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Research Article

SYNONYMY IN MODERN ENGLISH SLANG

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ABSTRACT

The article delves into the intricate landscape of synonymy within modern English slang, offering a comprehensive exploration of the nuanced variations and overlapping meanings of slang terms. As a dynamic and ever-evolving aspect of language, slang often presents a rich tapestry of words and expressions that exhibit varying degrees of synonymy, reflecting the diversely expressive nature of contemporary colloquial speech. By scrutinizing the phenomenon of synonymy in modern English slang, this article seeks to unravel the subtle shifts in meaning, usage and connotation that underlie the lexicon of slang, shedding light on the fluidity and adaptability of language within informal and subcultural communicative spheres. This investigation aims to unravel the contextual and sociolinguistic underpinnings of synonymy in slang, offering insights into the intricate layers of linguistic innovation, social identity and communicative diversity inherent within modern English slang.

KEYWORDS

Paradigmatic relationships, synonymy, identity, affinity, acronymic formations, similarity, referent, quasi.

INTRODUCTION

It has been stated over and over again that slang, much more so than other language variants, has a tendency towards the creation of a lexicon of its own.

We can anticipate that no generalizations are possible for the whole slang lexicon, but tendencies can be identified within specific areas of slang and for certain slang terms.

Our core hypothesis is that slang refuses the standard organization and either develops a different one, with its own forms, dimensions and interactions among the system components, or substitutes it with disorganization, showing a tendency towards randomness and unpredictability [3, 54].

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The key question from which our research starts is 'How are words, meanings and concepts organized within the slang lexicon?'.

Semantic theories develop various approaches to meaning description and lexical organization. Two approaches which appear particularly relevant to our semantic description view the lexicon as structured into either semantic fields or conceptual frames. Within semantic field theories words applicable to a common conceptual domain are organized within semantic fields by paradigmatic relationships (synonymy, antonymy, hyponymy, meronymy, etc.), called 'meaning (or sense) relations'. Meaning relations connect members of selected sets of lexical items: e.g., the names of the days of the week (Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, etc.) can be defined by means of the 'part of' relationship (meronymy) that they hold to the word naming the entire cycle of seven days, i.e. week [6, 78].

By contrast, within frame semantics, words are not related to each other directly, but by way of their links to common background frames (also called 'domains' or 'knowledge schemata'). That is, in a frame-based description, the above terms would be related to the more complete system of Calendric Terms, including common nouns (day, week), as well as the names of the days (Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, etc.), special categories such as fortnight and week-end, and wider categories (month, year).

Organization enables the system to stay away from total randomness, makes some states impossible or highly improbable given certain constraints, and reduces the overall complexity of the system [8, 15].

Let us now investigate whether the slang lexical system accepts this type of structural organization, and, if so, whether its behaviour is in any way predictable and describable in terms of established meaning relations and regular patterns.

Within an organized lexical area, each lexeme (or micro-system) can be first of all described in terms of its relations with the other system components. Moving from Croft and Cruse, the primary paradigmatic relations that I have found useful for my research include: Relation of identity, similarity or synonymy (X equals Y, as in happy = glad).

Synonymy is a relation of affinity which links two phonologically different words having a very similar meaning. In English slang synonymy is a profuse phenomenon.

1. Heroin (smack, horse, H, Chinese - when combined with cocaine it is called a snowball). May be sniffed, or burned and then inhaled (chasing the dragon) or injected.
2. Cocaine (coke, snow, freebase, crack). Psychologically addictive.
3. LSD (acid, trips, blotters, blue, smileys). A powerful hallucinogen. Few try it more than once.
4. From left to right: amphetamines (or speed); cannabis (grass, marijuana or pot); hashish resin (which is derived from the Indian hemp plant like cannabis) and ecstasy tabs.

Following Lyons, the meaning of an expression (sense) is a property of language, and is not to be equated with the object or concept the expression may be used by speakers to refer to (reference): i.e., the Morning Star and the Evening Star have different meanings (senses)

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but both refer to the planet Venus. Similarly, the slang expressions smack and horse have different senses, but both refer to heroin, i.e. denote heroin in the real world [11, 19].

Extracts above show that each standard drug name (i.e. amphetamines, cannabis, cocaine, heroin, LSD) corresponds to a set of slang terms. For instance, heroin is called Chinese, H, horse or smack by drug addicts, cocaine is often referred to as coke, freebase or snow, and cannabis as grass or pot. Such slang terms can be considered exact, absolute or perfect synonyms because they have the same referent in the real word, belong to the same syntactic category, and are therefore mutually substitutable, or, more precisely, they are interchangeably used in drug addicts' conversations. On the other hand, they are not exact synonyms to the comparable standard English words [13, 98].

5. Tests were being carried out on suspected drugs thought to include heroin, ecstasy, cocaine, LSD and cannabis.

In effect, none of the standard drug names in (5) can be substituted by a slang co-referent without making the sentence appear anomalous, as in Tests were being carried out on suspected drugs thought to include heroin, ecstasy, snow, LSD and cannabis.

Nor are the afore-mentioned slang terms exact synonyms for other slang words used in a different context, which may highlight different shades of meaning. For example, junk, a slang word referring to drugs in general or heroin in particular, assumes negative connotations which are not present in H or smack, and it is in fact used by non-addicts, as in (6):

6. 'It's an article on junk,' he said. 'Junk?' 'Drugs. It's for the features department' [16, 14].

Synonymy in slang is a rather intricate sense relation, and many factors may enter at play when establishing whether or not two slang words are totally synonymous. For instance, the geographical collocation or the origin of the words under examination may determine their perfect (vs. partial, near or quasi) synonymy. In fact, two different regional variants are not mutually substitutable. Compare furphy with scuttlebutt in (7)-(8) below:

7. The persistent rumour that they were introduced to check ragwort is a furphy.

8. The scuttlebutt says their contracts were not yet signed and that the pair were holding out for better terms and conditions.

Both terms have the same meaning/referent - i.e. 'a false report or rumour' - but furphy is Australian slang, while scuttlebutt is American slang, or at least, it was originally. Hence, the two words are not perfect but partial synonyms [20, 73].

On the other hand, motormouth and big mouth, which both originated and are used in American English to mean 'a very talkative or boastful person', are perfect synonyms, as (9)-(10) show:

9. 'Stow it, motormouth,' she said, smiling sheepishly, 'and drink your coffee'.

10. 'You big mouth! Get out! Get out of here!' Another crucial criterion which may determine perfect synonymy is the morphological form of the words. For instance, the two adjectives fubar and snafu meaning

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'confused, messed up' are both American acronymic formations and therefore perfect synonyms:

11. This was my grandfather's and it works just fine... My wristwatch, on the other hand, is still FUBAR.

12. Last week U.S. citizens knew that gasoline rationing and rubber requisitioning were snafu.

Following the same criterion, the lexical phrases dog's breakfast and dog's dinner meaning 'a mess' are likewise synonymous:

13. He can't make head or tail of it... It's a complete dog's breakfast.

14. The influential Georgian Group described the main frontage of the scheme as a dog's dinner yesterday.

And so are the exocentric compounds oddball and screwball used as nouns to denote 'an eccentric or odd person' or, attributively, to mean 'eccentric, strange':

15. Bernie was seen as a bit of an oddball - although not by me.

16. He was a scientist, but whether brilliant or a screwball nobody ever knew.

In delving into the intricacies of "Synonymy in Modern English Slang," this study has revealed a fascinating interplay of linguistic adaptability, cultural resonance, and social identity within informal language usage. Through a nuanced analysis of diverse examples, we have unveiled the dynamic and multifaceted nature of synonymy, showcasing its pivotal role in expressing nuances, diversity, and group affiliations within various linguistic communities. This exploration has not only shed light on the evolving landscape of synonymy in modern English slang but has also underscored its capacity to mirror and influence contemporary cultural nuances. As language continues to serve as a reflection of societal shifts and individual expression, this inquiry contributes to a deeper understanding of linguistic innovation, sociocultural dynamics, and the ever-changing nature of informal language. The study of synonymy in modern English slang stands as a crucial means by which we unravel the rich tapestry of human communication and communal identity, providing insights that resonate deeply within the broader context of language and society.

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