On Synonymy and Definition

In general, it is true that there are no **pure synonyms** – that is, words that can be used completely interchangeably with no effect on the meaning. Perhaps *lawyer* and *attorney* come close in modern American English, though there is an older distinction between them (see, for instance, the discussion at *lawyer* in *Webster's Dictionary of Synonyms*). (And an attorney to me always sounds more expensive than a lawyer.)

There are, however, many, many **near synonyms** in our language. In fact, dictionaries use synonymy (or perhaps more accurately, near synonymy) as one of their four most common methods of definition, the four of which are as follows:

1. **Genus-species**, which is putting the item in the next more general category (that is, giving its genus) and then distinguishing it from other members of that genus (that is, giving its species). Example: throne: "the chair or seat [the genus] occupied by a sovereign, bishop, or other exalted personage on ceremonial occasions, usually raised on a dais and covered with a canopy [the species]." (*RHD*) This is pretty much the classical notion of definition: genus followed by species, generalization followed by specification, inclusion followed by exclusion, similarity followed by difference. Notice that genus-species definitions involve the distinction between superordination and subordination.

2. **Exemplification**, which is giving examples or illustrations. The following definition of *grain* follows up a genus-species definition with exemplification (which is underlined): "a small, hard seed, esp. of the food plants, as wheat, corn, rye, oats, rice, and millet." (*RHD*) Notice that exemplification also involves superordination and subordination.

3. **Synonymy**, which is defining a word with another word, which is then defined elsewhere in the dictionary (surprisingly often with and yet another synonym or even the original word!). The Merriam-

Webster dictionaries (that is *Webster's Third Unabridged* [*W3*] and *Webster's New Collegiate* [*WNC*]) seem to be particularly given to the use of definition through synonymy. An example from *WNC*, the synonyms being given in small full caps: *forward*: "**1 a**: near, being at, or belonging to the forepart **b:** situated in advance **2 a:** strongly inclined : READY **b:** lacking modesty or reserve : BRASH **3 :** notably advanced or developed : PRECOCIOUS" etc.

4. **Analysis**. In addition to the synonyms, the definition of *forward* contains some other defining phrases, such as "lacking modesty or reserve," which could be called "synonymous phrases." But notice that what they do is to analyze out certain features or components of the complex concept referred to by *forward*. Thus "lacking modesty or reserve" analyzes out of *forward* or its synonym *brash* three things: a relationship (*lacking*) and two features, either of which, if lacking, constitute forwardness or brashness -- *modesty* or *reserve*. This making explicit relationships and features that are implicit in the total concept of the word is characteristic of lexical analysis.

In the introduction to the first edition of Webster's Dictionary of Synonyms it says this about synonyms:

A synonym, in this Dictionary, will always mean one of two or more words in the English language which have the same or very nearly the same essential meaning. . . . Synonyms, therefore, are only such words as may be defined wholly, or almost wholly, in the same terms. Usually, they are distinguished from one another by an added implication or connotation, or they may differ in their idiomatic use or in their application. They may be, and usually are, interchangeable within limits, but interchangeability is not the final test, since idiomatic usage is often a preventive of that. The only satisfactory test of synonyms is their agreement in denotation. This agreement is seldom so perfect as to make the words absolutely identical in meaning, but it is always so clear that the two or more words which are synonyms can be defined in the same terms up to a certain point.

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It's probably worthwhile to distinguish between synonymy and a superficially similar operation often called **co-reference**. A common form of co-reference is the use of pronouns: "That **car** messed up again. I couldn't get **it** started this morning." In the second of those two sentences *it* refers to the same thing that the phrase *that car* refers to, but there is no question of *it* and *car* having the same denotation; they just have the same reference. The pronoun is like a finger pointing at the same thing *that car* was used to point at before. Thus co-reference.

Another form of co-reference involves not pronouns, but pro-verbs: "George said he was going to **win** and he **did**." *Did* is a pro-verb in co-reference with *win*. We have other pro-forms, too -- for instance, some very general (and useful) nouns that are almost pronouns, nouns like *stuff* and *thing*: "Conrad loves **pizza**. He can't seem to get enough of **the stuff**." *Pizza* and *stuff* are in co-reference. Another form of co-reference involves what is technically called **polyonymy**, "many names." Sports writers are very fond of polyonymy: "Well, the **Lakers.** did it again! **L.A** beat Detroit in the final half of the final game to win the world championship. **Pat Riley's boys** came through for him when it counted. The **Tinseltowners** just about blew it, and the Pistons put up a good fight, but finally **Los Angeles** did it again." Notice the polyonymy: *L.A., Lakers, Tinseltowners, Los Angeles* – and, though this one is more like an analytical phrase, *Pat Riley's boys*.

Co-reference is like synonymy in that it involves repeated reference to the same concept. But it is unlike synonymy in that the co-referencing terms do not have what *Webster's Dictionary of Synonyms* would call "the same essential meaning." Notice that in the use of pro-forms (pronouns, pro-verbs, and the like) the pro-form is more general than the antecedent: There are more *it's* than cars; more actions get "did" than winning. In the use of polyonymy the co-referencing names are a little different. Names in general -- at least pure names -- work differently from other words in that they don't really have any denotation beyond their reference. But notice

that the different names in our story about the Lakers tend to highlight different aspects of the team: *L.A.* and *Los Angeles* highlight where they are from, as does *Tinseltowners*, which also throws in some glitzy connotations. The phrase *Pat Riley's boys* identifies the coach. *Lakers* is the "purest" name in this string of names.

Key Terms:
synonymy
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near synonyms
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exemplification
definition by analysis
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