Substitutability as Distributive Criterion of Synonymity

Through the Example of Words ‘Way’ and ‘Road’ in the Russian Lexical System

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Abstract—The difficulty of differentiating such synonyms as way and road in the lexical system of Russian exists not just in the linguistic consciousness of Russian speaker—it is present in the theoretic studies of complex relationship between these words and in lexicographic practice as well. The article reviews how the distributive criterion of synonymity—the possibility (or impossibility) of synonymic pairs to substitute for one another in certain contexts—can serve as the basis for distinguishing their differentiating features.

Keywords—synonymy; road; way; distributive criterion; synonyms substitutability; lexical dichotomy

I. INTRODUCTION

The contemporary Russian standard language is distinct in richness and verve of the means of expression. The presence of rich synonymy, to which many scholars’ works are being dedicated, diversifies its lexical resource furthermore. Scientific linguistic theories, in turn, are finding their application in the development results of methodologists-practitioners, who teach Russian as a foreign language and, while teaching, pursue to give the most precise definition does not require synonyms’ match or partial similarity of their combinability or constructions, wherein they are used, as well as the match of their stylistic property” and draws the conclusion that “the substitutability makes (their synonyms) property, frequent but not obligatory” [3].

Later many researchers began to adduce another, “weak distributive criterion of synonymity – the condition of synonyms’ partial substitutability in the contexts or context types”, whereof Yu.D. Apresian reports in his work “Lexical semantics. Synonymic means of language”, worthily considered nowadays to be one of the most in-depth studies in the synonymy field. (Yu.D. Apresian) [3].

“Dictionary of Russian synonyms” of Z.E. Aleksandrova defines as follows: “Synonyms are words that have one and the same lexical meaning, differing just in shades of it, in vibrant colour, and belonging to this or that stylistic environment with specific reference. The lines of the greatest Russian poet M.Yu. Lermontov:

Alone, I come onto a road,
Flinty way all glistens through the fog...

In recent years, the criterion of substitutability was constantly criticized, changed and amended. Along with scientific progress, the criterion of delineating synonyms was constantly criticized, changed and amended. The thesis “Semantics. Certain aspects of the study of synonymic relations in the language system” by L.P. Abdulakhakova is specifying that the first specialists studying the synonymy had viewed the substitutability ‘either as the synonyms’ base attribute or as a device, a mean, a method of delineating synonyms, forming the framework of their qualification” (A.P. Yevgenyeva) [1][2].

II. SUBSTITUTABILITY AS SYNONYMS CRITERIA

There are various wordings in the contemporary linguistics answering which words can be called synonyms. Among scientific progress, the criterion of delineating synonyms was constantly criticized, changed and amended.

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III. POSSIBILITY OR IMPOSSIBILITY OF THE SYNONYMS ‘WAY’ AND ‘ROAD’ TO INTERCHANGE IN SIMILAR CONTEXTS

Let us consider the synonyms ‘way’ and ‘road’ in their capacity to displace each other in similar contextual environment with specific reference. The lines of the greatest Russian poet M.Yu. Lermontov:

Alone, I come onto a road,
Flinty way all glistens through the fog...
are clearly showing the way and road are synonyms that may denote the same object [5].

The lines of another beloved of all creation “To Nurse” by A.S. Pushkin are validating this:

You are look through forgotten gates
Onto a black long-distance way...

wherein the way substitutes road in the meaning of material object that possesses ‘physical’ traits [6].

Such examples suggest a simple and comprehensible synonymic relationship of the words road and way. Scholars A.I. Golovnya from Belarus and Yan Xinxin from China are writing: “As is known, the meaning of lexical items way and road have much in common. And sometimes they can no longer be distinguished—commonly, they are interchangeable” [7].

Some dictionaries also insist on a perfect substitutability of these notions, for instance, Dictionary of synonyms under the editorship of Z.E. Aleksandrova and the student's dictionary Lexical base of Russian language [8] [9].

Stressing this case in her article “Contents of the concept way / road according to the vocabulary research” O.E.Bespalova, still points to “an insufficient moving apart of similar definitions in lexical practice” and “to the difficulty in their localization in the lexical system of Russian language, and, as a consequence, in the linguistic consciousness of Russian speakers” [10].

Indeed, in spite of an apparent simplicity, habitualness and high enough frequency of the synonyms way and road usage, the words’ relationship stay half-revealed in the lexical system of Russian language.

It is important that responsible scholars discreetly argue in their works, pertaining to the study of these synonyms, along their comparison and prefer using such words as usually, oftentimes, ofteren, commonly, high accentuation etc.

For instance, E.V. Guseva, speaking in her dissertation on the distinctions between the words way and road, is describing them in the following way:

1) The lexical item road is being often applied to material objects, while way involves the process of man's spiritual dynamics;

2) The road concept contains high accentuation on the substantive existence of an object of corporeal reality; the lexical item way is semantically inconceivable without the subject of movement;

3) The lexical dichotomy road/way may be compared to the categorial opposition ‘profane/sacred’, which is implemented in the following formula “Road – for everyone, way – for the few”;

4) Road is neutral in terms of lexical expression, while the way – marked [11].

Another renowned researcher N.D. Arutyunova, reasoning on these synonyms’ relationship, writes “in the semantics of road emphasis is given to the spatial-concept aspect of the situation, while in the meaning of way – to the temporal-dynamic” [12].

No less meticulous about her statements is S.V. Svobotova, saying the analysed in the research concepts of road and way “oftentimes operate as interchangeable synonyms” [13].

While the records of thesauruses claim the words way and road coincide in almost all their meanings, the specific examples show they not always can interchange each other without semantic or stylistic changes in text. Thus, in the sentence “All alone I come onto the road…” it is impossible to substitute road with way (“All alone I come onto the way…”), since, if to speak in the context of contemporary cognitive linguistics, way and road are relatable to different mental presentations in the cognition of Russian native speaker. And from this standpoint road suggests itself as an object existing apart from the subject, while way, by contrast, “beside certain expanse of way, also suggests a subject of the way, a wayfarer accomplishing the labour of covering this space – actual or ideal, imaginable” (E.S. Mikitchenko) [14].

Since way is always somebody else’s, which is proved by the frequency of this word usage with the possessive pronouns my, your, his, rarely our (“our way ran along a narrow but straight as a ruler, country road…” (A.P. Chekhov), it belongs to man's mental world, while road – to the appearance of his life (“The way is where there is a road. It is ample where it is well-trodden” (V.I. Dal) [15] [16]. The way concept, as used ‘in the values context of a subject’ (N.E. Mikhailova), expresses one’s personal ambition, movement or development: “The fear had gone and I could continue my way further on” (A.P. Chekhov) [15] [17].

Road exists for all. Many people can concurrently move down the road, therefore, the indication of me being presently alone on a road is essential for the description of the suggested scene. Conversely, way is individual, personal and, therefore it is exuberant to say, “I'm alone on my way, because the road, indeed, is just mine realisation and I am the only one who can make my way.” Invidiousness of such statements, according to researcher V.S. Li, “is due to the operation of semantic congruence laws that, beside the implementation of notional concord, require neutralization of semantic redundancy, or semantic tautology” [18]. Someone can repeat my (or like mine, way), follow my way, but only I can ‘make = implement my way'. In the earlier quoted sentence the word group ‘our way’ implies that a group of people is being united by common goals and acts as one entity; therefore, when personal ambitions, ideals, goals (etc.) of such group members cease to coincide, it is said that ‘they split ways’.

Again, it is natural to apply in this context the noun road without the definitive (“All alone I come onto a road…” while the usage of the word way (in the meaning of material object that can be seen, perceived, touched) in combination with the definitive is subject to a certain forbidding in the system of Russian language. For instance, it is possible to find rural way, look into a black far-distance way, or go along a gravelly (stony) way etc. Yet, in the following...
examples, the first and the third sentences look natural but every second sentence sounds dissonant:

“I walked along the road” / * “I walked along the way” / “I walked along the way washed out by rain”;

“Sliding off from the cart, the clothes fell onto the road” / * “Sliding off from the cart, the clothes fell onto the way” / “Sliding off from the cart, the clothes fell onto a rural way”;

“I’m looking through the open gates at the road” / * “I’m looking through the open gates at the way” / “You’re looking through the forgotten gates into a black long-distance way” (“To Nurse” A.S. Pushkin) [19].

If, however, we come across the usage of the lexical item way without the definitive,

1) Its different meaning is being actualized – ‘to walk’ or ‘to make a trip’, ‘to travel’: “In the morning he got under headway”;

2) Or the terminological application of this word is possible, such as, for instance “laying (rail)ways from scattered rails”), “metro way”: “During trains traffic the impact on (rail)ways, beside the vertical force, includes the force directed along the way” [20]. Journalists, however, try to avoid in public speech the usage of the way word without the definitive and, talking about the metro (rail)ways to avoid in public speech the usage of the word way without the definitive,

3) Anthropological – for the purpose of reflection of the man’s inner world and his existence in the world—journey as the way of development, change, perfection, self-fulfilment by man as the self-identity experience (‘life journey’, ‘margins of the society’, ‘homelessness’).

In his thesis “Global network and cyberculture: postmodern context”, following distinguished French philosophers Deleuze and Guattari, D.Phil. V.A. Yemelin (MSU) compares the contemporary man—the infosphere subject—to an ancient nomad who remains motionless and, without leaving the spot, travels in a chair in front of a computer rather than in the saddle. Mentally, he is never in the place, and his continual availability ("online") equates with homelessness [23].

Therefore, road, as a certain tangible formation, which appears in the result of man’s activity and dispatches particular practical mission, gradually evolves at a particular stage of human development into ‘the spiritual phenomenon of culture’ and starts to act as an ‘element of its semantic space’, ‘the constituent of sense generative process’. ‘The cultural element ‘road’ assumes ambivalence, as reflected in the lexical-semantic dichotomy ‘road/way’ (E.V. Guseva) [11].

The fine art expert Paola Volkova is analysing the landscape on Leonardo Da Vinci’s picture “Portrait of Mona Lisa del Giaconda (“known as “Mona Lisa”) on her online lecture in this way: “... and to the left in here rear we see another token of a certain long gone and totally lost civilization – a road. The road sweeps round her back. It begins somewhere behind her back and ends somewhere far off. We do not know its beginning, or its end. As if this road, this way… This is not even a road—this is the way. This is not a laid road. That is especially common for Italian landscapes – the road as a way. While the way is infinite. We can see there just one fragment of the way…” (Paola Volkova) [24].

As it can be seen, there is an explicit contraposition at this point, opposites accompanying each side of the dichotomy come to light: road – limitation, way – infinity;
road – corporeality, way – virtuality. Researcher A.A. Bragina in her thesis “Synonyms and their interpretation” stresses the importance of existence of such distinctive features in the synonymic system: “Synonyms are being interconnected through closeness of meanings, and in their functioning, however, the leading role belongs to the distinctive-differentiating meaning shades” [25]. Works are showing that if a context requires semantic accentuation of one of the dichotomy parts or suggests complete separation of one of its members, the choice bases on the model below “Table I”:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ROAD</th>
<th>WAY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Destined place</td>
<td>Impassibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Designated route</td>
<td>Free</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plane (two-dimensionality)</td>
<td>Volume (tridimensionality)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technosphere</td>
<td>Ecosphere</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reliability</td>
<td>Danger</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regularity</td>
<td>Variability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stability</td>
<td>Unsteadiness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Precision</td>
<td>Ambiguity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independence of existence</td>
<td>Part of the subject of movement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tangible object</td>
<td>Ideal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finality</td>
<td>Infinity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Individual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For followers</td>
<td>For partlfinders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical</td>
<td>Spiritual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Profane</td>
<td>Sacred</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For everyone</td>
<td>Exclusive</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Accordingly, the bonds between the lexical items way and road turn out conjugate both in correspondence and in oppositional relations, concurrently staying the constituents of a certain holistic unity. Notably, the oppositional relations are somewhat being woven into the equivalence relations, being virtually latent for the speakers.

This makes another cause for the complicatedness of interrelations of the synonyms road and way, specified by E.N. Rudnev ‘both as antinomy and conceptual unity, the core of which is formed by the same word-symbols’. He calls road ‘an invariant of way, its visual specifier’ [25].

V. CONCLUSION

Consequently, we observe that the relationship of the words road and way is aptly demonstrating the ability of human reasoning to assimilate any phenomenon through the poles of dual opposition, to show its sense by reference, opposition and releasing of the contradiction through the focus of overcoming such opposition, as also reflected in language in the synonymy effect, in the duality of synonyms usage in speech. The mission of linguists’ future research is to straighten out the complex nature of relations of the synonyms way and road, amongst other things applying the synonymy distributive criterion.

REFERENCES


