webster's New World Dictionary of the English Language* 1964.

³ *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English* 1974.

⁴ *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary on Historical Principles* 1968.

meaning as syntagms or sentences. If sameness of meaning is what we are interested in, little seems to be gained by making distinctions dictated mainly by syntactic considerations. Let us therefore accept def. 2 (an extension of def. 1) as our starting point.

DEFINITION. 2

SYNONYMS ARE EXPRESSIONS HAVING THE SAME MEANING.

Def. 2 will, of course, not stand up to a closer scrutiny, but by using the less determinate *expressions* it will give an intimation of the importance and scope of sameness of meaning. It comprises synonymy in the restricted sense of def. 1, as well as paraphrase, definition, and (if not restricted to the same language) translation, all of which involve sameness of meaning.

It is obvious that synonymy in this extended sense plays an important part in everyday speech, but, as Quine (1961: 47-64) has pointed out, linguistics itself is largely based on the notion of synonymy. It is easy to find definitions of e.g. the phoneme, morpheme, but also of ambiguity (Alston 1971:37ff.; Leech 1969:7, 1974:85) which implicitly or explicitly make appeal to synonymy (see also Harris 1973).

Furthermore, linguistic arguments frequently rest on the assumption that scholars will agree about the synonymy of expressions. Leech (1974:85) even goes so far as to include statements of synonymy in his "basic statements", i.e. "statements on a level where investigators seem to find themselves intuitively in agreement". The strange thing is, that this agreement seems to exist only as long as synonymy is not the problem under investigation. In view of the importance of synonymy there is, however, no evading the problem. Most linguists agree that synonymy is one of the *explicanda* of any semantic theory. It is, therefore, surprising that comparatively little effort or progress has been made in integrating the phenomenon of synonymy into a linguistic description.

Nevertheless, recent work on synonymy seems to suggest a new approach to this notoriously recalcitrant problem. The following discussion is an attempt to analyse what is taken to be the basic difficulty, to point out some pertinent observations, and to outline a tentative explanation which appears to account for them. In a sense, therefore, the present paper is a programme for further research into synonymy.

2.

Using def. 2 as a starting point one may ask when two expressions can be said to have the same meaning. One frequently discussed suggestion, which has, indeed, been taken to be a definition of synonymy, is def. 3.

DEFINITION 3

EXPRESSIONS HAVE THE SAME MEANING (I.E. ARE SYNONYMOUS) IF THEY CAN BE INTERCHANGED IN ALL CONTEXTS WITHOUT ALTERING THE MEANING OF THE TEXTS IN WHICH THEY OCCUR.

The popularity of this definition is partly due to its resting on interchangeability which - under the name of substitutability - has proved to be a fruitful criterion in linguistic research. Def. 3 is based on the assumption that it is easier for an informant to decide on the sameness of sentence meaning than on that of shorter expressions. Although experience seems to bear this out, the substitution test has one serious theoretical flaw. Alston (1971:40) points out that "in using the substitution test we are assuming that the rest of the sentence holds fast semantically", and that an attempt to justify this assumption will lead to an infinite regress.

But perhaps the greatest trouble with def. 3 is that all attempts to find expressions compatible with it have remained unconvincing (see Söll 1966: 93ff.). This has led to the conclusion that there are no genuine synonyms. Thus, instead of defining synonymy, def. 3, as it were, defines it away.

This is, of course, nonsense. Although the non-existence of "genuine" synonyms has for a while been accepted as dogma, the foundation of this conviction is very shaky indeed. It rests on the unjustified premise that def. 3 really does define synonymy. But the fact that synonyms in the sense of def. 3 have not been found merely proves that this definition is devoid of any linguistic interest (Koch 1963: 72). The old, ill-defined notion of synonymy would appear preferable, if only because it tries to capture something that is felt to exist. The fact that it was resurrected under the new name of quasi- or pseudo-synonymy (Ullman 1963: 108ff.) proves this point. But what is needed is not a new name for, but a better understanding of, the old concept.

3.

One way of bringing back the lost touch with linguistic reality is to weaken the claim made in def. 3. The following definition by Hirsch (1975: 563) is a good example of this attempt:

DEFINITION 4

"THIS PAPER IS FOCUSED ON A DIFFERENT CRITERION: THAT OF OCCASIONAL SUBSTITUTABILITY. IF THE TWO ITEMS INSTANCED ABOVE COULD EVER BE SUBSTITUTED WITHOUT CHANGING THE MEANING OF THE UTTERANCE MY MORE MODEST CLAIM ABOUT SYNONYMY WOULD BE PROVED."

According to this definition one single instance of mutual substitutability would suffice to establish the synonymy of two expressions. But even this claim seems too strong, for the literature shows that any such instance proposed has been questioned, and it is only a matter of time before this will happen to Hirsch's own examples (see Söll 1966). Thus the conventional definitions of synonymy lead to a dead end.

4.

We are, then, faced with two apparently irreconcilable findings. On the one hand we can observe that competent speakers when presented with two presumably synonymous expressions will deny that they have the same meaning. On the

other hand, there is a strong and general feeling that there are expressions that sometimes do have the same meaning. If this feeling is accepted as basically just, there must be something wrong with def. 4 and, *a fortiori*, with def. 3.

Note, first, that definitions 3 and 4 are not really definitions. They only outline a method of finding out whether two expressions are synonymous or not. To explain the utter failure of this method two reasons may be adduced. The first is that it is based on direct questioning, which is the least reliable elicitation technique (Quirk/Svartvik 1966: 13). The second is its "abnormal decontextualizing" (Hirsch 1975: 568):

If the man in the street is asked whether *pretty* means the same as *beautiful*, he is entirely right to answer "No", when the question is so framed. And even if the words are contextualized in sentences the experiment yields the same results. "She is a pretty girl" and "She is a beautiful girl" have different meanings for the native speaker - when the sentences are presented in isolation. But this usual way of testing for synonymy is, in some respects, an entirely artificial experiment. (Hirsch 1976:568)

The substitution test is a method to establish the choices open to a speaker to express a given meaning. It indicates this meaning by putting a corresponding expression within the context of a sentence. But how precise is a meaning when given in this manner? Not precise enough, perhaps. The substitution test tries to elicit from an informant whether substituting one expression for another would alter the meaning of the sentence, regardless of the larger linguistic and extralinguistic context in which it may be embedded. It is possible that this is not enough information for an informant to make such a metalinguistic judgement. It is possible that the choice of synonyms depends on a large number of unexplored linguistic and pragmatic factors, such as the intention of the speaker, his linguistic system, the linguistic context, the speaker's knowledge of the hearer, the situation etc. To put it briefly, the substitution test looks for synonyms in competence (unconditioned synonymy), whereas it is possible that synonymy is basically a performance phenomenon (conditioned synonymy).

5.

Some authors have, indeed, suggested that synonymy is encountered only in performance (Gauger 1972: 53ff.; Koch 1963: 76). If this view is correct, no two expressions have an identical meaning in competence, which would explain why the substitution test cannot find any. There are, however, in competence, **potential** synonyms, which under the appropriate conditions can mean the same in actual speech.

A theory of synonymy that distinguishes between synonyms in competence (potential synonyms) and synonyms in performance (actual synonyms) will have to account for two things: It must first explain what makes potential synonyms potentially synonymous, and, secondly, what aspects of performance are responsible for converting potential into actual synonyms. The first problem is part of the more general problem of what form a semantic description of language should take. It is obvious that the meanings of potential synonyms will have to be both similar and different, and an adequate semantic description

should make this explicit. Naturally this is beyond the scope of this paper. In what follows, some observations on performance aspects of synonymy will be presented.

6.

If we assume that a satisfactory explanation of potential synonymy can be given, it must be asked under what conditions two potentially synonymous expressions have the same and under what conditions different meanings. Koch (1963: 75) has proposed the following definition of what we will call actual (as opposed to potential) synonymy:

DEFINITION 5

UNTER SYNONYMEN WOLLEN WIR SPRACHLICHE FORMEN VERSTEHEN, DIE BEI VERSCHIEDENER LAUTGESTALT UNTEREINANDER AUSTAUSCHBAR SIND, OHNE DEN JEWEILS INTENDIERTEN AUSSAGEGEHALT ODER AUSSAGECHARAKTER ZU VERÄNDERN.

This definition assumes that actual synonymy depends on the speaker's intention. But by doing so it confines the occurrence of synonymy to the mental processes of the speaker, at least as long as one stipulates that interchangeability ought to be limited to the same context token. In speech there is no

(1) Let's found a club for {bachelors/ unmarried men}

Linguistically acceptable explanations of actual synonymy must also explicate how a hearer recognizes that potential synonyms are used with an identical meaning. Koch is aware of this, for he comments his definition as follows:

Die jeweilige Intention des Sprechers und im weiteren Sinn der sprachliche und außersprachliche Kontext entscheiden über die Synonymität mehrerer Ausdrücke. Synonymie kann nur aus den Gegebenheiten des Sprechaktes erschlossen werden. (Koch 1963:76)

7.

It is evident that expressions cannot be recognized as actual synonyms unless they actually do occur in speech. Owing to the linearity of speech they must, furthermore, follow one another, and consequently they cannot - strictly speaking - have the same context. But even if one interprets sameness of context as two tokens of the same context, synonyms will rarely be found both in the same context and in the same stretch of text.

(2) Let's found a club for bachelors. Let's found a club for unmarried men.

(2) is felt to be repetitious. In speech, redundancies like the ones in (2) may be found when there are difficulties of communication. For instance, the second sentence of (2) could be taken to be an explanation or even correction of the proposal made in the preceding sentence. Utterances such as the following are more frequent and more "normal":

(3) Let's found a club for bachelors. Unmarried men need a place where they can get together.

It appears, therefore, that in performance, synonyms may occur in the same stretch of text, but usually in different linguistic contexts.⁵ An explanation of actual synonymy will have to take this into account.

8.

Since the intention of the speaker is not known to the hearer, he must be capable of recognizing the synonymical use of two expressions from the context. This can only mean that the context should generally provide enough clues for a hearer to ascertain the actual synonymy (or non-synonymy) of two potentially synonymous expressions.

It has been remarked that "it seems to be an incontrovertible principle of semantics, that the human mind abhors a vacuum of sense" (Leech 1974: 8). This principle may be invoked when accounting for a hearer's recognition of intended synonymy. Any hearer will take for granted that speech utterances are somehow connected. If a speaker uses potential synonyms indiscriminately for the same referents, the hearer will surmise that the intended meaning of both expressions is the same rather than different. In the case of (3) this means that the hearer will expect that *bachelors* and *unmarried men* have the same intended meaning, rather than believe that there is no semantic coherence between the two propositions. He will ignore – or rather not notice – any semantic differences which may exist between the two expressions in competence.

9.

Gauger (1972: 57ff.) has suggested that the indiscriminate use of potential synonyms in actual speech has to do with the speaker's linguistic consciousness. He distinguishes between two (idealized) context types. In *non-synonymical* contexts⁶ the choice between, and the indiscriminate use of, potential synonyms is preconscious. The speaker's attention is not focused on **how** he speaks, but on what he wishes to achieve by speaking. An example would be the speech of a surgeon during an operation: "Forceps!...Scissors!...Swabs!...Knife!". In synonymical contexts, however, the speaker is conscious of **how** he can say what he wishes to convey. Awareness of the choices open to him implies awareness of his linguistic competence. Such a speaker will therefore notice the differences between potential synonyms. One of the most famous examples occurs in Shakespeare's *As You Like It* (V, 1, 45ff.):

Therefore, you clown, abandon - which is in the vulgar leave - the society - which in the boorish is company - of this female - which in the common is woman - which together is:

⁵ I shall leave aside here the problems connected with establishing the sameness of extralinguistic contexts, or, indeed, with their systematic description.

⁶ This use of *synonymical* and *non-synonymical* outside the original context is somewhat confusing. Synonymical contexts stress the differences between potential synonyms, non-synonymical contexts don't.

abandon the society of this female; or, clown, thou perishest; or, to thy better understanding, diest; or, to wit, I kill thee, make thee away, translate thy life into death ...

Gauger's proposal provides an additional explanation for the failure of the standard substitution test of synonymy. Asking an informant whether two expressions mean the same will inevitably direct his attention towards potential differences. Such a question puts him into the position of a synonymist who compares words with similar meanings in order to establish the semantic differences between them. By doing so he creates his own synonymical context. He is being induced to reflect on language, i.e. on competence, and there he will not find any identity of meaning, for -according to this hypothesis - there is none.⁷

10.

In everyday speech, synonymical contexts are not the rule, but they do occur. A hearer, in order to properly recognize them, must be able to differentiate between synonymical and non-synonymical contexts.

We have mentioned that a hearer will assume that in an utterance potentially synonymous expressions carry an identical meaning if they have the same referent. We may, therefore, expect that in synonymical contexts this identity of meaning must be negated. These contexts must somehow emphasize the meaning differences between potential synonyms.

Gauger suggests that synonymical contexts always contain a metalinguistic hint that two expressions A and B differ in meaning. This he calls the diversity implicate "A differs from B" (Gauger 1972: 74-77). If we take another look at the Shakespeare text, we find that this implicate is realized there by stating in the text wherein the synonyms differ. They come labelled much like dictionary entries. There are, of course, other ways for a speaker to indicate that "A differs from B". Gauger has compiled a list of synonymical contexts (1972: 87-94), which realize the diversity implicate in different manners, but a fairly frequent way seems to be the obvious one, namely to say "A, but not B", e.g. in

(I am) one of the men who like women, but who don't love women. (Gauger 1972:94)

11. Summary

Starting with the observation that the substitution test of synonymy looks for synonyms in competence and that such synonyms have not been found, it was concluded that competence does not contain expressions with an identical meaning, but only potential synonyms. These are expressions with a similar, not

⁷ Synonyms are only felt to have the same meaning as long as attention is not focussed on them, it is understandable that the debate about the existence of genuine synonyms has failed to produce any convincing instances. Participants will look for differences and always find them, particularly when there is no limit to the nicety of the distinctions made.

however an identical, meaning. In actual speech, potential synonyms may occur in two basic types of context. In synonymical contexts they occur as having different meanings (diversity implicate), in non-synonymical contexts they occur as having the same meaning (no diversity implicate). Thus, in synonymical contexts the actual text establishes a metalinguistic relation (diversity of meaning) between potential synonyms.

The proposals made so far are tentative. New and more appropriate tests will have to be devised. Questions will have to be so framed as to divert the informant's attention from the problem at issue and at the same time to elicit the relevant information. We need to know what must be the relation between the meanings of two expressions to render them potentially synonymous. A good deal of potential synonyms may turn out to be in a hyponymy relation (Lyons 1969: 452 ff.). The reason for their meaning identity in context may often be due to semantic transfer (Weinreich 1972: 100). More research must be done to establish the usefulness of the distinction between synonymical and non-synonymical contexts. Furthermore, the various possibilities of expressing the diversity implicate deserve further study. It may even be valuable to postulate an identity implicate "A is B" in order to account for the relation between *definiens* and *definiendum* in definitions. The expression of metalinguistic relations in natural languages deserves more attention altogether. We still know very little about the relation between meanings so loosely described as "sameness".

12.

By way of conclusion, the observations made above will be employed in re-interpreting a synonymy test devised by Hirsch in order to prove that the well-worn *bachelor* is synonymous with *unmarried man*. It should be remembered that according to Hirsch's definition one single instance of interchangeability would be sufficient to establish the synonymy of the two expressions. Hirsch construed the following texts:

(4) This is a club for bachelors. Experience having shown that this town offers no convenient facility where unmarried men can eat, drink, and converse in peace with fellow bachelors, nor any place where they can resort free from the gaze of unmarried women, we, the undersigned do hereby charter and found the Bower Club, where only unmarried men, that is, bachelors, may enter its precincts as members or as guests.

(5) This is a club for unmarried men. Experience having shown that this town offers no convenient facility where bachelors can eat, drink, and converse in peace with fellow unmarried men, nor any place where they can resort free from the gaze of unmarried women, we, the undersigned do hereby charter and found the Bower Club, where only bachelors, that is, unmarried men, may enter its precincts as members or as guests. (Hirsch 1975: 568f.)

For every instance of *bachelor* in (4), (5) has *unmarried man* and vice versa. Hirsch showed these texts to "a number of literate native speakers" and (apparently) asked them which of the two charters the club should use.

Here is his result:

... without exception they will tell you that it is a matter of total indifference which document the club should choose; that the two charters are exactly the same thing; that they are, in fact, perfectly synonymical. (Hirsch 1975: 569)

As a test this procedure is somewhat dubious. But even if one accepted the result, one may well doubt whether Hirsch's reasons why the text works are correct. It is true, the texts do avoid abnormal decontextualizing and are not linguistically eccentric. But this is not the reason why one can conclude that the "experiment is more, not less, informative about language in use than is an experiment with isolated words or sentences" (Hirsch 1975: 569). There is no necessary relation between length of context and synonymy. This may be shown by making a slight alteration in the last sentence of Hirsch's text:

(6) ...we, the undersigned do hereby charter and found the Bower Club, where only unmarried men, that is, bachelors, widowers and divorcés, may enter its precincts as members or as guests.

(7) ... we, the undersigned do hereby charter and found the Bower Club, where only bachelors, that is, unmarried men, widowers and divorcés, may enter its precincts as members or as guests.

Native speakers will find (6) acceptable, not however (7). This calls for an explanation. Why are (4), (5), and (6) acceptable, and what is wrong with text (7)? If we take another look at (4) and (5) we can make the following observations:

- Informants were asked which of the texts should be **used**, thus distracting their attention from the investigator's problem. This Quirk/Svartvik consider a "necessary condition of achieving a controlled and natural (if not naive) reaction" (1966:131).
- The two proposed synonyms both occur several times in either text. (In the standard test the first text would only have instances of *bachelor*, the second only instances of *unmarried man*.)
- There is no metalinguistic diversity implicate.
- There is, however, a metalinguistic identity implicate, which emphasizes that the speaker intends both expressions to have the same meaning. This implicate is encountered twice; in *fellow* relating *bachelors* and *unmarried men*, (*fellow* indicating sameness), and in the explicit definition *unmarried men, that is, bachelors*.

The informants' answers merely prove that the texts were successful in conveying, and the informants successful in understanding, that the author did not intend to distinguish between *bachelor* and *unmarried man*.⁸

On the other hand, text (6), simply by juxtaposing *bachelor*, *widower*, and *divorcé*, directs the reader's attention to the fact that the set of bachelors and the set of unmarried men are not coextensive. It classes *bachelor* as a co-hyponym of *widower* and *divorcé*, with the superordinate term being *unmarried man*. Text (7), however, by interchanging *bachelor* and *unmarried man* violates the hyponymy relation while claiming that such a relation does actually hold between the two expressions. This is why it is unacceptable.

Dictionary definitions should make distinctions nice enough to distinguish at least the cognitive meanings of potential synonyms. In the case of *bachelor* a definition must include the information that bachelors are men who have never married (see Katz/Fodor 1963:190).⁹ But dictionaries are about competence. In performance a speaker is flexible enough to produce, and a hearer flexible enough to understand, even

(8) Although John has been married for years, he is really still a bachelor.

A hearer will notice that this is a figurative use of *bachelor*. But "abhorrence of a vacuum of sense" can apparently induce the human mind to disregard parts of the meaning one would have thought absolutely indispensable.

Nevertheless, a hearer must start out with definite meaning postulates. Hirsch rightly stresses that "in attending to speech we must always begin with such postulates, for if we lacked **any** firm meaning expectations we could not begin to understand an utterance. We need confidence that not all our meaning expectations are in doubt all the time". (1975:570) These postulates are obviously part of our linguistic competence, but so is our ability to disregard some of these postulates in order to make sense of an utterance. This is what makes actual synonymy possible. But what are its limits?

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⁸ Nevertheless one cannot but wonder why nobody objected to the expression *fellow unmarried men*.

⁹ Katz, J.J. & Fodor, J.A.: "The Structure of a Semantic Theory", *Language*, 39 (1963), p.190.

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