

TEACHING VOCABULARY THROUGH SYNONYMS

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Abstract: *Dat fiind faptul că sinonimele constituie un strat considerabil al vocabularul limbii engleze, metodicienii trebuie să-și schimbe atitudinea față de procesul de predare/învățare a limbii engleze ca o limbă străină. Însușirea sinonimelor este indispensabilă în deosebi pentru elevii, care învață engleza ca o limbă străină. Predarea vocabularului prin intermediul sinonimelor oferă posibilitatea studenților să acumuleze abilități și cunoștințe necesare pentru o lectură efectivă, comprehensiune și comunicare. Abilitatea de a alege cuvântul potrivit în orice context sau situație este o parte esențială în cadrul procesului de învățare a unei limbi.*

Predarea vocabularului în limba engleză cu ajutorul sinonimelor poate îmbogăți semnificativ vocabularul studenților și poate să le dea mai multă siguranță în utilizarea acestora în viața de zi cu zi.

Key Words: *ideographic, stylistic, absolute synonyms; connotation; denotational features; synonymic series; the dominant word; emotive associations; context; teaching vocabulary and the classroom techniques.*

The given article is a research dedicated to the problem of synonyms in Modern English, a considerable source that contributes to the enrichment of the vocabulary giving language learners the possibility to make their speech nice, sophisticated, colourful and precise. The problem of synonymy is one of the most important issues of lexicology, first of all, because linguists have different approaches to it. Linguistic literature offers various definitions of synonyms and synonymy viewed from different angles. Though, linguists have agreed that synonymy is a linguistic reality, the

divergences in tackling this problem have not permitted the elaboration of a unanimously accepted definition. A thorough analysis of most modern definitions leads researchers to consider again the most significant characteristics of synonyms and state that synonyms are words having the same or almost the same general sense, differentiated by shades of meanings and semantic features, connotations, valence and idiomatic uses not shared by others, and inter-changeable at least; in some contexts. Synonyms may be found in different parts of speech among both notional and functional words.

It should be remarked that linguists have different approaches to the problem of synonymy and, accordingly, they distinguish several classes of synonyms. The most general classification of synonyms was proposed by I. Arnold, who classified synonyms into- *ideographic, stylistic and absolute*, and, who furthermore suggested the classification of synonyms according to the nine types of connotation, a fact that plays the key role in choosing the most appropriate word from a synonymic series depending on the context we work with. Sharing the same opinion Academician V. Vinogradov distinguished *the connotation of degree or intensity, connotation of duration, emotive connotations, the evaluative connotation, the causative connotation, the connotation of manner, connotation of attendant circumstances*.

As synonyms constitute a vast layer of the vocabulary of the language, methodologists have to change their attitude to the process of teaching/learning English as a foreign language. The study of synonyms is especially indispensable for school pupils who learn English as a foreign language as teaching vocabulary through synonyms makes students acquire skills and knowledge necessary for effective reading, comprehension and communication. The skill to choose the most suitable word in every context and every situation is an essential part of the language learning process. We have to learn to seize the various connotations in the meanings of synonyms and to choose the right word appropriate to each context. Teaching English vocabulary with the help of synonyms may significantly enrich students' vocabulary and make them more confident in applying this knowledge in everyday life.

This article is an attempt to analyze some of the opinions that exist concerning synonymy and to make a distinction between the traditional and

modern approaches in the study of synonyms. The main purpose is to prove the fact that pupils should know all connotations of the words they use in order to select the right synonym for the given context. Thus, the article seeks to prove that teaching synonyms during English lessons is the best way to increase pupils' vocabulary that will help them express their thoughts precisely and accurately.

Many linguists consider as one of the most characteristic traits of synonymy the fact that synonyms have several identical denotational features. This approach was offered by Academician V. Vinogradov, who affirms that it provides the possibility of including into the synonymic series words that may differ in a few other denotational features. According to his theories a word can also have several meanings. In such cases, the denotational features of each meaning cannot exhaust the cognitive or affective content corresponding to these meanings, making room for the existence of other words which can express similar meanings (Arnold 1986: 194). Linguists consider that in a synonymic series several words have a common general meaning, but they are different due to the nuance they bring with them. And it means that in a synonymic series one of the terms acquires a dominant position, and in synonymic dictionaries it becomes *the head-word*. Thus, if we look carefully at all the words entering this synonymic series we will see that this dominant term expresses the most general meaning while all the other members of the series add some specific features. Accordingly, if the dominant term of a synonymic series is a polysemantic word, then among its meanings the dominant or most used one usually coincides with the meaning for which it has been included in the synonymic series. If, for example, we analyse the synonymic series **rest, repose, relaxation, leisure, ease, comfort**, we will see that the dominant word or head-word is **rest** as the most general of all these terms. We can say that the words included into this synonymic series have as a common meaning the idea of *"freedom from toil that implies a withdrawal from any kind of labour suggesting an opposition to the term work"* According to the dictionary the term **Repose** implies only *the withdrawal from motion and mental activity which enables a man to work again, or, in other cases, it means a release that finally induces repose*. The term **Leisure** implies *a dispensation of freedom duty, compulsion or routine, and often suggests the freedom to determine one's activities while* **Ease** also includes *freedom from toil*, but, if it is taken in

contrast with **Leisure**, it implies *rest and relaxation*. The dictionary meaning of the term **Comfort** includes only *a state of mind characterized by relief from all strains, or inconveniences, suggesting a feeling of enjoyment or content*. Thus, Horia Hulban claims that the *synonyms which imply difference in meaning, usually through different shades and different degrees of a given quality, are called ideographic synonyms*, and moreover, he sustains that most synonymous words belong to this group (Hulban 2001: 200). Thus, this fact clearly shows that pupils should be explained and taught the types of synonyms and their main characteristic features in order to know how to select the necessary word suitable for a given situation expressing the exact meaning they need.

It is evident that emotive associations play an important part in differentiating synonyms, no matter how close synonyms seem to be from a semantic point of view. In this case denotational equivalence relationships have little significance if the connotations of the synonyms are regarded. In this respect it is worth mentioning Louis Salomon's words who remarks that the speaker's choice of certain words will depend on his attitude to the person or object under discussion when he has to characterize him or it. Thus, if we have the supply of simple adjectives at our disposal for indicating that a person's figure is noticeably below the natural norm in weight and if *it is someone whose feelings we particularly want to spare* (ourselves, for instance), we might use the term *slender*; but *if we want to sound patronizing or 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*. Linguists consider that words with rather different meanings when considered apart tend to approach each other in meaning in certain contexts. They say that only very few of the words in idiosyncratic enumerative structures are recorded as synonyms by dictionaries, but the differences among them are reduced and their meanings tend to unify in the context (Solomon 1966: 31).

Louis Salomon goes on and sustains that if on the contrary, we want to describe a person from the opposite weight pattern, we could make our selection among *plump, well-rounded, portly, fleshy, overweight, stout, pudgy, chubby, fat, corpulent, obese, and bloated*. He considers that the abundance of such word choices makes possible an instructive little

exercise, proposed many years ago by Bertrand Russell under the name "conjugation of adjectives". Thus, he proposes to use different didactic activities in class such as games, discussions, various communicative exercises that will make pupils learn, train and memorize new words by using them in appropriate conversational topics, dialogues, role plays, etc. One of the exercises proposed by the scholar is to use the right adjective in a series of sentences (in his opinion playing the game without too rigid adherence to rules might go like): *I am careful, you are timid, he is afraid of his shadow*"; *"I am interested, you are inquisitive, he is a snooper"*; *"I am a social drinker, you may be overindulging, he is a lush"* (Solomon 1966:33).

This fact is common especially for literary works, where synonymic series must be regarded as "open" series, because it is evident that the writer's imagination can't be restricted by the limits of fantasy imposed by synonymicons. Speaking about dictionaries, the help offered by dictionaries and the limits they are concerned with, Ogden and Richards remark: *"These fixities in reference are for the most part support and maintained by the use of Dictionaries and for many purposes 'dictionary-meaning' and "good use" would be equivalents. But a more refined sense of 'dictionary meaning' may be indicated. The dictionary is a list of substitute symbols"* (Ogden 1952: 208).

According to Richard Ohmann, a writer's search for linguistic relationships is a tendency which leads to synonymy. Scholars develop this idea saying that this phenomenon can be shown with the help of the following basic criteria:

- 1) *The naming of a thing twice, which means the establishing of a semantic near-equivalence between the two names, which counts as an instance of linguistic similarity.*
 - 2) *Usually one term of the series includes the others;*
 - 3) *Similarity is evoked by the juxtaposition of several terms, by the fact that the members of the series share some obvious syntactical characteristics.*
- (Richard 1967: 4)

And the linguist explains that in this case the terms belong to the same grammatical class, being syntactically interchangeable and, accordingly, the series is connected by the sense similarity; the signal determines the reader to look for similarity in meaning as it is the equivalence of the grammatical forms. He considers that the members of a

series are introduced by the same words (they may be prepositions and conjunctions), or they may belong to parallel syntactical structures (Hulban 2001: 205).

It is certain that the study of synonyms is especially indispensable for those who learn English as a foreign language because what is the right word in one situation will be wrong in many other, apparently similar, contexts. Thus, the study of synonymy will help pupils increase their vocabulary because a person who uses many synonyms can express his or her ideas in an original and interesting way

It is worth mentioning that language is in constant development therefore language learners both teachers and pupils should work hard at their English in order to brush up the vocabulary they have acquired to be able to express their thoughts precisely and accurately. Synonyms are the very linguistic items that can describe exactly every shade of meaning any word can have. And, we can conclude that it is the English teachers' task to teach their pupils new vocabulary, identify and select the right word from the synonymic group to render the exact nuance required by the given context.

It is true that the attitude that foreign language teachers have had towards teaching vocabulary and the classroom techniques they employed have varied enormously during the past decades. Most of the language experts and foreign-language teachers believe that knowledge of lexical classes, new ways of enriching vocabulary with the help of such lexical items as antonyms and synonyms facilitate the process of guessing, recognizing, understanding and remembering the meanings of words. In Reverse and Temperley's opinions teachers may develop certain skills to help students increase their power in English through focusing on form, meaning, expanding by association and recalculating the vocabulary they have learned. In Modern Methodology this process is called Incorporation (Rivers 1978: 194).

Thus, we can conclude that teaching vocabulary through synonyms makes students acquire skills and knowledge necessary for effective reading, comprehension and communication. This is an opportunity to gain, first, the fundamentals of words and to use them in any situations their needs call for. As teachers are likely to know the needs of their students, they may efficiently use the class time in order to explain and encourage the

students to use synonyms in their speech. Constant work on vocabulary items by means of synonyms during lessons may significantly enrich students' vocabulary and make them more confident in applying this knowledge in everyday life.

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