Sameness of meaning in a bilingual dictionary

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Outline

- Rationale for choice of topic
- Equivalence, synonymy, sameness
- Synonym types and their relevance to BL
- Genuine sameness of meaning in BD (selected types)
- Postscript – Glimpse into the future
Rationale

- Changes in lexicography as we know it
  - introspection-based $>$ corpus-based
  - decontextualised $>$ contextualised
  - print $>$ electronic
  - visible $>$ invisible
- Time to take stock of the traditional BL model before it disappears
Equivalence, synonymy, sameness

- Equivalents ~ interlingual synonyms (& v.v.)

- Equivalence ≠ sameness because of... interlingual anisomorphism

- Synonymy ≠ sameness because... distinctiveness is raison d’être of words

- Question: assuming it can be found at all, where is sameness more likely? Why?
equivalence: [t]he usual situation is that the respective meaning of the lexical unit of the target language is only partly identical with that of its counterpart in the source language (Zgusta 1971)

synonymy: similarity/identity of meaning between senses associated with two (or more) different lexical forms (Cruse 2002)
Synonyms are words with identical or partly identical referential range, but different semantic ranges. That is to say, they denote the same referents, but each word denotes it in an aspect that somehow differs from the others. When a speaker wants to denote a referent, he is practically always seeing it in a peculiar context, into which one of the synonyms may fit, but not necessarily the others (Stern 1931).
Perfect synonymy?

Often denied or questioned: such synonyms ‘never occur in real life’ (Bolinger 1977), are ‘rare’ (Stern 1931), ‘rather rare’ (Zgusta 1971), ‘vanishingly rare’ (Cruse 2002), or ‘exceedingly rare’ (Murphy 2013)

Exception – Apresjan (1974, 2000): intralingual sameness of meaning is quite common, though not in the standard literary language
Synonym types

- absolute (a.k.a. complete or exact)
- cross-varietal
- propositional (a.k.a. descriptive)
- near-synonyms (a.k.a. quasi-synonyms or plesionyms)

Most are situated in the last category, between sameness of meaning at one end and heteronymy at the other.
Absolute synonymy

Lyons (1968): complete synonyms (identical in both their cognitive and emotive meaning) vs total synonyms (interchangeable in all contexts; either complete or not) – 3 classes of candidates

Highest possible degree of synonymy?

Lyons’ complete (but not total) = Cruse's absolute, Apresjan's exact
Propositional synonymy

If one sentence, S1, implies another sentence, S2, and if the converse also holds, S1 and S2 are equivalent ... If now the two equivalent sentences ... differ from one another only in that where one has lexical item $x$, the other has $y$, then $x$ and $y$ are synonymous (Lyons 1968)

E.g. *start*: *begin*: *commence*
Propositional synonymy

Dictionaries commonly use descriptive synonymy (or something even weaker) as a criterion of equivalence, which is why a dictionary can be a dangerous weapon in the hands of a foreign learner (Cruse 1990)

\[
\text{die: pass away} \quad \text{commence: kick off}
\]

\[
\text{knee-cap: patella} \quad \text{brave: courageous}
\]

\[
\text{concerning: about}
\]
Cross-varietal synonymy

It is possible, and possibly useful, to create a degree of synonymy intermediate between absolute ... and propositional synonymy ... [I]t is in principle possible for two words belonging to two different varieties to be identical in all other respects. The extreme case of this would of course be exact translational equivalents in two distinct languages (Cruse 2002)

E.g. *glen*: *valley*
Near-synonyms

They share central features of meaning but differ in respect of peripheral ones; they are intuitively recognisable, even by untrained speakers, and identifiable by the *or rather* test (Cruse 2002)

*He was murdered, or rather, executed.*

*The concert started, or rather, began, punctually.*

*This is a cat, or rather, a dog.*
synonyms must have the same or very nearly the same essential meaning

they can be defined wholly or almost wholly in the same terms

they are distinguished by an added implication or connotation or by their idiomatic use

they are interchangeable only within limits
Crucial point of agreement

... between (most) lexicographers and lexical semanticists:

- The criterion for synonymy should be sameness of definitions, not substitutability in context

(a word’s co-occurrence features are determined not only by its meaning but also by other factors, some of which are purely a matter of chance or tradition)
Relevance to BDs?

Due to anisomorphism, most dictionary equivalents resemble near-synonyms.

Question: are there any equivalents which would correspond to perfect (i.e., in this case, cross-varietal) synonyms? If so, in which areas of the lexicon should we look for them?

(Answers inspired by Apresjan 1974)
Intralingual sameness

- Foreign influence:
  - specialised lexis
  - recent borrowings
- Expressive lexis

(strong tendency in those areas to renew lexical resources plus little pressure for semantic differentiation due to low frequency of individual items)
Specialised lexis

E.g. *caecitis*: *typhlitis*

(the more specialised the lexical item, the greater the likelihood of semantically identical terminological alternatives, both intra- and interlingually; with classical loans, the boundary between the two becomes fluid)
BrE *aubergine*: AmE *eggplant*
*cross-varietal synonyms*

Pol. *oberżyna*: *bakłażan*
*absolute synonyms*

Combined, these produce four perfect equivalence pairs. More pairs are possible where there are more intralingual synonyms (e.g. mushroom names in Polish)
Recent borrowings

Sameness of headword and equivalent likely if the former is the direct (recent) source of the latter

Examples from English-Polish BDs:

*cheerleader* – *cheerleaderka*

*G-string* – *stringi*

*camp* – *kamp n, kampowy adj*
Expressive lexis I

Expressive force weakens with frequent use, hence dynamic lexical renewal (sometimes leading to overlexicalisation)

Vendryes (1921): names of disagreeable noises, wild or magical animals (taboo), informal words for money

Frequent mechanism: one-time euphemisms ultimately form a cluster of near-synonyms
Parallel synonymic developments:

A word X with a meaning A, develops from this a meaning B. Thereupon a word Y, also with the meaning A, a synonym, being associated with X, likewise develops the meaning B (Kroesch 1926)

Fr. *chiquер* ‘beat’ developed the sense ‘deceive’; its near-synonyms (*torcher, taper, estamper, toquer, craquer*) followed suit
Expressive lexis II

Stern (1931): analogy need not be postulated; parallel synonymic developments are due simply to synonyms occurring in similar contexts (e.g. adverbs meaning ‘rapidly’ often develop the sense ‘immediately’)

Question: Are expressive synonyms absolute?

Apresjan: YES
Cruse: NO (merely descriptive)
Expressive lexis

Interlingually, semantic identity in this area is even more controversial

E.g. plenty of words in different lgs meaning ‘very big’, ‘stupid’, ‘mad’, ‘drunk’, etc – are they to be treated as perfect equivalents or is it merely our inability to tease out the differences and identify the true equivalent pairs among the multitude?
Likely future developments in BL:

- the structuralist model will be abandoned in favour of one which rejects the idea of a stable system-internal structure of sense relations, emphasising instead the context-dependence of synonymy

- sameness will be sought where it is more likely, i.e. between units larger than individual lexical items
References

Lyons, J. 1968. *Introduction to Theoretical Linguistics*. CUP.
Murphy, L. M. 2013. ‘What We Talk About When We Talk About Synonyms (and what it can tell us about thesauruses)’. *IJL*.