

# Discrimination of Synonyms

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**Abstract:** This paper mainly introduces the discrimination of synonyms in the following aspects: difference in the range of meaning, difference in the intensity of meaning, difference in emotional implication, difference in style, difference in collocation, difference in semantic meaning and difference in district. Finally, the significance and value of synonyms are introduced.

**Keywords:** Synonym; Discrimination; Difference

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## 1. Introduction

Synonymy refers to the sameness or close similarity of meaning. It is a common feature of all natural languages. Words that are close in meaning are called synonyms, which can be defined as words different in sound and spelling but most nearly alike or exactly the same in meaning. Modern English is extremely rich in synonyms, and their origins vary. The most important source is borrowing. Due to the long history of development, the English language has taken in a large number of words from other languages, mostly European languages, such as French, Latin, Greek, Italian, and German. Most of the borrowed words have been naturalized. Therefore, we often find pairs or triples of words in English that share more or less the same meaning. But because of their different origins, there are often subtle differences among these synonyms. Therefore, it is difficult for English learners to choose the most appropriate one among a large number of synonyms in different contexts.

There are two types of synonyms: relative synonyms and absolute synonyms. Absolute synonyms are words that are identical in meaning in all its aspects. Relative synonyms are words that have shared basic meanings, but meanwhile there are also some subtle differences in meaning and usage among them. Therefore, relative synonyms can differ from one another in many aspects, such as the range of meaning, the intensity of meaning, emotional implication, style, collocation, semantic meaning and district, etc.

## 2. In the range of meaning

Although there are many synonyms, the words may express the meaning differently in the range of the conceptual meaning of the words. The synonymous group of war, battle, campaign is a good example to explain it. War means a state of armed conflict between different nations or states or different groups within a nation or a state over a period of time. Battle means a violent fight between groups of people, especially one between military forces during a war. Campaign means a series of planned movements carried out by armed forces in a war. From the above examples, we can clearly see the differences in the range of meaning of these synonyms. Understanding the subtle differences of synonyms could help us better understand their meanings.

## 3. In the intensity of meaning

Synonyms may differ in degree of intensity. For example, in the group of synonyms, decline, refuse, reject, although they all have nearly the same basic meaning, they express the different intensity. Decline is the most polite word in this group, it means that someone politely declines an invitation or an offer of help. Refuse is the most commonly used word. As far as intensity is concerned, refuse is stronger than decline, and reject is the strongest of all. Take dislike and hate as another example. I dislike running. I hate running. Both sentences express the meaning that I don't like running. But We can see that hate implies a deeper feeling of disgust. That's to say, hate has a stronger intensity than dislike. The same difference could be found among the words tired and exhausted. The word Tired generally refers to tiredness caused by work or stress. Exhausted refers to the exhaustion of energy or physical strength due

to excessive exertion, e.g. She was tired and under strain. She felt exhausted after the exertions of recent weeks at work. Differentiating between the different intensities of expression used by synonyms can help us choose the most appropriate words in different situations, making the listeners feel comfortable and avoiding conflict.

#### **4. In emotive meaning**

Many words share the same meaning but have complex differences in emotive values and express different emotions of the user, indicating the attitude or bias of the user toward what he or she is talking about. We can roughly divide English words into positive, negative and neutral words. Synonyms also have positive, negative or neutral meanings. For example, generous and extravagant both have the basic meaning of giving or willing to give freely. The former refers to a sense of praise, but the latter refers to a sense of criticism. Those words reflect a certain emotion of the language users, and penetrates their affirmation, praise, love, negation, denunciation, hatred or calm. It reveals the difference between synonyms in emphasis and aspect and in potential meaning. For example, slender, thin, skinny and other words have similar conceptual meaning but different emotional meanings. The former is a positive term, which describes a woman as slender and graceful, while the latter is a negative term, which means excessive thinness and ugliness, and the middle term is a neutral term. The term thin is only have a general declarative meaning, it does not have any emotional connotation. The pair of synonyms collaborator and accomplice is another good example. The two words bare the same meaning of “a person who helps another”, but they also have subtle differences in emotive meaning. A collaborator helps another in doing something good, while an accomplice helps another in a criminal act. Thus, we could know that when we choose between the two words that we would use depends on our assessment of the nature of the activity that the person would help with.

Another excellent example is this pair of synonyms, politician and statesman. We could say that Mao Zedong is a great statesman and political thinker. The word statesman is clearly appropriate, because Mao Zedong is an excellent leader of the Communist Party of China. However, the word politician is not suitable in this situation, because the word politician would be usually used in a derogatory sense, with implication of seeking personal gain, scheming, opportunism, etc, while statesman is a political or government leader, especially one who is respected as being wise and honorable. As can be seen from the above, we should be very careful when choosing synonyms, because the positive and negative meanings of a word can have different effects. If you do not pay attention to the choice of words, there will be ambiguity or even misunderstanding in the text or communication.

#### **5. In stylistic meaning**

Words that have the same meaning may differ in style, or degree of formality. In other words, some words tend to be more formal, other casual, and still others neutral in style. Synonyms differ in style. They could be classified as formal, informal, literary, colloquial, archaic, slang and so on. For instance, the group of synonyms, die, pass away and pop off all have the meaning of becoming dead. But die is a basic and general word, which can be used in almost every context. And it is stylistically neutral. Pass away is a euphemism and it should be used in formal contexts, showing people’s respect and love for the dead. Pop off is slang. It would be used on very informal occasions, implying people’s contempt for the dead. Besides, we should also take archaic and poetic terms into consideration. For example, ire—anger, list—listen are synonymous pairs, but in each the second is standard in use whereas the first is old-fashioned and archaic, only found in poetry, earlier writings or perhaps in legal documents. Therefore, in different contexts, especially in different stylistic styles, it is particularly important for the speakers or writers to choose the most appropriate vocabulary to properly and politely convey the meaning.

#### **6. In collocation**

Some words, the meaning is the same, but the collocation is different. Some synonyms differ in their collocation, that is to say, in the words they are paired with. It is a matter of usage. For example, when we intend to express that somebody has done something wrong or even criminal, we can use accuse, charge, rebuke, but they are followed by different prepositions—accuse...of, charge...with, rebuke...for. When expressing the concept of a group, English has many expressions, such as a group of, a flock of, a herd of, a pack of, a school of, etc. These words are chosen because of idiomatic usage, a group of students, a flock of sheep, a herd of cows, a pack of wolves. Another example is mentioned when we want to describe the food which has gone bad and is already not fit for eating. Different adjectives are used for different kinds of food, e.g. rotten tomatoes, addled eggs, rancid bacon or butter, sour milk. Insist and persist are synonyms, but the word insist should be followed by the preposition on and the word persist should be followed by the preposition in. Some synonyms have different positions in sentences. For example, both asleep and sleeping refer to falling asleep, while asleep is a postposition attribute and sleeping is a preposition attribute. For example, the sleeping boy and the boy asleep. There are many fixed collocations in English. By knowing as many as possible, you will avoid making grammatical mistakes that will

confuse the listeners or readers.

## **7. In semantic meaning**

Some synonyms differ slightly in what they mean. Some synonyms are semantically different, such as rage, fury, indignation. Indignation is semantically similar to anger, and rage implies a loss of emotional control. Fury is the most semantically powerful of the words, suggesting the out of control of the emotion almost to the point of madness. Indignation has implication that someone feel anger because of some moral reasons. The pair of words amaze and astound is another good example. They have very close meaning when they are compared with the word surprise, but in the meantime, they also have very subtle differences. While amaze suggests confusion and bewilderment, astound suggests difficulty in believing. Understanding the semantic differences between synonyms can help English learners better understand the connotation of English and choose the right words on different occasions.

## **8. Different regional dialects**

These are words with more or less the same meaning used in different regional dialects. British English and American English are the two major geographical varieties of the English language. There are many other geographical varieties of the English language, such as Canadian English, Australian English, Scottish English, Irish English and so on. It is easy for us to find examples of saying the same thing by using different words in the two dialects. Then dialectal synonyms can also be found within British English, or American English itself. For example, girl is called lass or lassie in Scottish dialect, and liquor is called whiskey in Irish dialect.

## **9. The value of learning synonyms**

Since there are a large number of synonyms in English, choosing the right words in practical application will make the meaning more accurate and avoid repetition. Co-occurrence of synonyms in a discourse can help readers to get a complete impression of a passage and the intention of the author, and can also help readers to better comprehend and appreciate the language used by the author. When people use language to communicate, they will cause communication failure because of incorrect choice of words. What one says must fit the situation or context. Choosing the proper words among a great number of synonyms will make language express appropriate and communicate successfully. The first standard for translation is faithfulness. A translator must choose an appropriate expression from many to achieve this target. Therefore, commanding synonyms helps to develop the ability to translate.

English synonyms are a major obstacle for many learners in the process of learning English words. Understanding their differences in the range of meaning, the intensity of meaning, emotional implication, style, collocation, semantic meaning and district will help learners broaden their knowledge of English synonyms, better appreciate the delicate and precise words of the author, and choose the right words according to different contexts in communication.

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