

## COGNITIVE SYNONYMY OF THE DESCRIPTIVE ADJECTIVES *THIN* IN ENGLISH; A SEMANTIC STUDY

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### *Abstract*

*This paper aims at analyzing and describing the cognitive synonyms, which appear in the descriptive adjectives thin. The data are collected from British National Corpus in which the researcher searched for some words considered having the same meaning as the word thin. The method applied in this research is qualitative. The goal of our study is also to examine the methods of how the cognitive synonyms are identified towards a special relation between two lexemes or more in which the expressions of those lexemes can all be used in all imaginable contexts of a sentence.*

*Keywords: Semantics, Cognitive Synonymy, Descriptive Adjectives Thin*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Along with sleeping and eating, humans need to talk, communicate and express their preference when they are around the society. Communication is both verbal and non-verbal. Verbal communication means that humans use spoken language to communicate with other people and they could express their feelings, discuss something, tell events in the past and so forth. Non-verbal, however, means that people could use their gestures to show whether they are angry, happy or sad. However, the concern here is linguistic communication. In linguistic communication, humans use language and it is considered as a tool for this purpose of communication. Language is also objects of study in linguistics. By learning linguistics, it can help us to analyze the language.

Linguistics is the study of language in general or specific areas and has many branches of studies. We can study the structure of language and the study of meaning in linguistics. To study meaning it deals with semantics. Semantics is the study of meaning and deals with lexical, sentence and utterance meaning. Lexical meanings includes semantic fields of word, namely synonymy, antonymy, polysemy, metaphor, metonymy, meronymy and so on. Synonymy is the sameness of meaning in language. It could be found in adjectives, noun, adverbs and verbs. In English, we could find many synonymous words. Synonymous words may have exactly the same conceptual meaning, like elevator and lift, gala and festivity, or marvis and thrush (Palmer, 1982: 88). Many synonymous words, however, are not exactly alike in meaning. Some examples of synonymy in adjectives are big and large,

marvelous and astonishing, tiny and small and so forth. In addition, synonymy can appear in the descriptive adjective *thin*.

To make clear the descriptions of a person or things, they can also tell someone and even describe what they have looked, especially the size and the shape of a person's body. People can describe someone's body by describing them with the descriptive adjectives *thin* to refer to someone whose body is with little flesh on the bones or not fat. Sometimes people can say the expressions to describe someone whose body is not fat with *anorexic*, *underweight*, *slim* and *slender* in a given context without changing the truth conditions. Those words, however, do not have the same distribution which prevent them being absolute synonyms for all of those lexemes or the linguists call the terms as cognitive synonymy or propositional synonymy. This paper is aimed at how the words are used in a given context since they all refer to same meaning.

Some previous research inspired the researcher to conduct and analyze the cognitive synonymy of the descriptive adjective *thin*, namely Philip Edmonds at University of Toronto, a dissertation (1999), entitled *Semantic Representations of Near-Synonyms for Automatic Lexical Choice: Computational Linguistics*. This research analyzed the problems of representing near-synonyms in a computational lexicon and show that no previous model adequately accounts for near-synonymy. The research dealing with synonymy is also conducted by Richard Xiao and Tony McEnery (2006) entitled "*Collocation, Semantic Prosody and Near Synonymy: A Cross Linguistic Perspective*". This paper explores the

collocational behaviour and semantic prosody of near synonyms from a cross-linguistic perspective. In this paper also, the researchers undertake a cross-linguistic analysis of collocation, semantic prosody, and near synonymy, drawing upon data from English and Chinese.

## 2. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURES

### 2.1 Semantics

Speakers use language to communicate and it can be understood by their hearers since they comprehend each word and its meaning. The meaning itself is sometimes difficult to define, but the language field concerning on meaning is in semantic knowledge. The following experts of semantic knowledge define semantics based on their explanations.

According to Yule (1996: 4), semantics is the study of the relationships between linguistic forms and entities in the world; that is, how words literally connects to things. Semantic analysis also attempts to establish the relationships between verbal descriptions and states of affairs in the world as accurate (true) or not, regardless of who produces that description.

In line with Yule, Behrens and Parker (2010: 361) argue that semantics is the component of language concerned with the formal linguistic meaning of the words, phrases, and sentences of a language. Semantics is part of the Content component of language.

Based on two statements above, it is clear that semantics is the study of meaning in language and its concern is on the component of language, such as words, phrases and sentences as the formal linguistic meaning. In addition, this research concerns on word meaning, namely synonymy.

### 2.2 Paradigmatic Sense Relation

Since this research is concern on word meaning, namely synonyms it seems best to apply theories related to this research, namely paradigmatic sense relation. Paradigmatic sense relation is applied in this research to analyze how the words can be substituted each other to make sure that they refer to the same syntactic category. Cruse (ibid: 148) states that paradigmatic relations reflect the semantic choices available at a

particular structure point in a sentence. For instance:

- 1) I'll have a glass of \_\_.  
beer  
wine  
water  
lemonade  
etc.

Cruse (ibid: 148) also makes clear that typically paradigmatic relations involve words belonging to the same syntactic category, although not infrequently there are minor differences:

- 2) We bought some \_\_.  
knives  
forks  
spoons  
cutlery

Cruse (2000) divides paradigmatic sense relations into two broad classes, first those which express identity and inclusion between word meanings, and second, those expressing opposition and exclusion. The first is such as hyponymy, meronymy and synonymy and the second is antonymy. Since the focus of the research is concerning on synonymy, we only discuss the theories of synonymy and its parts.

### 2.3 Scales of Synonymy

Cruse (1985, 2000) classifies the scale of synonymy into three types, namely absolute synonymy, cognitive synonymy or also called propositional synonymy and near synonymy. According to Lyons (1995: 50), if lexical items are to be called absolute synonyms, they must satisfy the following three conditions:

- i. *All their meanings are identical;*
- ii. *They are synonymous in all contexts, i.e. they must have the same collocational ranges;*
- iii. *They are semantically equivalent on all dimensions of meaning, descriptive and non-descriptive.*

Cruse (2000: 157) states that absolute synonymy refers to complete identity of meaning. The following will illustrate the difficulty of finding uncontroversial pairs of absolute synonyms ('+' indicates "relatively more normal" and '-' indicates "relatively less normal"):

- 3) *Brave : courageous*

*Little Billy was so brave at the dentist's this morning.* (+)

*Little Billy was so courageous at the dentist's this morning.* (-)

The second type is cognitive synonymy or propositional synonymy or descriptive synonymy. Lyons (1977: 242) claims that descriptive synonyms are words whose basic meaning remains the same after the removal of expressive and social meanings. However, this section seeks to present also other interpretations of this important point on the scale of synonymity.

Cruse (1985: 88) makes clear how cognitive synonymy can be used in the same context by changing lexemes one into another lexeme without changing the truth condition. He asserts that cognitive synonymy in terms of truth-conditions: X is a cognitive synonym of Y if (i) X and Y are syntactically identical, and (ii) any grammatical declarative sentence S containing X has equivalent truth-conditions to another sentence S[1], which is identical to S except that X is replaced by Y. As an example, he considers the pair of cognitive synonyms *fiddle* and *violin* in *He plays the \_ very well*. Moreover, Cruse proceeds on specifying cognitive synonyms from the point of view of 'semantic mode'.

In line with Cruse, Cruse (2000: 158) gives the examples of propositional synonymy, as follows:

- 4) *This was the first time they had had intercourse.*
- 5) *This was the first time they had made love.*
- 6) *This was the first time they had fucked.*

Cruse (ibid) explains that the first version would be more likely than the others in a court of law, the second is probably the most neutral, while the third would be more likely in a typical novel found in an airport bookstall (ibid).

In line with Cruse, Vomend (2002: 8) argues that cognitive synonymy (sometimes called descriptive synonymy, referential synonymy, referential synonymy or propositional synonymy) is a special relation between two lexemes.

Vomend (ibid: 8) gave the examples of cognitive synonymy, such as *fade*, *die*, *decease*, *nibble off*, *kick the bucket*. These expressions can all be used in the same

context without changing the truth-conditions of a sentence. They are however no absolute synonyms because the distribution is not the same for all of those lexemes.

The last type of synonymy is near synonymy or plesionyms. Lyons (1995:60) defines that near-synonyms as expressions that are more or less similar, but not identical in meaning, such as *stream* and *brook*.

Lyons (ibid: 60) insists that near-synonyms should not be confused with 'partial synonyms'. Partial synonyms are, according to Lyons, those lexical items which meet the criterion of identity of meaning but which fail to satisfy the conditions of absolute synonymy. Thence it follows that Lyons' term 'partial synonymy' corresponds to cognitive synonymy.

Cruse (2000:159-60) characterizes the sorts of difference which do not destroy synonymy is no easy matter. As a rough and ready, but not very explicit, generalization it may be said that permissible differences between near-synonyms must be either minor, or backgrounded, or both. Among 'minor' differences may be counted the following:

- 7) *adjacent position on scale of 'degree': fog : mist, laugh : chuckle, hot : scorching, big : huge, disaster : catastrophe, pull : heave, weep : sob, etc.;*
- 8) *certain adverbial specializations of verbs: amble : stroll, chuckle : giggle, drink : quaff;*
- 9) *aspectual distinctions: calm : placid (state vs. disposition);*
- 10) *difference of prototype centre brave (prototypically physical) courageous (prototypically involves intellectual and moral factors)*

Vomend (2002: 8) argues that plesionyms, or near synonyms, are words, that are almost synonyms. They are distinguished from cognitive synonyms by the fact, that the connotations of the pairs are different and therefore they yield different truth conditions in a given context.

### 3. RESEARCH METHOD

The method of analysis in this research will be intended to analyze and describe the cognitive synonymys of the descriptive adjective *Thin* in English. The researcher will apply qualitative method in

this research. Qualitative research is not the method dealing with frequencies or calculations to analyze the data. According to Creswell in Creswell (2009:1), qualitative research is a means for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. The process of research involves emerging questions and procedures, data typically collected in the participant's setting, data analysis inductively building from particulars to general themes, and the researcher making interpretations of the meaning of the data.

In addition, the researcher collects the data from British National Corpus by searching for the words required in this research, namely *anorexic*, *underweight*, *slim* and *slender*. They are considered synonyms in a given context.

#### 4. DISCUSSION

The word *thin* is considered as a descriptive adjective which describes someone whose body is with little flesh on the bones or not fat and can be used interchangeably with other words, such as *skinny*, *anorexic*, *underweight*, *slim* and *slender*. Related to paradigmatic relations of identity and inclusion, these following expressions in which the data are taken from British National Corpus are cognitive synonyms as in the following discussions:

1) *Skinny: thin*

*Take a picture of her head and shoulders. Mm. You'd think she was skinny.*

*Take a picture of her head and shoulders. Mm. You'd think she was thin.*

In the expression above, the descriptive adjectives *skinny* and *thin* can all be used in the same context without changing the truth-conditions of a sentence. These two expressions have the same social meanings in which these words describe someone's body negatively. They are, however, context restricted in use and they failed to be candidate as absolute synonyms since the distribution is not the same for all of these lexemes.

2) *Anorexic: thin*

*That's right yes from twenty I read that, so, did she. She could of died like you know, so they had to She became anorexic then did she?*

*That's right yes from twenty I read that, so, did she. She could of died like you know, so they had to She became thin then did she?*

In the expression above, the descriptive adjectives *anorexic* and *thin* can all be used in the same context without changing the truth-conditions of a sentence. These two expressions differ in almost purely one of fields of discourse: *thin* is used to describe someone whose body is with little flesh on the bones and the everyday term, with no special expressive or stylistic loading, whereas *anorexic* is used by medical terms or neutral term in social meaning. Again they are, however, context restricted in use and they failed to be candidate as absolute synonyms since the distribution is not the same for all of these lexemes.

3) *Underweight: thin*

*He was underweight for age at birth and had been placed in an incubator for ten days after a difficult delivery.*

*He was thin for age at birth and had been placed in an incubator for ten days after a difficult delivery.*

In the expression above, they denote that the descriptive adjectives *underweight* and *thin* can all be used in the same context without changing the truth-conditions of a sentence. These two expressions have the same social meanings in which both words describe someone's body negatively. They are, however, context restricted in use and they failed to be candidate as absolute synonyms since the distribution is not the same for all of these lexemes.

4) *Slim: thin*

*Sara was slim and pretty with long, straight hair, good bone structure and no make-up.*

*Sara was thin and pretty with long, straight hair, good bone structure and no make-up.*

In the expression above, they denote that the descriptive adjectives *slim* and *thin*

can all be used in the same context without changing the truth-conditions of a sentence. These two expressions differ in social meaning or expressive meaning: *thin* is used to describe someone whose body is with little flesh on the bones negatively and the everyday term, with no special expressive or stylistic loading, whereas *slim* is used to describe someone whose body is attractively thin and considered more polite.

Again they are, however, context restricted in use and they failed to be candidate as absolute synonyms since the distribution is not the same for all of these lexemes.

5) *Slender: thin*

She was ***slender*** and very fair with long golden hair and as unlike as possible any Naulls that had ever been.

She was ***thin*** and very fair with long golden hair and as unlike as possible any Naulls that had ever been.

In the expression above, they denote that the descriptive adjectives *slender* and *thin* can all be used in the same context without changing the truth-conditions of a

sentence. These two expressions differ in social meaning, or expressive meaning, or stylistic loading: *thin* is used to describe someone whose body is with little flesh on the bones negatively and the everyday term, with no special expressive or stylistic loading, whereas *slender* is used to describe someone whose body is thin and delicate often in a way that is attractive or polite. Again they are, however, context restricted in use and they failed to be candidate as absolute synonyms since the distribution is not the same for all of these lexemes.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The present research investigates cognitive synonymy of the descriptive adjectives *thin* in English and the results of this research are that the expressions, such as *skinny*, *anorexic*, *underweight*, *slim* and *slender* are synonymous with *thin* and can all be used in the same context without changing the truth-conditions. They are cognitive synonyms, because the distribution is not the same for all of those lexemes and differs in expressive meaning, presupposed field of discourse or stylistic level, so that they fail to be the candidate as absolute synonyms.

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