

ON THE ROLE AND FUNCTIONS OF SYNONYMS

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Rezumat: Problema sinonimiei este unul dintre cele mai importante aspecte ale lexicologiei, deoarece lingviștii au păreri diferite asupra acestor probleme. Literatura de specialitate oferă diverse definiții ale sinonimelor și sinonimiei văzută din mai multe perspective. Analizând în profunzime definițiile cele mai moderne considerăm importante caracteristicile sinonimelor, definindu-le drept cuvinte cu înțeles aproximativ identic, diferențiate prin anumite nuanțe de sens și trăsături semantice, de conotație, valență și uz idiomatic. Articolul dat este o încercare de a identifica rolul de bază al sinonimelor ca sursă semificativă care contribuie la îmbogățirea vocabularului oferind vorbitorilor posibilitatea de a se exprima plastic, variat, utilizând un limbaj colorat stilistic și explicit, și a evidenția funcțiile acestora în limbă și vorbire.

Cuvinte cheie: rol, funcții principale, conotație, serii sinonimice, asocieri diverse, nuanțe emoționale, sinonimie, sinonimia în limbă, sinonimia în vorbire.

Speaking about lexical classes and words belonging to them, a famous Romanian scholar H. Hulban, says that intellectually and affectively, man conceives the world as consisting of things and ideas that are either similar or contrasting. Language records these associations and words which denote things and ideas considered similar fall into the class of synonyms. According to the scholar's opinion the search for synonymy betrays an intellectual satisfaction in *discovering order in language*, which is not essentially different from the search of *order in environment* and in the social relations reflected by words. Similarly, synonyms are words that clearly point out differences between or among terms, the existence of

shades of meaning reflected in the presence of some ideas of minor importance in the word meaning or stressed by the presence of various associations or emotional nuances, of vital differences among words from the viewpoint of their synchronic or diachronic power of circulation. (Hulban, 2001,p. 199)

The very existence of words traditionally called synonyms is disputed by some linguists; the nature and essence of the relationships of these words is hotly debated and treated in different ways by the representatives of different linguistic schools because English boasts with a great number of synonyms. To support this idea, it is worth mentioning B. Bryson's thoughts who considers that "For almost every word we have a multiplicity of synonyms. Something is not just big, it is large, immense, vast, capacious, bulky, massive, whopping. No other language has so many words all saying the same thing. It has been said that English is unique in possessing a synonym for each level of our culture: popular, literary, and scholarly- so that we can, according to our background and cerebral attainments, rise, mount, or ascend a stairway, shrink in fear, terror, or trepidation, and think, ponder, or cogitate upon a problem. This abundance of terms is often cited as a virtue. And, yet, a critic could equally argue that English is an untidy language, cluttered with a plethora of needless words. After all, do we really need *ficile* as a synonym for *mouldable*, *glabrous* for *hairless*, *sternutation* for *sneezing*?" (from Bryson B. *Mother Tongue. The English Language.* (Кульгавова, 2008, p.150)

Thus, we can state that synonyms are words *having the same or almost the same general sense, and differentiated by shades of meanings and semantic features, connotations, valency and idiomatic uses not shared by others, and interchangeable at least in some contexts.*

Consequently, it is but evident that synonyms perform certain functions in language and speech. Thus, a Romanian linguist Cristinel Munteanu states that the functions of synonyms depend on the way we conceive or treat synonymy. He says that in order to understand it, we must first distinguish synonymy in language and synonymy in speech. Scholars explain that when treated on the language level, synonyms are terms which have a meaning that can be decomposed into denotational features, in which the basic features coincide. That is to say, when treated on the language level, *denotational components* are decisive in associating two or more words in a *synonymic series*. If synonyms are treated as facts of speech, some other components are added to the denotational components. For

instance, *some words are neutral, others are poetic; some words are formal, and others are colloquial; some words are technical, others are childish; some slangy and others are dialectical.* It is evident that each word is appropriate in certain contexts and rejected in others. Thus, to emphasize the great role of synonyms in language Dr. Johnson once remarked that “*words are seldom synonymous.*” And Thomas Barbington Macaulay expressed the same idea saying that if we *change the structure of a sentence; substitute one synonym for another; the whole effect of the message is destroyed*”. (ibidem, 2008, p. 151)

Regarding synonymy in the language, R. A. Budagov states that the main function of synonyms can be called the function of differentiation, of specification. The Russian linguist claims that it must be recognized as *essential* for all groups of synonyms with the exception of absolute synonyms. (Munteanu, 2005, p. 293)

As for synonymy in speech, Romanian authors consider that sometimes synonyms are repeated to create a gradation that becomes the source of connotation: *diligent and demanding, (sîrguincios și silitor), stingy and carny,(zgîrcit și cărpănos)etc.*”, stating that through this process some expressions acquire “*maximum intensity values*”.

Linguists agree that emotive associations play an important part in differentiating synonyms, no matter how close synonyms seem to be from a semantic point of view. And denotational equivalence relationships have little significance if the connotations of the synonyms are regarded.

In this respect Louis Salomon suggests considering, for example, the supply of simple adjectives at our disposal for indicating that a person's figure is noticeably below the natural norm in weight. If it is someone whose feelings we particularly want to spare (ourselves, for instance), we might use *slender*; if we want to sound patronizing, even a trifle acid, we might say *thin* or *lanky*; if we really want to leave a sting we might try *skinny* or *scrawny*-leaving still, for intermediate shades, *slim, spare, delicate, underweight, lean, emaciated*. For the opposite weight pattern, we could make your selection among *plump, well-rounded, portly, fleshy, overweight, stout, pudgy, chubby, FAT, corpulent, OBESSE, and bloated*. (ibidem, 2001, p. 204)

St. Ullmann, after he also mentions the competition of synonyms in the language talks about the stylistic effects arising from the combinations of

synonyms. He considers that *"the primary function is variation"*, that is to avoid repeating the word when the idea is repeated. The accumulation of synonyms can have stylistic functions similar to those of repetition, observes Ullmann, highlighting that *"on a rational level, juxtapositions of synonyms give off an effect of insistence and meticulous clarity" while, in poetry, they correspond to the ascending line of emotions. Other times, some writers seek to increase precision by pursuing the idea "from every new angles."*

In conclusion, S. Ullmann identifies that synonyms have (ibidem, p. 295):

- 1) *to vary (or diversify) the way of expression; 2) to intensify (or accentuate) an idea;*
- 3) *to specify an idea.*

At a detailed study of linguistic literature we can observe that these functions are also present in Marin Bucă's work, who affirms, in addition, that "sometimes the precision and specification of certain ideas is obtained by contrasting synonyms", giving as an example a quote from C. Noica (Bucă, Evseev, 1976, p. 134): "*Anything can be done, but not everything can be made, just as not everything can be done. I.* Evseev admits that the functions of synonyms result from "the nature of the relationships between these categories of words", but he wants to specify that when we talk about the functions of synonyms in communication, we should not refer to the selection process of "the right word", an operation preceding the act of communication, but to "the relationships between synonyms and their functions, when they are used in the same context". Thus, the four functions identified by him are (ibidem, 1976, p.136).

1) *The function of diversifying speech, by avoiding the repetition of a word in the context of the same phrase or some adjacent phrases" (specific, above all, to absolute synonyms, but also to relative ones);*

2) *The function of emphasizing and highlighting an idea by repeating it with the help of juxtaposed synonyms;*

3) *The function of specifying an idea, by introducing a synonym that limits and makes concrete the scope of the notion;*

4) *The function of differentiating or opposing certain notions, which, from the point of view of common usage, can be confusing, and the author wants to emphasize precisely the difference between them.*

Thus, after this review of scholars' opinions related to the functions of synonyms, C. Munteanu formulates some observations in this regard. From his point of view it is clear that *the main function of synonyms in the language is that of differentiation*, because, in general, the language does not allow itself the luxury of retaining semantically identical words for a long time. It has become commonplace to say that absolute synonymy does not exist. Sharing the same idea Al. Graur emphasizes that (ibidem, p.296):

a) Even technical terms can be colored by their preferred use in one institution or another.

b) Instead, in speech, things are different. In the concrete linguistic act, the differences between synonyms (considered in the language) can be presented as such or they can be blurred or deepened, depending on the communicative intention of the speaker. Also, some words, which were never considered synonyms, become synonyms in certain contexts. Based on previous knowledge about synonymy and synonyms, the researcher recognizes certain words as synonyms (of the language) and finds that they have become something else in a specific context. Likewise, he recognizes some words as semantically different, but finds that they have become synonymous due to the pressure of the context - this would be synonymy as a result.

c) Linguists remark that the function of synonyms in speech is viewed as the role that a synonym has in a verbal context in relation to another synonym previously present in communication.

Thus, C. Munteanu emphasizes that upon re-evaluation, the functions of the synonyms are as follows (ibidem, p.297): :

1) *The function of diversifying the speech* (or varying the expression), to avoid repeating the same word in a wider or narrower context, the synonymy being in this case more or less distant:

2) *The function of intensifying (or emphasizing) an idea, which appears in juxtaposed synonymy due to the accumulation of synonyms aimed at the gradation effect:*" They argue, they always talk, / They swear, shout, yell and roar." (A. Pann); "Youth, how you deceive the hopes, how you dry up the powers, how you stifle and calm the gusts." (E. Gârleanu);

3) *The function of specification* (of an idea or a term) also arises in the case of juxtaposed or contact synonymy. Most of the time, it seems to correspond to the metalinguistic function (in the Jakobsonian sense) when a word is explained, through another more accessible term. Sometimes it is not the term that needs to be clarified, but a notion that needs additional clarifications, additions, an operation possible with the help of a less general synonym(s) than the first in the series:

4) *The function of differentiating terms* (and not notions, as Evseev

states), which can go as far as opposing them, arises from the necessity of adapting the word to reality, rejecting proximity to other words: "*I am ruined! More than ruined, I am bankrupt!*" (V. Alexander); "*That's a long story. So the word comes because it's a story. Yes, it was not a story. It was true history.*" (I. Agârbiceanu).

However, Professor Cristinel Munteanu points out that the above four listed functions are functions of synonyms and not of synonymy.

As a conclusion to these observations made by different scholars, we could cite I. Arnold's opinion who considers that "the general effect of synonyms when used in prose or in every day speech *is to render the idea precisely and create an elevated tone.*" (Arnold, 1986, p.195)

The famous linguist E. Coșeriu states that all these are called evocative functions "we can say that around the representation there is a bundle of evocative functions, we are dealing[...]with that rich ambiguity of the word that can precisely denote something, without ignoring or making less distinct, at the same time, other denotations".(ex: apud.Coșeriu, 1994, p. 149)

In conclusion, it should be remarked that according to linguists' opinions the notion of function of synonyms depends on the approach from which we treat synonymy. In language, the function of differentiating synonyms is given by the simultaneous and permanent relationship (as an interrelation) between synonyms; while in speech, the functions are triggered by the appearance in the context of the second or third/ forth synonym.

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