Semantic relationships between contextual synonyms

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Abstract: Contextual synonym is a linguistic phenomenon often applied but rarely discussed. This paper is to discuss the semantic relationships between contextual synonyms and the requirements under which words can be used as contextual synonyms between each other. The three basic relationships are embedment, intersection and non-coherence. The requirements are discussed in the course of the discussion on the three relationships.

Key words: contextual synonym; text; context; relationship

Not all language researchers today are unfamiliar with such terms as "context" and "synonym", but they may not quite understand the term "contextual synonym". This is only because contextual synonyms are still beyond most linguists' eyesight up to the present[1]. In spite of this, contextual synonyms are very often used in real texts. Discussions on contextual synonyms may reveal some features between words in a language and may help language learners to comprehend better in their reading and do better in their writing. This paper will focus on the discussion of semantic relationships between contextual synonyms. These relationships might help us understand which words in what circumstances can be used as contextual synonyms.

1. Definition

1.1 Contextual synonym

In this paper, we define words that are not synonymous with each other in semantics, but are synonymously used in certain specific texts as *contextual synonyms.* For the sake of a clearer contrast between contextual synonym and the term "synonym" commonly used, in this paper, we redefine words that are semantically synonymous as *semantic synonyms.* There are some obvious, important differences between contextual synonyms and semantic synonyms, which we should make clear.

1.2 Text

In this paper, we do not distinguish "text" from "discourse", as many linguists do, but we only use the word "text". A *text* here is a sequence of linguistic units, spoken or written, of whatever length, which forms a unified whole.

1.3 Context

In this paper, the term "context" is used in its narrow meaning. It merely refers to the linguistic units preceding and/or following the particular linguistic unit in question in the same text. All extra-linguistic situations and knowledge are excluded in this meaning of *context*. Although this understanding of context is different from

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[1] Some linguists (e.g. Lyons, 1968; Palmer, 1981; etc.) also noticed such "context-dependent synonymy" as in "I'll go to the shop and buy/get some bread." (Lyons, 1968, p. 452-453) Unfortunately, they did not discuss this in detail and not treat them as synonyms, as Palmer wrote, "…this does not seem to be an argument for the synonymy of the words. On the contrary they are related in terms of hyponymy…" (Palmer, 1981, p. 93).

the concept of context of many linguistics researchers, we take this narrow meaning in order to make our discussion easier and clearer.

2. Semantic relationships between contextual synonyms

The relationships of two-word pairs can represent the characteristics of the relationships between multi-word groups. To simplify our discussion, we discuss only the relationships of two-word pairs in the following analyses.

Words that might be used as contextual synonyms should have, between each other, one of the three semantic relationships discussed as follows.

2.1 Embedment

There are some groups of words in which the meaning of one word (hereinafter referred to as W1) is totally embedded in the meaning of the other word (hereinafter referred to as W2). This relationship can be more clearly shown by Figure 1.
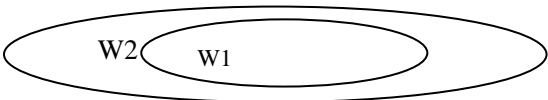
Figure 1   Relationship of embedment

There are two typical different types of word groups which take this relationship between each other. One type is that W2 refers to a collective group of something, while W1 refers to an individual division in that group. This is exemplified by "bird" and "sparrow", "fruit" and "apple". This type is usually known as "hyponymy" by many linguists[2]. W2 is called a superordinate term or an upper term, and W1 is called a hyponym, a subordinate term or a lower term. This type of relationship can be more clearly illustrated by hierarchical tree-diagram. Figure 2 is an example of this.
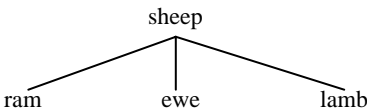
Figure 2   Tree-diagram of W1

The other type is that W2 refers to a whole composed of W1 and some others. This is exemplified by "body" and "arm", "head" and "nose". W1 is a part of W2. This type is also known as a part-whole relation (Lyons, 1977).

For nouns, we can say that "W1 is a part of W2" if they are in the part-whole relation, whereas we can say "W1 is a kind of W2" if they are in the hyponymy relation.

(a) A sparrow is a kind of bird. (but not "a sparrow is a part of bird")

(b) An arm is a part of body. (but not "an arm is a kind of body")

The second type of word groups cannot be used as contextual synonyms. In synecdoche, we can use W1/W2 to replace W2/W1, as is the case in the following examples:

(c) He has many mouths to feed in his family. (mouths= people)

(d) The birds sang to welcome the smiling year. (the smiling year= springtime)

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[2] Some linguists call this relation "inclusion" (e.g. Leech, 1983) and some use both "hyponymy" and "inclusion" (e.g. Palmer, 1981).

In spite of this, in the case of synecdoche, W1 and W2 are usually not used in the same text.

The first type of word groups can be used as contextual synonyms. In this case, the word with general meaning, i.e. W2 is specified to the same meaning as W1. In the text where W1 and W2 are used as contextual synonyms, they are used interchangeably. A typical example is the words "participant" and "negotiator" in a text which discusses negotiation skills. The upper term "participant" is defined as "a person who participates a negotiation" and is used as a contextual synonym of "negotiator", as is the case in example (e):

> (e) For a successful agreement, participants need to know negotiation principles and tactics. … at the beginning of the negotiation, the negotiators should know well their desired results and not to be willfully manipulated by their counterparts.

Usually, if we need to use W1 and W2 of this type as contextual synonyms, we cannot broaden the meaning of W1 to the same meaning of W2. For example, we cannot generalize "college students" to refer to "all kinds of students"; however, we can specify "students" to refer only to "college students". This shows us the fact that if an upper term and a lower term are used as contextual synonyms, their synonymous meaning can only be the meaning of the lower term and the meaning of the upper term should be specified in the same meaning of the lower term.

2.2 Intersection

The relationship of intersection refers to the relationship that the meaning of one word (W1) intersects with the meaning of the other word (W2) to a certain extent (see Figure 3). In this case, the two words are at the same level. There is no upper term, nor lower term, which is the case in the previous relationship.
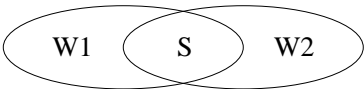

Figure 3   Relationship of intersection (S is the intersected part)

Accurately speaking, most semantic synonyms are also in this relationship. The difference between intersected semantic synonyms and intersected contextual synonyms lies in the fact that the intersected part of semantic synonyms is the whole part of one meaning of the synonymous words, whereas the intersected part of contextual synonyms is only a part of one meaning of the synonymous words. For example, "proper" and "appropriate" are semantic synonyms only when they both refer to the quality of fitness and in this case, their meanings are the same. However, the word "proper" can also mean "being competent" and some others. In those cases, "appropriate" is not a semantic synonym of "proper". The potential contextual synonyms "proposal" and "motion" are merely partly intersected in the meaning of "something presented".

Words in the relationship of intersection can be used as contextual synonyms in one of the three conditions listed below:

(1) In some texts, the meanings of both W1 and W2 can be narrowed to refer only to their intersected part (S in Figure 3) and used as synonymously interchangeable words. For example, the meanings of the words "fight" and "strive" are intersected at the reference of "using all resources available for something". They can be used as contextual synonyms when they both are narrowed to mean "trying to gain something to one's best ability" (as in example (f)).

> (f) They were fighting for their independence. … they got great help from all countries in the course of striving for their independence.

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(2) In some texts, the meanings of both W1 and W2 are broadened, and as a result, their intersected part is enlarged. Or the meaning of either word is broadened and their intersected part is also enlarged. When used as contextual synonyms, they both refer to the expanded intersected part. The words "shy" and "nervous" are usually intersected in the fact that they both can imply a kind of uneasiness in the presence of other people. But in example (g), their intersected part is obviously much enlarged.

(g) She is a shy girl and she is nervous among a group of boys.

Here, besides uneasiness, the intersected meaning may include "easily to be frightened; uncomfortable, etc."

(3) In some texts, the meaning of one of the words (W1/W2) is broadened to embed the whole meaning of the other word (W2/W1), i.e. their intersected part is expanded as large as the meaning of the other word (W2/W1) (see Figure 4).
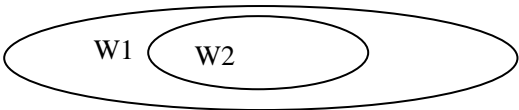
Figure 4   W1 is expanded to embed W2

In this case, the expanded word becomes very much like the higher level word in the relationship of embedment. Yet, there are some differences between them. The expanded word and the other word become in a part-whole relation, but they are used as contextual synonyms. Their synonymous meaning will be the same as that of the unexpanded word.

Let us now notice the case of the words "effect" and "fruit". These two words are intersected when they both mean "something brought about by a cause". The exact semantic meaning of "effect" is "a condition or occurrence traceable to a cause; result; reward". However, in example (h), the meaning of "fruit" is expanded to include all this meaning of "effect".

(h) Our arguments had no effect on them. Our efforts proved fruitless. ("fruitless" is the adjective form of "fruit". The latter sentence might roughly be replaced by "our efforts brought about no fruit", though it is not as good as the original one.)

3. Non-coherence

In some cases, people may use one word (W1) as a contextual synonym of another word (W2) in their texts, although, semantically speaking, the two words are not even intersected in any part of their meanings. We regard the relation between W1 and W2 as the relationship of non-coherence (see Figure 5).
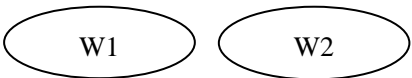
Figure 5   Relationship of non-coherence

When W1 and W2 are used as contextual synonyms, they become totally the same meaning in the text (see Figure 6).
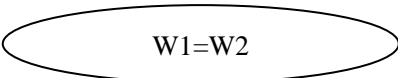
Figure 6   The same meaning of W1 and W2

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But this meaning will be different from at least the meaning of one of them. Only in the following two conditions can W1 and W2 be used as contextual synonyms of each other.

(1) If some people used W1 to refer to one thing and some other people used W2 to refer to the same thing, when someone later wants to refer to that thing, he/she can use both W1 and W2, and in this case, W1 and W2 become contextual synonyms in his/her text. We refer to this condition as *academic reasons*

Many grammarians call the first part of a noun phrase, preceding adjectives "determiners". But Halliday uses the word "deictics" to refer to the same part in a noun phrase. Therefore, some people now use "determiners" and "deictics" as synonyms in their texts. (Berry, 1998)

In the condition of payment by letter of credit, the seller's bank may be referred to as the negotiating bank or the advising bank. Literally speaking, the two names are not the same. However, they refer to the same bank and we usually use the two names interchangeably in the same text.

(2) If for some reason, it is universally recognized that a special concept can refer to the same as another semantically different concept, when a writer/speaker wants to refer to that concept, he/she can use the two words as contextual synonyms of each other in his/her text. We also refer this condition as *cultural reasons.*

Today, when people are mentioning the word "green", more often than not, they refer to environmental protection. In an article, the title uses the word "green accountant" while in the body of that article, "environmental auditor" is used. Evidently, they are the same meaning in that article. (Jones-Macziola, 1994)

The relationship of non-coherence is the most typical type of contextual synonyms, taking consideration into the differences between contextual synonyms and semantic synonyms.

The use of antonomasia and metonymy is rather similar to this kind of contextual synonyms, for instance, in English, we can use "Foggy Bottom" to refer to "US State Department" (metonymy) and "Daniel" to refer to "a wise and fair judge" (antonomasia). What distinguishes them from contextual synonyms is that contextual synonyms are used in the same text while in metonymy or antonomasia the two words (groups of words) are usually not interchangeably used in the same text.

4. Conclusion

We have so far discussed the three basic semantic relationships between contextual synonyms. Yet, we have to point out:

(1) Words which are not synonymous with each other in semantics can be used as contextual synonyms under one of the conditions above discussed;

(2) These conditions are only requirements for contextual synonyms. Words meeting these requirements may not be necessarily used as contextual synonyms.

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