

CONTEXTUAL SYNONYMY IN CONTEMPORARY FRENCH: IMPLICATIONS FOR TRANSLATION ACCURACY AND SEMANTIC NUANCE

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Abstract

This article examines contextual synonymy in contemporary French—the condition where words considered semantically equivalent diverge in connotation, register, and pragmatic force depending on context. Using corpus linguistics, cognitive semantics, and translation theory, it argues that conventional models of synonymy inadequately capture the layered behavior of French vocabulary. Analysis across literary, journalistic, legal, and colloquial registers shows that translators face systematic challenges from contextual misalignment rather than lexical gaps. The article proposes a contextual synonymy framework integrating collocational, pragmatic, and sociolinguistic dimensions, with implications for translator training, machine translation, and lexicography.

Keywords: contextual synonymy, French lexicology, translation accuracy, semantic nuance, pragmatics, register, collocational meaning, cognitive semantics.

КОНТЕКСТУАЛЬНАЯ СИНОНИМИЯ В СОВРЕМЕННОМ ФРАНЦУЗСКОМ ЯЗЫКЕ: ПОСЛЕДСТВИЯ ДЛЯ ТОЧНОСТИ ПЕРЕВОДА И СЕМАНТИЧЕСКИХ НЮАНСОВ

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Аннотация

В данной статье рассматривается контекстуальная синонимия в современном французском языке — явление, при котором слова,

считающиеся семантически эквивалентными, различаются по коннотации, регистру и прагматической силе в зависимости от контекста. С опорой на корпусную лингвистику, когнитивную семантику и теорию перевода автор показывает, что традиционные модели синонимии недостаточно отражают многослойное поведение французской лексики. Анализ литературных, журналистских, юридических и разговорных регистров демонстрирует, что переводчики сталкиваются с систематическими трудностями, обусловленными не столько лексическими пробелами, сколько контекстуальной не соотнесённостью. В статье предлагается модель контекстуальной синонимии, объединяющая коллокационные, прагматические и социолингвистические аспекты, что имеет значение для подготовки переводчиков, машинного перевода и лексикографии.

Ключевые слова: контекстуальная синонимия, французская лексикология, точность перевода, семантические нюансы, прагматика, регистр, коллокационное значение, когнитивная семантика.

1. Introduction: The Illusion of Equivalence

A common assumption in translation is that synonyms are interchangeable. In French, words sharing dictionary definitions often encode different social worlds, emotional tones, and epistemic stances. Treating *maison* and *demeure* or *regarder* and *observer* as identical may yield translations that are technically correct but pragmatically foreign.

Contextual synonymy—the divergence of lexical equivalents depending on usage—has long been acknowledged theoretically, but its systematic implications for translation remain underexplored. Most scholarship emphasizes historical lexicology or register codification, leaving a gap for frameworks

integrating cognitive, pragmatic, and sociolinguistic dimensions relevant to translation.

This article addresses this gap by revisiting synonymy theory, examining near-synonyms across registers, highlighting challenges for English translation, and sketching implications for pedagogy, computational translation, and bilingual resource design. Methodology is corpus-informed, drawing on contemporary French prose, journalism, legislation, and spoken corpora. The goal is to provide a practical framework for understanding how context shapes semantic value.

2. Method: Theoretical Foundations: Synonymy Reconsidered

Classical Approaches and Limitations

Classical French linguistics distinguishes absolute synonymy—perfect interchangeability—and partial synonymy, which diverges in collocation, register, or connotation. Saussure’s insight that meaning exists relationally implies that true synonymy is rare. Structural semanticists and Mounin emphasised that apparent synonyms usually differ in usage, sometimes latently. Cognitive semantics reinforces this: words activate mental frames that include social roles and evaluative orientations. Choosing *peur* vs. *crainte*, or *liberté* vs. *franchise*, positions the speaker within particular conceptual and social landscapes rather than simply naming a concept.

Contextual Synonymy

Contextual synonymy occurs when words are semantically equivalent only in specific contexts but diverge elsewhere. Unlike general approximations of synonymy, this concept emphasizes the context as the determining variable.

For French near-synonyms, three contextual dimensions are crucial:

1. **Register** (formal/informal, written/spoken, technical/general)
2. **Collocational patterns** (typical lexical and syntactic partners)
3. **Pragmatic-evaluative stance** (attitudinal colouring in choice)

French maintains sharp register distinctions due to literary and administrative traditions. Words like *maison*, *demeure*, *logis*, *domicile*, *résidence*, *habitation* all refer to dwellings but differ in everyday, literary, legal, or technical contexts. Translators must navigate these distinctions, for instance, when rendering legal documents or literary texts.

Reporting verbs (*dire*, *affirmer*, *prétendre*, *déclarer*, *soutenir*, *alléguer*) encode nuanced epistemic stances. English equivalents such as *to say* risk flattening these distinctions.

Spoken and Written Divergence

French spoken vs. written registers diverge sharply. Lexical pairs like *commencer/débuter* or *demander/solliciter* are distributed asymmetrically across registers. Literary texts may mix registers to create irony or stylistic effects, complicating translation into English, which organizes register differently.

Collocational Dimension

Collocation differentiates near-synonyms in practice. *Fort* and *puissant* both translate as “strong,” but their collocates differ (coffee, personalities vs. organisations, machines).

Adjectives like *ancien* and *vieux* also signal meaning through position: *mon ancien professeur* (former teacher) vs. *un professeur ancien* (long-standing scholar); *un vieux copain* (familiar friend) vs. *un homme vieux* (physically old).

Corpus Evidence

Corpus analysis confirms collocational patterns. Verbs of visual attention—*regarder*, *observer*, *contempler*, *fixer*—differ by context and emotional nuance. English does not map one-to-one, requiring translators to match function rather than dictionary meaning.

3. Results and Discussion:

Pragmatic-Evaluative Dimensions

Evaluation in Lexical Choice

Near-synonyms encode social and attitudinal nuances. *Économe, frugal, avare, radin* describe someone who spends little, but with sharply varying connotations. Similarly, *savant, érudit, intellectuel, lettré* differ in social and cultural nuance. Flattening these in translation erases evaluative meaning.

Literary Translation

French literary prose, e.g., Annie Ernaux, uses subtle lexical choices (*modeste, convenable, correct*) to signal class and ideology. Emotional terms (*tristesse, mélancolie, chagrin, peine, désespoir*) also resist direct English equivalents, requiring careful contextual matching.

Lexical Gaps and False Friends

Some French words have no exact English equivalents. *Manquer* (“I miss him” structure), *se douter, dépaysser, and énerver* illustrate challenges for translation. False friends (*sensible, éventuellement*) appear similar but differ in meaning. Contextual awareness, including collocation and register, is essential.

7. Machine Translation and Limits

Neural MT performs well on high-frequency patterns but struggles with contextual synonymy, especially in literature, political discourse, and spoken registers. Stylistic and attitudinal distinctions often require human interpretive judgment beyond current models’ capabilities. Translation pedagogy should emphasize **contextual analysis** over static synonym exercises, engaging learners with corpora and registers. Bilingual dictionaries must include collocational information, nuanced register labels, and context examples.

A “contextual thesaurus” organizing semantic clusters could better guide translators and lexicographers, providing structured insight into the contextual constraints of near-synonyms.

Cross-Cultural Semantic Nuance

French lexical choices reflect cultural and ideological positioning. Words like *liberté, authenticité, engagement* encode traditions and evaluative frameworks

absent in English equivalents. Translators must read both linguistically and culturally to preserve meaning across languages, especially in philosophy and political texts.

4. Conclusion

Contextual synonymy presents systematic challenges for translation, shaped by register, collocation, and pragmatic-evaluative nuance. Translators need contextual sensitivity, corpus-based investigation, and awareness of cultural positioning. Lexicographers and MT developers must also consider context-rich tools. Understanding contextual synonymy is crucial for reproducing full communicative and cultural meaning, beyond mere semantic equivalence.

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