



PRAGMATIC FEATURES OF SYNONYMIC UNITS IN ENGLISH

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Abstract

This article is devoted to the pragmatic characteristics of synonymic units in the English language. It highlights not only the semantic relatedness of synonyms but also the stylistic, emotional, and socio-pragmatic differences that emerge in their contextual use.

Keywords: Synonymic units, pragmatic meaning, cognitive synonyms, pragmatic interference, semantic variants.

INGLIZ TILIDA SINONIMIK BIRLIKLARNING PRAGMATIK XUSUSIYATLARI

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Annotatsiya

Mazkur maqola ingliz tilidagi sinonimik birliklarning pragmatik xususiyatlariga bag`ishlangan bo`lib, unda sinonimlarning faqat semantic yaqinligi emas, balki ularning kontekstual qo`llanishida namoyon bo`ladigan stilistik, emotsional va ijtimoiy –pragmatik farqlari yoritilgan.



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Kalit soʻzlar: sinonimik birliklar, pragmatik maʼno, kognitiv sinonimlar, pragmatik interferensiya, semantik variantlar

Аннотация

Данная статья посвящена прагматическим особенностям синонимических единиц английского языка. В ней раскрываются не только семантическая близость синонимов, но и стилистические, эмоциональные и социально-прагматические различия, проявляющиеся в их контекстуальном употреблении.

Ключевые слова: синонимические единицы, прагматическое значение, когнитивные синонимы, прагматическая интерференция, семантические варианты

In linguistics, synonyms are regarded as lexical units that express identical or closely related meanings. However, their appropriate selection in actual speech depends not only on semantic similarity, but also directly on pragmatic factors such as the communicative goal, the speaker's intention, and the social situation. In the scholarly works of a number of professors and researchers, it is emphasized that the study of synonymic units should be conducted not merely at the semantic level, but also by covering their pragmatic properties; these studies also provide detailed discussion of pragmatic distinctions observed among different synonymic units and their functional role in discourse. In particular, J. Lyons in *Semantics* (Vols. 1–2) addresses the contextual and pragmatic use of synonymic units, while G. Leech in *Principles of Pragmatics* shows that the speaker's purpose, social distance, and speech strategy play a central role in synonym choice. Cognitive linguists such as U. Chafe, C. Fillmore, and R. Jackendoff relate synonymy to conceptual structure. Likewise, D. A. Cruse in *Semantics* focuses specifically on pragmatic differentiation, and A. Wierzbicka emphasizes that subtle semantic-pragmatic distinctions among synonymic units are strongly connected with human cognition, cultural values, and habitual speech practices. Synonyms are important lexical units that enrich a language's vocabulary and broaden its expressive potential. Linguists note that the system of synonymy



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occupies a central place in the semantic organization of a language, because expressing the same content through different lexical means ensures stylistic and expressive variation in speech.

J. Lyons characterizes synonyms as “units located close to one another within a semantic field,” stating:

“Two expressions are synonymous if they have the same descriptive meaning, but in practice perfect synonymy is extremely rare.”

This view reflects a natural limitation within the language system, namely that complete semantic equivalence is hardly ever found. Thus, synonyms always contain certain connotative, stylistic, or pragmatic differences. A language’s expressive capacity becomes more flexible through synonymy: depending on the communicative situation, a speaker can convey the same meaning with different degrees of formality, politeness, neutrality, or emotional coloring. For example, English pairs such as *child – kid*, *ask – inquire*, and *start – commence* are semantically similar, yet differ in stylistic value.

D. A. Cruse approaches the issue of synonyms in depth and evaluates them as a speaker’s choice in discourse. He writes:

“Synonyms are lexemes that share the same core meaning, but differ in nuances that affect their contextual appropriateness.”

This original idea means that the most important aspect of synonymy is “contextual appropriateness,” that is, suitability to context, which is directly connected with pragmatics.

Likewise, when explaining stylistic synonyms, G. Leech emphasizes the following:

“Synonymy involves choices motivated not only by meaning but also by social convention, politeness and the speaker’s communicative intention.”

This statement clearly shows that synonym choice is governed not only by semantic factors, but also by a broad range of pragmatic considerations. Thus, the position of synonyms within the linguistic system is determined not only by their semantic closeness, but also by stylistic differentiation, communicative function, social norms, and contextual flexibility. This, in turn, makes synonymy a complex and multi-layered phenomenon in language.



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Synonyms differ not only in denotative meaning (dictionary meaning), but also in pragmatic meaning—namely, a word’s stylistic and emotional value, its appropriateness in a given communicative situation, its social usage, and its alignment with the speaker’s communicative aim. Linguists refer to this as the pragmatic differentiation of synonyms.

“Pragmatic connotations include stylistic value, emotional coloring, expressive intensity, and the social or situational restrictions of a lexical item. Synonyms differ not only in meaning, but also in these pragmatic parameters.”

This point by I. V. Arnold shows that differences between synonyms are manifested not merely in their lexical meanings, but also in the “tone” or “resonance” with which a word is used in speech. Through pragmatic connotations, Arnold refers to factors such as stylistic value, emotional coloring, expressive force, and suitability to the social situation. For example, although *childish* and *childlike* may share the same denotative basis, the former typically carries a negative evaluation, whereas the latter often has a positive emotional connotation. Arnold’s approach demonstrates the necessity of evaluating synonyms in a context-dependent way: a word’s meaning and effect may shift noticeably depending on the discourse situation.

“Pragmatic meaning concerns what a speaker intends to convey by choosing a particular word among its synonyms, considering context, politeness, social distance, and interpersonal relations.”

G. Leech emphasizes that the most crucial factor in choosing among synonyms is the speaker’s intention, that is, the purpose behind the utterance. To make pragmatic meaning clearer, he specifically highlights the social dimensions of discourse (politeness, social distance, interpersonal relations). For example, “Could you possibly help me...?” (highly polite) and “Help me.” (an imperative) may share the same communicative goal, yet the social distance encoded in each is fundamentally different. According to Leech, the reason for selecting one expression over another lies in the speaker’s communicative strategy—particularly the degree of respect or deference shown toward the addressee. In this sense, synonyms pragmatically function as instruments for managing the social situation of speech.



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“Synonymy is rarely absolute, because words differ in their descriptive, expressive, and social meaning. These differences are pragmatically conditioned.”

J. Lyons provides a scholarly justification for why “absolute” synonymy is extremely rare. He distinguishes three principal layers of meaning through which lexical items may differ: descriptive meaning, expressive meaning, and social meaning. Even words that are very close in sense diverge along one or more of these dimensions, which is why they cannot be fully interchangeable equivalents. For instance, *residence* and *home* both denote a “place to live,” yet *residence* is formal and institutional in tone, whereas *home* carries emotional, personal, and socially embedded associations. Lyons’s position thus reveals the complexity of synonymy: in natural languages, each synonym tends to perform a distinct pragmatic role, and these differences become especially significant in actual discourse.

In contemporary linguistics, synonyms are increasingly viewed not merely as lexical-semantic units, but as a complex phenomenon connected with pragmatic and cognitive processes. In particular, pragmatic differentiation among synonymic units can sometimes be observed alongside grammatical patterning. For example, in English, temporal markers such as *still*, *already*, and *yet* are not direct lexical synonyms, but they are often interpreted as “pragmatic synonyms” because they frame a communicative situation in different ways. *Still* signals continuity, *already* indicates that something has happened earlier than expected, and *yet* suggests an outcome that is still anticipated but has not occurred. Consequently, when expressing a broadly similar content, the speaker encodes differing attitudes, expectations, and emotional reactions. This illustrates the cognitive-pragmatic layer of synonymy with particular clarity.

Therefore, differences between synonyms cannot be restricted to dictionary meaning alone. They diverge across stylistic-semantic, socio-pragmatic, emotional-expressive, and cognitive-conceptual dimensions, which makes synonym selection in discourse a complex, context-dependent, and multi-layered process.

In conclusion, the pragmatic properties of synonymic units in English determine their genuine place within the language system and their functional significance.



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They expand the language's expressive resources, enrich stylistic variation in discourse, and play an important role in producing context-appropriate, precise, and persuasive communication. The analysis of pragmatic features of synonyms constitutes an integrative research approach that connects major linguistic domains such as semantics, pragmatics, cognitive linguistics, and cultural semantics.

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