Facultad de Filología

A Preliminary Corpus-based Diachronic Analysis of the Behavioral Profile of a Set of Near-synonyms in American English

Trabajo Fin de Máster

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1. INTRODUCTION

Lexical semantics has been the object of study of numerous researchers working in the field of linguistics. However, lexical meaning has been approached from several different perspectives, and there is no general agreement as to how it should be studied. The term 'meaning' is in itself subject to controversy. Most people have a general idea of what it means to know a word. Nonetheless, if one contemplates for a moment what is actually meant when saying that we know the meaning of a given word, it becomes clear that 'meaning' is not as straightforward a term as it may seem at first sight. Does knowing the meaning of a word imply knowing its dictionary definition/s? Does it imply knowing all the senses of that word, or is it sufficient to know just some of them? Is knowledge about how that word is used in context required? Do we need to have information concerning the registers and fields of discourse in which it is used and with which words it typically co-occurs? When asked to explain the meaning of a word, language users normally do so by recurring to its synonyms, and/or by numbering the semantic features that it shares with semantically related words, ignoring other aspects of meaning such as connotation, style, and collocation (Hatch & Brown: 1995: 1-2).

Although the field of semantics has received much attention on the part of theorists, research conducted on synonymy is rather scarce. This semantic relation has often been left aside in the specialized literature, as it has not been considered intriguing enough. As Edmonds and Hirst (2002: 106) put it, "synonymy has often been thought of as a "non-problem": either there are synonyms, but they are completely identical in meaning and hence easy to deal with, or there are no synonyms, in which case each word can be handled like any other". Nevertheless, synonymy is a complex linguistic

phenomenon and language users seem to be puzzled by it.[1] Synonyms have proven to be useful when defining and explaining the meaning of words, and people typically turn to thesauri in search for suitable synonyms to acquire textual coherence and to avoid repeating themselves when writing. These dictionaries of synonyms do, however, only take some of the various existing dimensions of meaning into consideration, preventing users from fully comprehending how two or more lexical items are to be differentiated. Consequently, the data included in thesauri, despite offering valuable information about the similarities of lexical items, do not provide a comprehensive view of the differences existing between words, which makes it difficult to appreciate whether two potential synonyms can be freely interchangeable in a particular context. To provide a complete picture of how pairs or sets of synonyms differ as regards meaning and usage patterns it is necessary to uncover their internal semantic structure. This can only be done by taking into account the dimensions of meaning as, for instance, style and collocation, which often tend to be overlooked or forgotten.

1.1 AIMS

The present master dissertation, which is a preliminary corpus-based behavioral profile (henceforth BP) study examines the competition and usage patterns of the attributive uses of the following set of adjective near-synonyms in American English from a diachronic perspective with data from the *Corpus of Historical American English* (henceforth *COHA*): *perfumed*, *fragrant*, *scented*, and *sweet-smelling*.[2] My main

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[1] It is important to highlight that I am referring here to near-synonymy, as opposed to absolute or full synonymy, since the former abounds in languages. For a distinction between these two types of synonymy, see section 3.1 below. Throughout this dissertation I will employ the terms 'synonym'/'synonymy' and 'near-synonym'/'near-synonymy' interchangeably, since, as will become clear, absolute synonymy is very infrequent in natural languages, if it exists at all.

[2] Although *fragranced* is listed in some dictionaries and thesauri as synonymous with the set under consideration here, this adjective has been excluded from my analysis on the basis of the following

objective is to analyze the lexical items' collocational behavior throughout the history of American English. This is done with the intention of unfolding their distributional patterns and fine-grained aspects of meaning, information which is indispensable in order to establish differences between the near-synonyms, but which is not provided in dictionaries of synonyms and thesauri. As Edmonds and Hirst state "none [of the thesauri and dictionaries] captures the fine-grained meaning of, and differences between, near-synonyms, nor the myriad of criteria involved in lexical choice" (2002: 106).

Near-synonyms have shown to share the same denotational core meaning, but to differ when it comes to peripheral aspects of the denotational meaning or to other types of meaning (e.g. connotation, style, and collocation).[3] The following statement by Liu (2010) serves as a point of departure:

> Synonymy or near-synonymy is a common yet complex linguistic phenomenon. While synonyms express basically the same concept, they often do so in different fashions, for different contexts, and/or from different perspectives. In other words, synonyms are often not identical in meaning and hence not completely interchangeable. (2010: 56)

Nevertheless, when looking for alternative words in a thesaurus, synonyms typically seem completely identical and substitutable, since these dictionaries normally include solely the denotational meaning of words. Besides, the definitions provided for these semantically equivalent words are often nearly —even completely— identical, making the words seem undistinguishable. On some occasions lexicographers define words in terms of their synonyms, which further hinders distinguishing between words. Seeing that this reduction in the semantic properties of lexical items is a recurrent problem in dictionaries and that the internal semantic structure of synonyms has not received much

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reasons: (i) the majority of the dictionaries consulted do not include an individual entry for this adjective, (ii) several dictionaries point out that it is rare, and (iii) it is not attested in *COHA*, which can be taken as evidence that it is very infrequent in English.

[3] Cf. Section 2.1 below for a general description of these different dimensions of meaning.

attention in the specialized literature, further research is required to clarify how specific pairs or sets of synonyms work in terms of usage patterns and nuances of meaning. This is certainly necessary to provide a more accurate and satisfactory description of this semantic relation in the future.

1.2 STRUCTURE

To conduct this study, a general overview of semantics and synonymy is provided in chapters 2 and 3, respectively. When dealing with semantics, aspects such as the complexity of meaning and polysemy are introduced. The relation of synonymy is then described to provide an understanding of what is here understood as synonymy, thus introducing different types of synonymy as well as the various ways in which synonyms can vary. In chapter 4, I briefly explain the corpus-based BP approach, which is followed in this dissertation. This is done by reviewing some of the previous studies on synonymy which have made use of this approach as well as by explaining the most important contributions of these studies. Chapter 5, in turn, is concerned with the existing dictionary descriptions of the four selected adjectives: fragrant, perfumed, scented, and sweet-smelling. Here, I briefly introduce the dictionaries and thesauri used and explain the motivations for choosing this set of near-synonyms. In the last part of the dissertation (chapter 6) I analyze the overall frequency and the collocational behavior of the aforementioned near-synonyms in American English from a diachronic perspective with data from COHA, which covers the period 1810-2009. In this light, this study aims at establishing a)their frequency in the different sub-periods (henceforth SP) in COHA, b) their semantic development in collocational behavior over the period 1810-2009, and c) their different usage patterns, nuances, and behavior, as regards collocational meaning. The results obtained will hopefully contribute valuable

information for the elaboration of future thesauri and dictionaries of synonyms by elucidating the nuances of meaning of the selected lexical items and by shedding useful light on the differences existing among them.