

# Substitutability as Distributive Criterion of Synonymy

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 synonymy—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 and summed up characterization of word meaning, and to show the place and relationship of the word with other within the linguistic lexical system.

Synonyms as means of linguistic expressiveness allow the best accurate expression of the idea and let single out from the vocabulary riches the necessary word, which would be the most accurate in conveying the necessary shade of meaning.

## II. SUBSTITUTABILITY AS SYNONYMS CRITERIA

There are various wordings in the contemporary linguistics answering which words can be called synonyms. 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. Abdulkhakova 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].

Later many researchers began to adduce another, “weak distributive criterion of synonymy – 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 linguistic level, and which have at least some conterminous co-occurrence since only then they are capable to substitute each other in real contexts” [4].

Meantime, authors of Webster's Dictionary set another operational criterion of the synonymy – the chance to treat synonyms in the same or almost the same manner: “The only adequate criterion of synonyms is their coincidence of denotation. Such coincidence very rarely is so entire for the word meaning to be absolutely identical; however it is quite clear for the definition of two or more words, which are synonyms, to be brought up to a certain point in one and the same terms...” [3].

Yu. D. Apresian directs attention to the fact that “this 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].

## 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. Bepalova, 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, oftener, 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 way, indeed, is just mine realization 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 cloths 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 word way without  
the definitive and, talking about the metro (rail)ways (*tracks*),  
and use 'a heavy rail': "At around 10.20 a.m. a 77-year old  
Muscovite inadvertently fell down onto the heavy rail at the  
metro station Krasnogvardeiskaya, which has been noticed  
by the police who immediately and effectively brought her  
up to the platform and called health workers" [21].

As can be seen from the examples above, the language  
system of Russian has some quite clearly stated prohibitions  
on these words' compatibility. Some subject, a thing, can be  
*dropped* or *thrown* onto a road, but it cannot be *dropped* onto  
a way. Although it can be said '*fall* onto ways', but this  
would be the railways, in other words, a material object.

These synonyms' rich visualization, metaphoricality and  
symbolism lead to the point, whereat the phrase '*dry* road',  
taken out of the context, would yield in the common sense of  
a Russian native speaker an illustration of a certain locality  
where it rained long since, and 'a *wet* road' – would imply  
the rain has just followed or a street-washer has just passed;  
again, the *dry* or *wet* way are referring to the terms that  
distinguish some transport mode by land or through the  
water. The phrase '*light* road' (literally) will evoke an image  
of a sun-lighted road, while a '*light* way' is likely to be  
perceived more metaphorically and referred to man's way of  
living (or of a group of people) and to aspiration for a  
*brighter* future.

#### IV. REASONS FOR THE SYNONYMS 'WAY' AND 'ROAD' COMPLICATED INTERCONNECTIONS

Road, apparently, belongs to the notional invariables of  
general cultural meaning and to the basic and, yet,  
immensely complex cultural metaphors. Additionally, the  
complexity of these synonyms' relationship is due to their  
multivalued semantics – each is accomplishing own

particular functions in different cultural layers and  
multivarious texts of different style and modality.

"The metaphor of way, road... starts to be used not just as  
the medium of artistic expression—it is included into the  
cultural-cognitive phenomenon as the method of  
understanding the reality"; road gets "the rich symbolic and  
metaphorical field, wherein such essential philosophic  
categories as life and death, being, space and time are being  
conceived" (Ya.V. Fomenko) [22].

The representative of the Russian school of thought Ya.V.  
Fomenko is distinguishing three levels of the  
metaphorization:

1) Ontological – the road, way make the fundamental  
feature of the existence, a special form of the unities of place  
and time, the chronotope;

2) Epistemological, wherein way is the metaphor of  
thinking ('way of knowing');

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 I. THE CHOICE BASES ON THE MODEL

ROAD	WAY
Destined place	Impassability
Designated route	Free
Plane (two-dimensionality)	Volume (tridimensionality)
Technosphere	Ecosphere
Reliability	Danger
Regularity	Variability
Stability	Unsteadiness
Precision	Ambiguity
Independence of existence	Part of the subject of movement
Tangible object	Ideal
Finality	Infinity
Public	Individual
For followers	For pathfinders
Physical	Spiritual
Profane	Sacred
For everyone	Exclusive

Accordingly, the bonds between the lexical items way and road turn out conjugate both in correspondence and in oppositive relations, concurrently staying the constituents of a certain holistic unity. Notably, the oppositive 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.

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