

# SYNONYMY IN CONTEMPORARY FRENCH LINGUISTICS: A THEORETICAL, PSYCHOLINGUISTIC, AND CORPUS-BASED ANALYSIS

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## Abstract

Synonymy in French linguistics is a complex, context-dependent phenomenon that functions as a semantic continuum rather than a set of absolute identities. By integrating theoretical models with recent psycholinguistic and corpus-based data, this study shows that lexical substitution is governed by specific cognitive and pragmatic constraints. These insights provide essential frameworks for modern translation, lexicography, and applied linguistics.

**Keywords:** French synonymy, lexical semantics, semantic similarity, corpus linguistics, psycholinguistics, LSP

## СИНОНИМИЯ В СОВРЕМЕННОЙ ФРАНЦУЗСКОЙ ЛИНГВИСТИКЕ: ТЕОРЕТИЧЕСКИЙ, ПСИХОЛИНГВИСТИЧЕСКИЙ И КОРПУСНЫЙ ПОДХОДЫ

### Аннотация:

Синонимия в французской лингвистике представляет собой сложное, контекстно-зависимое явление, которое функционирует скорее как семантический континуум, нежели как совокупность абсолютных тождеств. Интегрируя теоретические модели с современными психолингвистическими и корпусными данными, данное исследование демонстрирует, что лексическая замена регулируется специфическими когнитивными и прагматическими ограничениями. Эти выводы создают

необходимую базу для современного перевода, лексикографии и прикладной лингвистики.

**Ключевые слова:** Французская синонимия, лексическая семантика, семантическое сходство, корпусная лингвистика, психолингвистика, язык для специальных целей (LSP).

## **Introduction**

Synonymy is a core complexity of French linguistics, challenging the traditional view that synonyms are simply interchangeable. As highlighted by Rakhimova and Rakhmonkulova (2023), synonymy is defined by the "problem of choice," where speakers navigate the tension between identity and difference. While classical theory provides a philosophical foundation, modern psycholinguistic and corpus-based tools now allow for empirical validation through usage data. This study bridges the gap between these theoretical roots and modern data-driven findings.

## **Methods**

### **Data Sources**

Three complementary data types were employed:

1. **Theoretical literature** on synonymy and lexical semantics
2. **Psycholinguistic norms** of semantic similarity in French
3. **Corpus-based examples** from general and specialized French discourse

### **Psycholinguistic Dataset**

The study relies on the semantic similarity norms developed by Lakhzoum, Izaute, and Ferrand (2021), which provide similarity ratings for 630 French word pairs based on native speaker judgments. These ratings allow synonymy to be treated as a **measurable gradient variable** rather than a categorical relation.

Table 1.

**Example of Semantic Similarity Scores in French.**

Word Pair	Similarity Score (0–10)	Degree of Synonymy
<i>peur – terreur</i>	8.7	Near-synonyms
<i>maison – bâtiment</i>	6.1	Partial overlap
<i>liberté – justice</i>	4.2	Conceptually related
<i>table – nuage</i>	0.3	Unrelated

### Corpus Data and Analytical Procedure

Corpus examples were drawn from contemporary French usage (press, literary prose, and specialized economic texts). Lexical items traditionally labeled as synonyms were examined in their **collocational environments**, syntactic patterns, and pragmatic contexts.

The analysis focused on:

- Substitutability in identical contexts
- Register sensitivity
- Semantic shifts in specialized discourse

### Results

#### The Gradient Nature of Synonymy

Empirical data confirm that synonymy in French is **graduated rather than absolute**. Even pairs traditionally described as full synonyms display measurable differences in usage probability and contextual acceptability. This observation supports Ullmann's view that synonymy forms a continuum, where lexical items cluster around a semantic core but diverge at the periphery.



**Figure 1. Continuum of Synonymy in French Lexical Semantics**

*The figure illustrates how lexical items move along a semantic continuum depending on context, register, and speaker intention.*

Corpus Examples of Contextual Constraints

***Example 1: Neutral Context***

*Je vais acheter du pain.*

*Je vais prendre du pain.*

In everyday spoken French, *acheter* and *prendre* function as contextual synonyms. However, this equivalence disappears in more specific contexts:

✗ *J'ai pris une maison pour 200 000 euros.*

✓ *J'ai acheté une maison pour 200 000 euros.*

Here, *acheter* encodes a commercial transaction, while *prendre* fails to convey the same legal and economic meaning.

***Example 2: Stylistic Differentiation***

*Il a mangé rapidement.*

*Il a bouffé rapidement.*

Although semantically related, *manger* and *bouffer* differ sharply in register. Their interchangeability is restricted by social context and communicative norms.

**Near-Synonymy in Cross-Linguistic Perspective:** Adıgüzel and Babanoğlu (2025) demonstrate that French often lexicalizes semantic distinctions differently from English. The adjective *profond* covers both physical and metaphorical depth, whereas English distinguishes between *deep* and *profound*. Corpus data show that *profond* remains constrained by collocational patterns

(*sommeil profond, silence profond*), confirming that semantic breadth does not imply unrestricted synonymy.

**Synonymy in Specialized Economic Discourse:** In economic French, synonymy serves rhetorical and stylistic purposes but carries semantic risks. Bylina et al. (2021) show that terms such as *croissance* and *expansion* are often used interchangeably in journalistic texts, yet retain distinct technical meanings in economic analysis.

**Table 2.**

Synonymy in General vs. Economic French		
Lexical Pair	General Usage	Economic Usage
<i>croissance</i> – <i>expansion</i>	Near-synonyms	Distinct indicators
<i>action</i> – <i>titre</i>	Overlapping	Legal differentiation
<i>crise</i> – <i>récession</i>	Interchangeable	Non-equivalent

## Discussion

Evidence confirms that French synonymy is a multi-layered interaction of cognitive perception and discourse rules rather than simple word replacement. While absolute synonymy remains a theoretical myth—as argued by Vinokur—psycholinguistic data proves that speakers perceive a measurable scale of "closeness" between words. This is critical in specialized fields like law or economics, where substituting even close synonyms can lead to significant semantic distortion.

## Conclusion

This study establishes synonymy as a dynamic spectrum shaped by pragmatic and contextual factors. By merging classical theory with modern empirical research, it moves beyond the concept of absolute equivalence to provide a grounded model of semantic proximity. Future work should leverage

computational models and broader corpus data to further map these relationships across diverse professional domains..

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