

Konferenciaelőadásra épülő közlemény

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Horwich on Synonymy*

Abstract

The paper is a critical review of Paul Horwich's views on the nature of synonymy as outlined in his two books: *Meaning* (1998) and *Reflections on Meaning* (2005). For Horwich (similar to other language philosophers' views), synonymy is primarily a semantic notion and is mainly based on identity rather than similarity of meaning. Its occurrence is manifested in words and sentences, and it can be tested via the interchangeability of the respective lexical elements or propositional structures in given contexts. I find these criteria too narrow and unreliable. In my linguistically rather than philosophically based view, the nature of synonymy (more precisely, *near synonymy*) is at least as much pragmatic as it is semantic. It is a graded notion deeply embedded in schema-related types of conceptual structure such as scenes, frames, and scripts as well as the traditional notion of semantic fields. Its gradience can be measured along the lines of the prototypicality (and distance from the possible prototype) of lexical expressions belonging to given synonym sets.

In the course of their history, philosophy and linguistics frequently went hand in hand in discussing major language-related issues, both fields contributed importantly to the development and shaping of ideas brought up by the other. In the recent history of the two fields, concerning the shaping of issues related to semantics and pragmatics, perhaps the more dominant role has been played by linguistic philosophy. The topic of the present brief paper, however, that of aspects of synonymy, has been more amply addressed and discussed by linguistic theoreticians than by language philosophers, although linguists studying this field inescapably have had to rely on the ideas of their philosopher partners. However, the other side of the coin is that when the issue of synonymy is raised, contemporary philosophers of language seem to be very much forgetful about the results of research gained by linguists, or even about the nature and scope of such research. The present brief report aims to bridge this gap by providing a few notes and viewpoints to Paul Horwich's philosophy of language, to his understanding of the nature of synonymy.

At the start, the issue of synonymy, the identity or commonality of meaning between lexical items, words, expressions of various length, was definitely viewed as belonging to the domain of semantics. Recently, mainly after Wittgenstein, we have witnessed a considerable shift of interest from semantics towards pragmatics in studying this field. I believe that this shift of interest has emerged, perhaps more powerfully in linguistics than in linguistic philos-

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ophy, with the separation of semantic from pragmatic aspects of synonymy, due to empirical methods gaining more and more ground mainly in cognitively based linguistic research. As pointed out by M. Lynne Murphy (2003), Alan Cruse (2004) and others, synonymy has become a major issue not only for lexical semantics, but also for lexical pragmatics.

Outlining his theory of meaning in two recently published (and republished) books, Paul Horwich also expresses his view on synonymy at various places, more strictly, perhaps, in the book titled *Meaning*. For him, as for other philosophers of language, synonymy is dominantly a semantic issue, it is related to words and also to larger expression types: sentences. I would like to note right away here, that for linguists, synonymy has always been rescripted to lexical relations only. Although philosophers of language have been much concerned with the synonymy observed between sentential structures, supporters of the compositionality hypothesis have been much concerned with observing synonymy guaranteed by the lexical body of propositions, certain items functioning as key words from this point of view.

For linguistic philosophers dominantly, including Horwich, Stephen Schiffer and others, synonyms are (to quote Horwich's *Meaning*, p. 49) "pretty freely substituted for one another". In such a view, terms have the same meaning if they are substitutable in sentences, that is, interchangeability is the guarantee to sameness of meaning, which is then the critical characteristic feature of synonymy. X and Y are true of the same thing if they have the same meaning properties. Does this also mean that in such cases X and Y necessarily have the same reference? One may wonder what "pretty freely substitutable" means in Horwich's characterization. For linguists studying synonymy, substitutability, interchangeability are used as a vital criterion in identifying what they call *absolute synonymy* (Lyons 1995, Cruse 2002). Linguistic investigations have proved, however, that absolute synonymy hardly if at all exists in language. Lexical items thought to be absolutely synonymous on grounds of substitutability turn out to carry different stylistic weight and are routinely not used in the same register or in the same genre. At best they are used with the aim to escape repetition, under strict contextual conditions. Horwich's phrase "pretty freely substitutable", however, offers a larger leeway: perhaps this condition supported by language philosophers should not be taken in such a strict sense, perhaps substitutability is not the only, exclusive condition of synonymy, maybe it should be understood in a relative sense. Moreover, some key examples that Horwich and others take as substitutable, for instance *bachelor* and *unmarried man* simply don't work as they would wish: they are not interchangeable in context, as the latter does not even work as a substitute in regular discourse. See for instance:

- (1) *The bachelor drank too much at the party yesterday.* vs.
- (2) *The unmarried man drank too much at the party yesterday.*

and I guess it would be quite difficult to find examples of it even in large lexical corpora. Linguistically, *unmarried man* can be understood merely as a paraphrase of the meaning of *bachelor*, but paraphrases are no good for testing criteria for synonymy in context.

On the same page, p. 49 of the book, referring to the use theory, Horwich states that synonymy occurs in case "the same basic regularity governs the use of two words", that is, provided that "all ... factors influencing the deployment of [those/ that is, synonymous] words are the same ... at a single time." What basic regularity, factors may he have in mind? Certainly not interchangeability, exclusively. There are certainly a number of factors offered by linguistic theorists, such as semantic field relatedness, conceptual frame relatedness, the matching of selectional and relational features, primary syntactic markedness, categorial

features, collocational matching, to bring up just a few, all left out of Horwich's, and many language philosophers' scope of interest.

On p. 57 he refers to the acceptance factor, but conditions of this factor remain unspecified. On the same page he also writes "... given that the meaning of a word is the concept it expresses, such synonymy would imply their intersubstitutivity *salve veritate* in belief (and other propositional-attitude) contexts". However, referring to work by Benson Mates (1952), with whose view I would fully agree, he correctly notes that as Mates observed, "no two expressions in the same language – even those regarded as synonyms – are reliably interchangeable *salve veritate*". I wonder why – as he seems to stick to the view that "the meaning of a word is a concept" (Horwich 1998: 100) – Horwich makes no mention of the relatedness in conceptual representation of synonymous items in terms of conceptual scenes, frames, or scripts forming an integral part of the common ground of speakers of a given linguistic community. The issue is amply discussed by Herbert Clark (1996), who is not referred to in Horwich's book, and also by Putnam or Burge, to whose views he does refer, for instance on p. 56 of *Meaning*.

Later in the book (p. 163-4), he addresses the issue of the constructional variation of synonymous words yielding synonymous sentential strings. In criticizing the view according to which constructional synonymy if possible, he states that "such relations of synonymy [for instance variations in active/passive sentences using the same lexical material in key word status] are precluded by the deflationary proposal, which reduces the meaning property of an expression to its mode of construction" (p. 163). He brings up the case of *bachelor* vs. *unmarried man* here again, but this time modifying his earlier, quite rigid view. Here he states: "... we do have a conception of meaning relative to which *bachelor* and *unmarried man* differ in meaning, as do active and passive versions of the same sentence. And it is such fine-grained meaning properties that I suggest are analyzable as construction properties." To continue, he says that in a coarser-grained kind of meaning there would be no difference in meaning between these pairs of items or constructions. As a kind of self-criticism he adds on the same page: "Of course it remains to specify the circumstances in which different expressions are to be assigned the same semantic structure". However, specification of the given circumstances remains unspecified in *Meaning*, nor are they specified in *Reflections on Meaning* published in 2005, where on p. 212 we can only read in a footnote that "there is ... a more fine-grained conception [of meaning], captured by identity of syntactic construction properties, relative to which they [the sentences in question] do not qualify as synonyms." However, criteria on sameness of syntactic constructional properties need further specification here as well. A domain that (as hinted to above) certainly has a role in synonymic relations among lexical items and constructional properties is that of (linguistic and conceptual) schemata mentioned, but not investigated at all, on p. 203 of Horwich's new book.

Concerning the synonymy of lexical items in their occurrence in syntactic constructions, Schiffer, studying the substitutability of certain synonymous lexical items in the same type of syntactic structure: the dative movement alternation, gives the following examples on pages 93-95 of his book titled *The Things We Mean* (2003):

- (3) *Betty gave her tiara to Oxfam.*
- (4) *Betty gave Oxfam her tiara.*
- (5) *Betty donated her tiara to Oxfam.*
- (6) **Betty donated Oxfam her tiara.*

He refers to Jerry Fodor (1998: 67), who explains the unacceptability of (6) by a morphological constraint on dative movement, according to which polysyllabic verbs resist double object movement. Taking then only monosyllabic verbs, Schiffer brings up

(7) *She said that it will rain*

which, he says, “is fairly synonymous with”

(8) *She stated that it will rain.*

and the two sentences sound fully acceptable, whereas

(9) *She said the proposition that it will rain.*

is judged as unacceptable, but

(10) *She stated the proposition that it will rain.*

sounds perfect.

Whatever meaning the vaguely phrased judgement “is fairly synonymous” may convey, the verbs *say* and *state* are certainly considered to be synonymous by most native speakers of English, and the list of this synonymic domain is quite large, including, among many verbs, *claim*, and *assert*. Testing the alternation with quite a few native speakers of American English, I found that *claim* dominantly yields unacceptable examples in both structures, whereas with *assert* only the sentence having the same structure and lexical components as (10) was judged to be dominantly unacceptable. Of course, this complex picture of the syntactic behavior of members of the above lexical domain requires further investigation. An interesting observation which, even at first blush, seems to be fairly striking is that occurrence in specific syntactic structures is far from being the best method of testing synonymy, substitutability (and sticking rigidly to sameness of meaning) by no means serves as a major criterion of identifying lexical or syntactic relations of this type, whereas, for instance, as pointed out by Andor (2003), distance from the prototypical member of a lexical group might provide a better ground for explaining specific syntactic behavior. In the above group of verbs, *say* is judged to be the prototypical member, whereas *claim*, *assert*, *state*, and others are members showing a gradable distance from the prototype. What makes *state* different in syntactic behavior from *claim* and *assert* requires further investigation within the given domain. Certainly, as can be seen on the basis of examples (3)-(10), synonymy as a conceptually based linguistic phenomenon is dominantly relative in nature, members of groups of synonyms or synonymic domains are mostly *near synonyms*, as opposed to *absolute synonymy*, which, as justified by research performed by Lyons, Cruse, Lynne Murphy, Mates, myself and others, is an unique rarity, perhaps it even does not exist.

On the basis of the above arguments and investigations, it seems to be clear that viewing and testing the grade of synonymy (both at the lexical and the syntactic level) cannot be restricted to testing the rate of substitutability or interchangeability, but it has to rely on the multiplicity of factors including, among many, identifying the type of synonymy, semantic field and conceptual frame relatedness (as pointed out by Andor, 1998), gradience of prototypicality (identifying the prototype if there exists one and the distance from it) or lexical neutralization within a given lexical domain, relational and selectional, but even subcategorization feature properties, the clustering of the features identified, and usage in registers also has to be investigated. These factors have started to be studied extensively by

empirical and cognitive-based linguistics, and I firmly believe that the results can certainly enrich the scope of investigation performed by philosophers of language.

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