

## An Assessment of Iraqi EFL Learners' Performance in Using Synonymy and Antonymy

**Dhea Mizhir Krebt**

University of Baghdad, College of Education Ibn Rushd  
Baghdad, Iraq

### Abstract

The knowledge related with lexical items can be realized as including relations of meaning a cross words. Words that share a similarity of meaning are called to be synonymous, and words that share a contrary of meaning are called to be antonymous. Both of them are universal linguistic phenomenon that exist in terms of linguistic system of every language. The present study aims at finding out areas of difficulty that Iraqi EFL learners encounter in the use of synonymy and antonymy, both on the recognition and production levels. Also tries to detect the main reasons behind such difficulties. A diagnostic test of two parts, namely, recognition and production, is designed. The test is built to include two linguistic phenomenon which are: synonymy and antonymy. A random sample of one (100) third year College students of two Colleges of Education, in University of Baghdad and University of Diyala, (50) students each. Data analyzed were based on Cruse's taxonomy (1986). The study has come up with the following conclusions: in spite of being students at an advanced level in learning English, they used a general lexical item, instead of their other synonyms and antonyms which imply a narrower sense of meaning. And although Iraqi EFL learners learn a number of synonym words and antonym words during their academic years of studying English, still they cannot utilize them correctly in context.

*Keywords:* antonyms, production, recognition, synonyms

**Cite as:** Krebt, D.M . (2017). An Assessment of Iraqi EFL Learners' Performance in Using Synonymy and Antonymy. *Arab World English Journal*, 8 (2). DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.24093/awej/vol8no2.13>

## 1. Introduction

The most intrinsic problem in teaching vocabulary is the flexibility of word meaning and it's closely related to context. This fact may create difficulties for the description of word meaning as well as in relation with each other. The relations of synonymy as well as antonymy are particularly considered as intricate fields in teaching, and it is worthy to illuminate such kind of relations. Thus, the present study is an attempt to shed light on the following areas:

- a) Identifying Iraqi EFL learners' level of performance in using English synonymous words.
- b) Identifying Iraqi EFL learners' level of performance in using English antonymous words.
- c) Finding out areas of difficulty that Iraqi EFL learners encounter in the use of synonymy and antonymy, both on the recognition and production levels.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Synonymy

Synonymy, as Jackson (1988) describes, is a term which can be derived from Greek. It is comprised of two parts (syn- + -nymy) which is meant "same + name". The notion of synonymy is observed in two facets, either more than one word have the same meaning, or the same meaning is exemplified by more than one word. Kempson (1977), Cruse (1986), Taylor (2003) describe synonymy as mutual entailment, and it can be defined as a special type of hyponymy, as Palmer (1981) calls it, symmetric hyponymy. More generally, mutual entailment is the connection, in which the propositional components of sentences are identical, as a result, the truth of one sentence is entailed by the truth of other, and vice versa, e. g.,

(2-1) The proposition '*the statesman spoke at the conference*'.

(Cannet, al., 2009: 8)

Harris (1973) defines synonymy simply as sameness of meaning, as a matter of fact, two or more lexical items are synonymous if they manifest the same meaning, and can be replaced one by another in different contexts. Thus, this interchangeability of synonyms pairs must be utilized in certain contexts because it is difficult to find two synonyms pairs which can be interchanged in all contexts (Lyons, 1968). This is due to the fact that each synonym pair which has variety idiomatic usage, e. g.,

(2-2) '*I'm afraid Mr. John is busy/ occupied at the moment*', but '*busy*' cannot replace '*occupied*' in :

(2-3) '*I'm afraid this seat is occupied.*'

(2-4) '*I'm afraid this seat is busy*' (Jackson, 1988:66)

Nevertheless, in order to be identified synonyms pairs, though, each pair of lexical items must be included a silent amount of semantic overlapping, and can be contrasted in "peripheral trait", e. g.,

(2-5) '*honest*' and '*truthful*' are synonymous, while '*truthful*' and '*purple*' are not synonymous (Cruse, 1986: 267).

### 2.2 Cruse's Taxonomy (1986)

Cruse (1986) classifies synonymy as a scale of synonymy. He exemplifies this linguistic phenomenon as "within the class of synonyms some pairs of items are more synonymous than others, and this raises the possibility of a scale of synonymy of some kind" (p, 268). He confines

'absolute synonymy' at the zero point on the scale. To clarify this point, he confirms the pairs 'green' / 'expensive' and 'long' / 'short' which can be regarded as zero synonyms. Thus, discriminating that zero point on Cruse's scale is held by 'absolute synonymy'. It is considered only as "referential point" on the scale of the synonymy (Cruse, 2000). As a matter of fact, it could be theoretically unnatural and uncommon for language to have absolute synonyms with exactly the same meaning. This fact is due to two important reasons for synonymy:

- 1- Utilization of absolute synonymy is gradually become impossible, so it would be vanished or dropped.
- 2- The condition of interchangeability in all contexts can neither dominated nor proved, on one hand, the quantity of contexts is endless, and the other hand, the special cases from absolute interchangeability are impossible.

In brief, it could be concluded that absolute synonymy is very seldom because when two lexemes are existed in the language, there are two conceivable results, either one is vanished, or one is altered into a new word.

Basically, the first point of Cruse's scale refers to 'cognitive synonymy' in which it can be described as a mutual entailment between two lexical terms which are both syntactically identical and truth conditions are equivalent in the same situation (Cruse, 1986). For instance, lexical terms such as 'violin' and 'fiddle' are cognitive synonyms pairs in (2-6) and (2-7) respectively since the two sentence have the same truth- conditions.

(2-6) 'He plays the violin very well'.

(2-7) 'He plays the fiddle very well'.

Cruse (1986) draws a distinction between plesionymy and cognitive synonymy. He asserts that plesionyms have produced sentences with different truth- conditions and the correlation between them are not mutually entailing. Accordingly, there is always one lexical item which is possible to assert, while "simultaneously denying" is the other item. The following example can show this:

(2-8) 'It wasn't foggy last Friday- just misty' (p, 285).

Plesionyms or (near- synonyms) are related with overlapping of meanings and senses, but this overlapping is not entirely (Murphy, 2003). Furthermore, the borderline between plesionymy and cognitive synonymy is in principle explicit, but it much harder to draw a discrimination between plesionymy and non-synonymy. Mainly, there are two possible outcomes:

- 1- Languages users should intuitively know whether or not lexical items are synonymous.
- 2- In order to recognize lexical items as synonymous, they should not contrast with each other, i.e., it is essential of their contractiveness to be explicit.

### 2.3 Discrimination of Synonymy

Synonymy pairs can be differentiated by some vital parameters, which are:

#### 2.3.1 Collocation

The important role of collocation is utilized to discriminate the meaning of near-synonyms, i.e. near- synonyms verbs 'tremble', 'shake', 'shiver', and 'shudder' are denoted to

movement, but only one of them which is the verb 'shiver' can be applied with the adverbial 'with cold', as in:

(2-9) ' *He was Shivering with cold* '.

(2-10) ' \**He was shaking with cold* '.

(2-11) ' \**He was trembling with cold* '.

(2-12) ' \**He was shuddering with cold* ' (Thakur, 1999: 48).

### 2.3.2 Dialect

Dialects are continually changing, indeed, this is due to everything in this world is interconnected with the history of dialect, which considered as a basic notion of historical change. Predominantly, some pairs of synonyms are determined to different dialects of the language. For instance, in the United States and in some Western countries of Britain, the lexical item '*fall*' is utilized, while others use the lexical item '*autumn*' instead. Thus, the concept of dialect is simply illustrated by people uttering different forms of the language having various vocabulary terms (Palmer, 1981).

### 2.3.3 Register

Synonymous items might be discriminated by the impact of register, e. g., '*lady*' and '*woman*' are synonymous nouns in which they express the same meaning. However, '*woman*' is neutral and used by every person, whereas '*lady*' is more commonly used by upper class (Thakur, 2001). Another example is the verb '*slip*' has different sense of meaning because of register limitations, i.e., the verb '*slip*' has the component [ + HAND] applied in scientific register, while [+ FEET] applied in literary register, e. g., (Abdul Sattar, 2003).

(2-13) ' *she let the robe slip from her shoulder.* '

(2-14) ' *He slipped on the icy road and broke his leg* '

### 2.3.4 Stylistic Variation

Stylistic variation implies alternation between formal and informal styles of speech which utilized by an individual speakers, regularly this variation may be connected with social variation such as, gender class, sex of participant (Pfauet, al., 2012). When dealing with synonymy, one should take into consideration alterations encompassed by stylistic variation which reflects the differences in meaning between synonymous items '*commence*' and '*kick off*', for example, are synonymous items, in that they express the same meaning, but in different styles. The following example can show this:

(2-15) ' *when did the meeting commence ?* ' (formal)

(2-16) ' *what time did the meeting kick off* ' (informal) (Cowie, 2009: 36).

### 2.3.5 Connotation

It is considered as a part of a classification for kinds of meaning (Crystal, 2003), in particular, it can be referred to the personal facet of meaning, i. e., ideological, emotional and so forth. These are basically associated to the interpreter's class, ethnicity, gender, etc. (Chandler, 2007). Connotations have changed according to the experience of people, this is true, because each person has a common experience towards words, for instance, the lexical items '*fiddle*' and '*violin*' are regarded to be synonymous items since they share the same referent, but they differ in connotation, '*fiddle*' is the neutral one which is applied for human or to reflect affection, and the other '*violin*' is the usual item. The following example can show this explanation:

(2-17) ' *He plays the fiddle very well.* '

(2-18) ' *He plays the violin very well.* ' (Kreidler, 1998: 45).

#### 2.4 Antonymy

Antonymy, oppositeness of meaning, has been considered as one of the most principle of semantic relation. Thus, many linguistics tried to construct a comprehensive analysis of antonymy, in English, in order to be applied and understood easily. Antonymy is more prototypical than synonymy and it is used by semanticists to refer to semantic differences (Murphy, 2003). The term antonymy, according to Lyons (1977), was coined by C. J Smith as an opposite of synonymy. Cruse (1986) refers to antonymy as a semantic relation which exist between words that have opposite meanings, so the pairs of words that have opposite meanings are termed as 'antonyms', for instance, 'good' and 'bad' is a pair of antonyms and the relation between them is called as 'antonymy'.

Alternatively, Gross (1989), describes antonymy as a lexical relation between words rather than meanings. To clarify this point, if antonymy is only a sort of lexical relation, so the semantic component could be unnecessary, as a matter of fact, it seems to be a crucial component, and this is due to a semantic component is based on semantic representations.

Cruse (1986) observes that English speakers have strong institutions about relation of oppositeness, for instance, speakers could accept that 'good' is the opposite of 'bad' and 'cold' is the opposite of 'hot' and so forth, this is because of the affection of prototypical category for oppositeness while, types of opposites are referred to logical definition, this is true, because English speakers cannot differentiate among types of oppositeness.

#### 2.5 Cruse's Taxonomy (1986)

Cruse (1986) designs his taxonomy of opposite's types, in particular, subtypes of anonyms, which includes polar, overlapping, and equipollent, so their patterns are established with special properties. As for the first type, polar antonyms, as in 'long/short', 'wide/narrow', 'fast/slow', are objectively descriptive, and evaluatively neutral, in some extent, this property can be applied to measure in conventional units, such as, grams, inches and miles per hour. In how question, one item of a pair is only applied, and the other one is not, e.g.,

(2-19) ' *How long is that string?* '

(2-20) ' *\*How short is that string?* '

In comparative construction, both items are applied, e. g.,

(2-21) ' *This string is longer than that one, but it's still short.* '

(2-22) ' *This string is shorter than that one, but it's still long.* '

As for the second type, the overlapping antonyms are used to measure an evaluative polarity, in this case, the positive item is used in uncommitted question as is, 'polite', 'good', 'pretty', 'honest', and so forth, while the negative item is used in committed question as in, 'rude', 'bad', 'plain', 'dishonest'.

Both terms of the pair is used in how question, but one item is uncommitted, and the other term is committed, e.g.,

(2-23) ' *How good is that book?* '

(2-24) ' *How bad is that book?* '

In comparative constructions, one item of a pair can be applied, and the other one cannot, e. g.,  
(2-25) '*This book is better than that one, but it's till bad*'.

(2-26) '*\*This book is worse than that one, but it's still good*'.

As for the third type, the equipollent antonyms are used to refer as emotional states and subjective sensations such as, '*cold/ hot*', '*happy/ sad*', '*proud/ ashamed*', and so forth. In how questions, both items are committed, e.g.,

(2-27) '*How cold is the weather?*'

(2-28) '*How hot is the weather?*'

This subtype of antonyms cannot be applied in comparative constructions, this is true, because, semantically, meaning is unacceptable, e.g.,

(2-29) '*\*The weather is colder than that one, but it's still hot*'.

(2-30) '*\*The weather is hotter than that one, but it's still cold*'..

### 3. Method

The sample of the present study is randomly chosen to the third year for the academic year (2016-2017). They represent one stratum of the whole population which includes of four strata. For this purpose, the sample, by conducting the percentage formula, represents (24% ) for group (1), students of college of Education Ibn Rushd, University of Baghdad and (26%) for group (2) students of college of Education, University of Diyala of the whole population. The total number of the sample is (205) for group (1) and (208) for group (2). The number of participants was (50) for group (1), and (50) for group (2).

Essentially, an objective test is the basic procedure adopted in the present study, tries to find out the areas of weakness in their performance, and difficulties of Iraqi EFL university students, in which they have been faced with discrimination of synonymous and antonymous expressions at the recognition and production levels.

The test is considered as a diagnostic one since it clarifies where the problem exists (Oller, 1987). Moreover, it also checks student's knowledge about lexical relation, in particular, synonymy as well as antonymy by enriching information about the type and the nature of difficulties which can be systematically utilized in the test.

Technically, the test of the present study is divided into two parts, recognition and production, it consists of 30 items of recognition and 20 items of production. Each parts includes several types of synonymous and antonymous words, in which each task in the recognition and production levels measures a specific aspect.

### 4. Discussion of Results

In order to identify the level of Iraqi EFL students' performance in using synonym and antonymy words. The t-test formula for one sample is used to identify the students' standard on the two parts which includes the recognition and production levels. The results are computed as shown in tables 1 and 2.

**Table 1**  
*The Students' Performance Level Synonymy Part*

Type of Test	No. of sample	X	SD	Theoretical mean	Df	t- value		Level significance P>
						Computed	Tabulated	
Synonymy	100	16.96	7.239	25	99	-11.107	1.98	0.05

As seen in table 1 by comparing the computed mean scores is (16,96), whereas the theoretical mean is (25). This shows that the computed mean is lower to the theoretical mean, by comparing the computed t- value which is (-11.107) bigger than the tabulated t. value which is (1.98) at the level of significant (0.05) with degree of freedom (99), this result shows that students' performance in using synonymous words is lower than the mean level . This indicates that the students' standard of the test is lower than the success line.

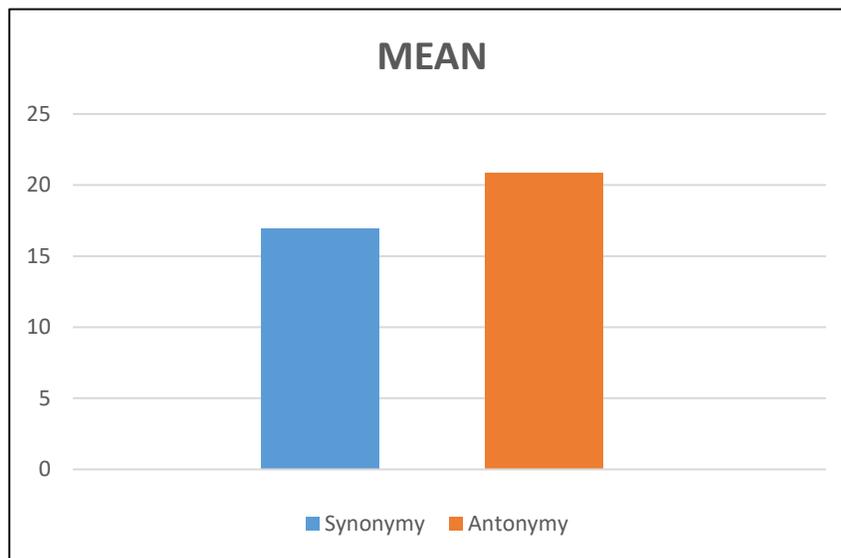
**Table 2**  
*The Students' Performance Level in Antonymy Part*

Type of Test	No. of sample	X	SD	Theoretical mean	df	t- value		Level significance P>
						computed	Tabulated	
Antonymy	100	20.84	5.365	25	99	-7.754	1.98	0.05

As seen in table 2 the computed mean scores is (20.84), whereas the theoretical mean is (25). This shows that the computed mean is lower than the theoretical mean, by comparing the computed t-value which is(-7.754) bigger than the tabulated value which is (1.98) at the level of significant (0.05) with 99 freedom degree. This result shows that students' performance in using antonymous words is lower than the mean level. This indicates that the students' standard of the test is lower than the success line.

**Table 3**  
*The Differences in the Students' Performance in Recognition and Production Levels*

N. of Sample	Test	X	$\sum (x1 - x2)$	Sd	t – value		df	Interpretation
					computed	Tabulated		
100	Synonymy	16.96	3.88	7.0313	-5.518	1.98	99	Recognizing and producing antonymy> Recognizing And Producing synonymy
	Antonymy	20.84						



*Figure 1* The Differences in the Students' Performance Level in both Parts (Recognition and Production)

Table 3 and figure 1 show that the computed value is (-5,518) which is bigger than tabulated t-value which is (1.98) at (0.05) significant level with (99) freedom degree. It indicates that there is a statistical significant difference between two mean scores which is (3.88), and this difference is in favor of antonymy (recognizing and producing antonymy > recognizing and producing synonymy).

Lack of semantic knowledge is considered as the main reason of difficulties. It is related to students' total or partial lack of semantics which has led to inappropriate recognition and production of synonymy and antonymy. Consequently, as found in the present study, synonym errors have variable causes, including 'denotative meanings, connotative meanings, different underlying meanings, similarity of semantic features, inclusion meaning', whereas antonym errors, including 'different underlying meaning, inappropriate meaning and distortion of meaning.

Lack of linguistic knowledge is regarded as the minor reason of difficulties. It is attributed to students' total or partial lack of morphology.

Some students have left out some sentences unanswered. This might be related to the total lack of linguistic knowledge.

## 5. Conclusions

- 1- Iraqi EFL learners are incompetent at discriminating and producing English synonymous words.
- 2- Iraqi EFL learners fail to demonstrate shades on meaning that antonymous words implies.
- 3- Students in both colleges committed endless errors in all linguistic levels, particularly, semantic level because of faulty or partial knowledge of English language.

- 4- In spite of being students at an advanced level in learning English, they used a general lexical item instead of its other synonyms and antonyms which imply a narrower sense of meaning.
- 5- Although Iraqi EFL learners learn a number of synonym words and antonym words during their academic years of studying English, still they cannot utilize them correctly in context. This is because of lack of semantic knowledge, in which synonymy and antonymy differ in their meaning or in their collocation range in various contexts.

#### About the Author:

**Dr. Dhea Mizhir Krebt** is a head of English department and instructor of ELT and applied linguistics, University of Baghdad, College of Education/Ibn Rushd. His research interests are curriculum and methods of teaching English, and assessments.

#### References

- Abdul Sattar, H. (2003). A Semantic Analysis of Motion Verbs in Selected English Literary and Scientific Texts. (Unpublished M.A. Thesis). Baghdad: University of Baghdad.
- Cann, R., Kempson, R. and Gregoromichelaki, E. (2009). *Semantics: An Introduction to Meaning in Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Chandler, D. (2007). *Semiotics: The Basics*. (2<sup>nd</sup>ed). New York: Routledge.
- Cowie, A.P. (2009). *Semantics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Cruse, D. A. (1986). *Lexical Semantics*. Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Cruse, D.A. (2000). *Meaning in Language: An Introduction to Semantics and Pragmatics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Crystal, D. (2003). *A Dictionary of Linguistics and Phonetics*. (5<sup>th</sup>ed.) Blackwell Publishing Ltd.
- Gross, D., Fischer, U., & Miller, G.A. (1989). The Organization of Adjectival Meanings. *Journal of Memory and Language*, 28(1), 92-106.
- Harris, R. (1973). *Synonymy and Linguistic Analysis*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Jackson, H. (1988). *Words and their Meaning*. London: Longman Group UK Ltd.
- Kempson, R.A. (1977). *Semantic Theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kriedler, Charles, W. (1998). *Introduction English Semantics*. London: Routledge.
- Lyons, J. (1977). *Semantics*. (Vols. 1-2). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lyons, J. (1968). *An Introduction to Theoretical Linguistics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Murphy, M. L. (2003). *Semantic Relations and the Lexicon*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Oller, J.W. (1987). Practical Ideas for Language Teachers from a Quarter Century of Language Testing. *English Teaching Forum*, 25(4), 42-46.
- Palmer, F.R. (1981). *Semantics*. (2<sup>nd</sup>ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Pfau, R., Steinbach, M., & Woll, B. (eds.). (2012). *Sign Language: An International Handbook*. (Vol.37). Walter de Gruyter.
- Taylor, J.R. (2003). *Linguistic Categorization*. (3<sup>rd</sup>ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Thakur, Damodar (2001). *Linguistics Simplified Semantics*. PANTNA: Bharati Bhawan.