

**ANA-MARIA TOADER**



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**Teaching synonymy  
through interesting activities**



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## ABSTRACT

The scientific paper “*Synonymy: Teaching it through Interesting Activities*” focuses on the semantic relation of synonymy and how it can be taught through all kinds of challenging means and exercises as this is of particular interest for me as a teacher of English at secondary level.

Synonymy is largely detailed beginning with an analysis of stylistic synonyms which means that synonyms often differ stylistically. Then contextual and partial synonyms are also dealt with. Contextual synonymy allows for the possibility that lexically simple expressions may have the same meaning as lexically complex expressions. As far as partial synonyms are concerned, they are taken into consideration starting from the difference which exists between near-synonyms and absolute synonyms. Euphemisms are also addressed since they are a variety of periphrasis, one that is used to replace an unpleasant word or phrase by a conventionally more acceptable one.

Then, as it has been proved that the use of semantic relations among words helps students to understand difficult words and enrich their vocabulary, a whole chapter is dedicated to teaching vocabulary through synonymy.



## INTRODUCTION

For thousands of years philosophers have been pondering what makes meaning clear, yet speakers of a certain language can understand what is said to them and can produce meaningful strings of words. To understand a language we have to know the meaning of words and morphemes that compose them, we must also know how the meanings of words combine into phrases and sentence meanings and finally, we must interpret the meaning of utterances in the context in which they are made. Learning a language includes learning the agreed-upon meanings of certain strings of sounds and learning how to combine them into larger units that also convey meaning. We are not free to change the meaning of these words at will and the meaning of a word can only be understood and learnt in terms of its relationship with other words in the language.

The purpose of this scientific paper is to thoroughly analyse the important semantic relation among words of synonymy, also dealing with teaching synonymy through interesting activities as its title suggests.

Chapter one analyses in detail the relation of synonymy and the case of stylistic synonyms showing the way in which synonyms can differ stylistically. For instance “*steed*” and “*nag*” have the same conceptual sense but belong to different styles of English: the former is poetic and rather archaic, the latter is slang. Also taken into consideration within this chapter is the case of contextual synonyms and partial synonyms and

then a short presentation of euphemisms- words or phrases used to replace an unpleasant word or phrase by a conventionally more accepted one, for example: the word “*to die*” has bred the following euphemisms: “*to pass away, to expire, to be no more, to depart, to join the majority*”- is made as euphemisms represent a special kind of synonymy.

Chapter two presents types of exercises based on synonymy, exercises that can be used in class at any time.

Chapter three is about teaching vocabulary through synonymy taking into account the theoretical framework of teaching synonymy through the basic skills of English: reading, writing, speaking. Though the problem about the use of synonym exercises is that some linguists wonder whether there is really such a thing as “true synonymy”.

## CHAPTER 1. SEMANTIC RELATIONS AMONG WORDS: SYNONYMY

The meaning of a word can only be understood and learnt in terms of its relationship with other words in the language. According to Saussure, words are signs consisting of a sound image, or signifier, and a sense image, or signified. The complete sound is used to refer to the outside world in some way; this constitutes its “reference”. Some signs have a strong reference- nouns and verbs- whilst some only have a weak reference- conjunctions and prepositions. But, in addition, individual signs are also related to each other. Bearing in mind the two halves of the sign, there are two principal ways in which they may be related. First, the sound images may be the same, or similar. There are lots of words in English which sound the same but which have a totally different and unrelated sense. The technical term for them is **homophones**, for example *vain/ vein, air/ heir, whether/ weather*.

The second way in which signs may be related is in terms of their senses. It is here that the concept of semantic space is so useful. Each sign, by virtue of its relationships with other signs, occupies a certain amount of territory in the linguistic system. The total extent of this territory is referred to by Saussure as the sign’s “value”. The senses of words, both conceptual and associative, are constantly adjusting to the presence of new words and the absence of old ones.

**Synonyms** are different phonological words which have the same or very similar meanings. Although,

theoretically, it is possible for two words to be completely synonymous, that is to say, identical, it is very rare for this to happen. Total synonymy would mean that words were interchangeable in all linguistic environments. Such is the nature of language, however, that there is invariably some difference. If two words were synonymous on every occasion, there would be little need to have them both in the language.

The issue of perfect synonymy is indeed problematic; as an illustration, let's consider the following pair of sentences which have very similar meanings:

*He is sitting on the sofa.*

*He is sitting on the couch.*

Some individuals prefer to use *sofa* instead of *couch*, but if they know the two words, they will understand both sentences and interpret them to mean essentially the same thing. The degree of semantic similarity between words depends to a great extent on the number of semantic properties they share. *Sofa* and *couch* refer to the same object and share most of their semantic properties.

There are words that are neither synonyms nor near synonyms yet have many semantic properties in common. *Man* and *boy* refer to male individuals; the meaning of *boy* includes the additional semantic property of "youth" whereby it differs from the meaning of *man*.

Some other examples of synonyms might be the pairs below:

1. *die/pass away*

2. *chap/ bloke*