

SOME CONTEXTUAL CONSIDERATIONS IN THE USE OF  
SYNONYMOUS VERBS: THE CASE OF *STEAL*, *ROB*, AND *BURGLARIZE*

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the use of the synonymous verbs *burglarize*, *rob* and *steal* in various authentic contexts in an attempt to identify the semantic and syntactic constraints that differentiate them from one another. The study, drawing data from newspaper articles, books, spontaneous speech as well as the *BNC* and concordance systems, shows that each of these words possesses semantic and syntactic features that distinguish it from the other two. The study also shows how contextual factors determine the choice of one verb rather than the other. After presenting many illustrative examples that reveal the peculiar nature of each verb, the paper attempts a componential analysis of these three synonymous items that further illustrates the uniqueness of each one of them.

1. Introduction

Lexical knowledge constitutes a major component of the foreign language learner's competence in the process of foreign language learning. Lexical items are the building blocks that are strung together according to the rules of sentence structure in order to convey meaningful messages. The improper choice of lexical items in both oral and written communication may, more often than not, lead to a breakdown in communication. Furthermore, the erroneous use of vocabulary items may create a sense of disorientation to the message receiver, i.e. reader or hearer. The misuse of lexical items by foreign language learners may also add to the degree of foreignness in these learners' language. These problems might be aggravated when the wrong choice of lexical items occurs in the content words such as verbs and nouns which constitute the two essential components of English sentences.

English language teachers very often find it easy to account for their students' errors especially when these errors are morphological or syntactic. How-

ever, this might not be the case when errors pertaining to improper choice of lexical items or collocations are encountered. Very often, foreign language learners receive comments such as “This is not English. We don’t say that in English”, especially when the error or mistake relates to semantics or meanings of words.

The difficulty that FLLs encounter in acquiring the lexicon of the foreign language may be attributed to a number of factors. The complex nature of lexical competence may constitute the major factor. Having a functional knowledge of a lexical item at one’s disposal involves knowing more than the definitional information or the literal meanings of the word that are stated in a dictionary entry. In fact, the components of the semantic competence are much more complicated than to be contained in a dictionary entry. Nevertheless, whenever FLLs find themselves unable to express an idea in L2, they usually resort to bilingual dictionaries to help them find the equivalents of the words or expressions that they have in L1. However, such attempts tend not to be very fruitful. The multiplicity of synonyms that Arabic-English dictionaries, for instance, usually provide for a single Arabic word may be confusing to the learners since they might erroneously assume that these synonyms are semantically and syntactically alike, which is not always the case. For instance, *Al-Asri Arabic English dictionary* (1993), *Al-Mawrid Arabic English dictionary* (2000) and *A dictionary of modern written Arabic* (1974), three widely circulated Arabic-English dictionaries, list the following as English equivalents of the word *saraq* ‘steal’: *steal, rob, pinch, plunder, burglarize (burgle), filch, crib, cabbage, kidnap*, etc. This is definitely not helpful to the learner.

Learners feel puzzled at finding that a single L1 term can have all these various synonyms in English, and they may wrongly conclude that these synonyms are interchangeable, a misconception that commonly results in the production of erroneous sentences. For instance, Arab learners of English usually produce sentences such as the following:

*The thief stole the bank.*

The production of such an unacceptable sentence may be attributed to two causes. The fact that Arabic-English dictionaries provide *steal, rob* and *burglarize* as equivalents to Arabic *saraq* motivates learners to believe that these synonyms share the same syntax and semantics. The second possible cause may be ascribed to the fact that these learners’ knowledge of how these verbs behave in language use is far from being complete. These inaccurate productions may indicate that these learners are only familiar with the definitional or broad characteristics of these verbs. That is to say, they know their general meanings, but lack knowledge of these words in depth as Reeds (1988: 16), Ringbom (1987:

35-46), and Wallace (1982:18-21) simply put it. This incomplete knowledge may reveal how these verbs were taught to these learners and what aspects of meaning and use were either highlighted or ignored.

English-Arabic dictionaries are not any better. They define these three verbs by referring to each other. For instance, Atlas dictionary (2002) uses the word *yasriq*, which is the primary meaning of the word 'steal', as the first definition of the word. It also uses the same word as the second and fourth meanings of the verb *rob*, and uses it in a clause as the second definition for the verb *burglarize*.

Bilingual dictionaries (Arabic-English and/or English-Arabic dictionaries) are not the only source of error to blame. Foreign language learners are usually advised to consult monolingual dictionaries after referring to bilingual ones in order to check whether the word they were provided by bilingual dictionaries can be used in the target context. In our attempt to specify the selectional restrictions that help learners set a limit that would indicate where the use of one word starts and where it ends, it was, unfortunately, found that monolingual dictionaries also failed to do so. In fact, English monolingual dictionaries tend to be suggestive rather than exhaustive for some types of words.

This paper, therefore, is an attempt to explore the semantic and syntactic features that make the verbs *burglarize/burgle*, *rob*, and *steal* similar or different from each other. In other words, the study attempts to answer the following questions:

1. What are the semantic constraints that govern the use of each of the synonymous verbs: *rob*, *steal* and *burgle/burglarize* and make them distinct from each other?
2. What role do the pragmatic or contextual factors play in determining the choice of each of these verbs?

It has become obvious that the paper attempts to show how these verbs are semantically different or similar, and how pragmatic factors help in setting these verbs apart from each other.

The paper proceeds as follows: section (2) describes the methodology adopted in the analysis including data collection and analysis techniques. Section (3) will be devoted to the findings and discussion. Finally, section (4) presents the conclusions and recommendations.

## 2. Research methodology

### 2.1. Data collection

In order to identify the semantic and syntactic constraints that differentiate these verbs from each other, it was necessary to examine and analyze how they are actually used in various authentic contexts. Therefore, the data on which the analysis was based were culled from the following sources in which the target words are likely to be used:

- a) Newspapers: A number of current and old issues of the *The New York Times* were skimmed, paying special attention to the New York City news page because, as it is generally known, New York City is usually a fertile spot for theft. All the contexts in which any of the target words was used were amassed for later analysis.
- b) Books and references on crime and criminal law: The indices of many of these books were surveyed, and all instances in which any of the target words appeared were identified. We also got a police book from the internet titled *Indiana criminal code* which was found useful.
- c) Widely circulated magazines: A number of well-known magazines such as *Time*, *Newsweek*, *Reader's Digest* and *U.S. News* (mainly old issues found in the library of the University of Sharjah and from the Internet) were skimmed through, especially the sections pertaining to crime news. Some good examples were collected from these magazines and added to the list.
- d) Electronic concordances and the *British National Corpus (BNC)*: The major bulk of data were culled from these two electronic systems from which we were able to compile hundreds of examples on each target word.

It is worthwhile noting that all the amassed examples were written by native speakers of English. They were extracted from their natural contexts although they may appear decontextualized in the appendix. This makes the results of the study more reliable as they are based on authentic texts rather than on made-up ones.

## 2.2. Data analysis

All the examples that were collected on each verb were compiled together in a list in order to describe the possible linguistic contexts in which each verb can occur. In other words, the examples in which each verb occurred were thoroughly analyzed in order to identify the semantic properties of the arguments of each verb that may help in rendering these verbs distinct from each other.

## 3. Data analysis and findings

Before we embark on the analysis, it might be expedient to state that the verbs *steal*, *rob*, and *burglarize* have something in common. They all share the feature of referring to an illegal criminal activity that involves dispossessing someone or something of something else. This broad sense is probably why they are given as synonyms to each other in thesauri, monolingual and bilingual dictionaries as well. However, the findings revealed that there are narrow semantic differences, or finer grained constraints, to use Pinker's (1989) terms, that make these verbs behave semantically different. In what follows, these features will be discussed with illustrative examples.

### 3.1. Location of activity

The verb *steal*, to start with, refers to that kind of theft that may take place anywhere: inside or outside a house, a building, a bus, etc.; from a place, or from a person. Consider the following illustrative examples:

- 1) According to police reports, numerous vehicles, both new and used, have been stolen in the city in recent months. The thefts have occurred from various car dealerships and private parking lots (*The Muncie Star*).
- 2) A thief stole her purse while she was queuing.
- 3) Someone stole some money from the cashier's counter at the bank yesterday.

The verb *rob* is similar to the verb *steal* with regard to the place in which the illegal action is committed. The following are illustrative examples:

- 4) They robbed the bank at gunpoint.
- 5) ... Tourists in New York are most vulnerable to being robbed, especially if coming from low-crime towns and cities (Tubilleja 2001).
- 6) He'd just rob us and tie us up and leave us for the wolves, I expect (concordance).

Examples (1-6) above clearly show that stealing and robbing can occur inside and outside a house or building.

Unlike *steal* and *rob*, the verb *burglarize* refers to the kind of theft that is committed in houses or other similar structures. In other words, the verb *burglarize* implies that the crime of burglary occurs inside buildings, especially houses. Consider the following examples:

- 7) A Mitsubishi video recorder worth £475 was stolen in a burglary at a house in Widgeon Road, Darlington, between Friday evening and the early hours of Saturday morning (*BNC*).
- 8) According to Police Captain Robert Snow "... more than 5 million American households were burglarized in 1995" (*New Stand* 1998).

Another point that supports the idea of "inness" with regard to "burglary" is the fact that the word *house* collocates with *burglary* in *house burglary*. Furthermore, almost all the collected examples on burgle and burglary described the illegal action of breaking or forcing one's way into a house.

### 3.2. Object of activity (the verb)

Identifying the semantic properties of the object of the verb helps us to determine which verb can be used in a certain context: *steal*, *rob*, or *burglarize*. The object of the verb *steal*, for example, is almost always non-human, portable/movable (easily carried from a place to another) and usually concrete, unless the verb is used in a metaphorical sense. The following examples illustrate these features:

- 9) I didn't steal your wallet. You must have put it somewhere.
- 10) He planned to steal a car although he couldn't drive.
- 11) Despite fine acting by several well-known stars, it was a young newcomer who stole the show (attracted the most attention and praise).

The objects of the verb *steal* in the above examples are non-human, portable and concrete. These selectional restrictions account for the semantic oddness/unacceptability of the following sentences:

- 12) \* The thief stole the young boy. (+ human)
- 13) \* Two men stole the bank/house. (immovable object: place)

Examples (12-13) are unacceptable because the objects of the verb *steal* violate the constraints of being non-human and portable.

The verb *rob* takes an object that can be human, or a place (house or institution) that is concrete and importable. However, the object of *rob* can also be abstract when it is used metaphorically. The following examples illustrate these features:

- 14) He robbed the bank.
- 15) They plan to rob a toy store on Christmas Eve in a busy New York street.
- 16) A gang of three men robbed a shopkeeper last night.
- 17) The fact that he had lied before robbed his words of any credibility.

These features of the object of the verb *rob* rule out the acceptability of the following sentences:

- 18) \*He robbed a car. (not a person or a place and it is portable)
- 19) \*He robbed my watch. (not a person or a place and it is movable)

These examples show that one can rob but cannot steal a person. However, one can steal from a person. Consider the following example:

- 20) ... And the neighbors, she said, are afraid if they make a move they'll get robbed (*The New York Times*).

Figuratively, however, one can find examples where a person can get stolen. In the "Oprah Winfrey Show", they refer to somebody who:

- 21) "Stole her sister's husband."

What makes this example acceptable despite its apparent violation of the semantic constraint that determines the nature of the object of the verb *steal* is the context in which it is used. The participants in the conversation know what it means for a woman to steal another lady's husband.

Finally the feature that distinguishes the object of *burglarize* is that it must be a place and not a human being. That is why the word *house* collocates with *burglary* in *house burglary*. The following are illustrative examples.

- 22) Damian, an adult, entered the waste ground through a hole in the fence, intending to burgle Charles' house.
- 23) They would rather go and burgle a house that is not alarmed.

Any violation of this semantic constraint on the object of *burglarize* renders the sentence unacceptable. Consider the following examples:

- 24) \*They have burglarized a statue of the Christ Child in Wabash. (object is not a place and can be moved)

Virtually all the examples the study considered show that the verb *burglarize* refers to that kind of theft that is committed against places, but the things that these places contain are not burglarized by burglars, but rather are stolen, as the following example illustrates:

- 25) Our house was burglarized last night while we were away. The burglars stole our stereo and our TV.

Another dimension that may also help distinguish these verbs from each other relates to the size and value of the theft. For instance, a thief may steal little things such as watches, wallets, or money from people or from store counters, as well as valuable and precious items from museums and jewelry stores etc.; whereas a burglar or a robber tends to go for bigger things such as banks, jewelry stores, etc. In other words, a thief can steal from people of any economic level; whereas a robber or a burglar tends to go for higher class or wealthy people. The analysis of the data revealed that robbery is rarely committed against the very poor, who rather get mugged. Similarly, burglaries do not usually happen to the property of poor or lower class people. Both burglars and robbers usually look for something that is worth the risk. The following examples may illustrate this point:

- 26) He stole the ashtray.  
 27) He is a jewel thief.  
 28) He robbed a bank/ pharmacy.  
 29) He burglarized/robbed the jewelry store.

Unlike the verb *steal*, the direct objects of the verbs *rob* and *burglarize* are not single objects (things), but rather places or people. The object in the following sentence is a single item. That is why the use of the verb *steal* is acceptable, whereas the use of *rob* and *burglarize* renders the sentence semantically ill-formed.

- 30) They have [stolen, \*robbed, \*burglarized] a statue of the Christ Child in Wabash.

However, the verbs *burglarize* and *rob* are acceptable in the following example, whereas *steal* is not, simply because the object is a place and not a single movable object.

- 31) They [burglarized/ robbed/ \*stole] the fur store.

### 3.3. Manner of action

Another distinction that helps to differentiate these words relates to the manner in which the actions of theft that these verbs represent are carried out. The verb *steal* implies an illegal activity of stealthily taking away something from goal/container (a person or a place) without force or violence. Actually, part of the meaning of the verb *steal*, as defined in *The concise Oxford dictionary*, is ‘to move silently or stealthily’. Consider the following examples:

- 32) Paul Nee, owner of a small variety store, wanted nothing less than a jail term for the thief who stole \$170 from his cash register.
- 33) He stole a glance at the princess.
- 34) He stole certain things from the office during the lunch break.

On the other hand, the verb *rob* implies an illegal activity of dispossessing a container, to use Pinker’s (1989) terms, (someone/something) of something else by force, threat or violence. In other words, it refers to that action of theft that involves the use of force, threat, or violence on the part of the robber against the robbed. A face-to-face confrontation occurs between the robber and the robbed who are usually unable to protect their properties. *Indiana criminal code* defines the term *robbery* as an activity in which a person who knowingly or intentionally takes property from another person by (a) using force or threatening the use of force on any person; or (b) putting any person in fear. The following examples illustrate this definition:

- 35) [A tourist] was robbed and killed in Zimbabwe (The Star, June 24, 2003).
- 36) He’d just rob us and tie us up and leave us for the wolves, I expect (concordance).

However, one may argue that a robbery does not always involve force or violence, as the second condition of the above definition states. Consider the following example:

- 37) The store was robbed last night. The thieves got away with \$300, but the clerk was not hurt.

In fact, no one can rob a safe or a protected place such as a store or a bank without using force to break into that safe place, nor can a robber rob a person of his property without using force or threat. The fact that the clerk in example (37) above was not hurt does not exclude the use of force. It may be because the

clerk did not resist the robber or did not even disturb the whole activity. This might also be due to the possibility that the clerk was threatened not to show any reaction.

Unlike *rob* whose direct object can be either human or place, the verb *burglarize* implies an illegal activity of stealthily forcing a way or breaking into a secure place in order to steal something from it. In other words, this verb can only be used with a place as its direct object. Burglary as well as robbery may involve resorting to weapons and violence if disturbed. Consider the following examples:

- 38) Most burglars won't attack unless they are frightened. (*Reader's Digest*, Nov. 1991)
- 39) "If you hear an intruder in your home, don't you confront him directly. Burglars are like wild animals", says Joe Rodriguez. A crime prevention expert with the San Antonio police. "They are most likely to fight if they feel trapped" (*Reader's Digest*, Nov. 1991).

These constraints can account for the acceptability of examples (40-42) and the unacceptability of sentences (43) and (44) below.

- 40) Two horsemen robbed a shepherd last week.
- 41) They burglarized a food store two hours ago.
- 42) Our house was burglarized last year while we were away. The burglars stole our stereo and our TV. When we walked into the house, my husband said "we have been robbed".
- 43) \*A group of three men burglarized a bus driver on the highway yesterday.
- 44) \*Three armed men robbed a pharmacy a little bit after midnight last night.

Example (42) above may raise a question about the comment of the husband. Why did he use *rob* rather than *burglarize* although the latter is used in the first sentence? This can probably be accounted for as follows. The husband realizes that the verbs *rob* and *burglarize* are in essence similar in meaning. Both involve committing an assault or an illegal activity against oneself or one's own property. The husband's use of *rob* rather than *burglarize* also reflects his deep knowledge (competence) of how these two verbs behave syntactically and semantically. He knows that only places (houses, shops, etc.) not human beings can realize the object function in the complement of the verb *burglarize*. Realizing that he and his wife are the losers as a result of burglarizing their house, he used a passive structure to convey the same intended effect with the pronoun *we* as the surface subject of his comment. However, being aware of the constraints on using the verb *burglarize* and *rob*, he opted for the latter since people can be robbed, but not burglarized.

### 3.4. Connotation

Another aspect that might shed light on the different uses of the verbs *steal*, *rob*, and *burglarize* relates to their connotative meanings. The verb *rob* is always associated with a pejorative, or negative connotation. Consider the following examples:

- 45) Poverty robs a man of his dignity.
- 46) He robbed her of her happiness.
- 47) The fact that he had lied before robbed his words of any credibility.

The role of pragmatic factors is, again, evident here. It is the interlocutors' knowledge of the universe of discourse that makes these sentences imbued with pejorative meanings.

Similarly, the verb *burglarize* always has a negative connotation. This analysis agrees with the severity of the punishment given for these three kinds of larceny: theft, burglary, and robbery, where the first is regarded as a Class D felony, the second as a Class B or C felony, and the third as an A, B, or C felony, with A as the worst and D as the least severe (See *Indiana criminal code*: 35-45).

The verb *steal*, on the other hand, can sometimes imply positive connotations, as the following examples show:

- 48) A pretty child is often told that s/he will grow up to be a heart "stealer".
- 49) She stole his heart.
- 50) Robin Hood stole from the rich and gave to the poor (from a song).

In these sentences, the verb *steal* is used metaphorically.

### 4. Conclusion

In light of the preceding analysis we can conclude that the semantic constraints that govern the use the verbs *steal*, *rob* and *burglarize* can be tentatively stated as follows:

1. The verb *steal* implies an illegal activity of stealthily taking away something from a goal/container (a person or a place) usually without force or violence. The syntactic object of this verb is a non-human, concrete, and portable object.
2. The verb *rob* implies an illegal activity of dispossessing a container (someone/something) of something else by force, threat or violence. This is the

only verb among the three that can take a direct human object; therefore, it involves face-to-face confrontation between the robber and the robbed. The object of this verb is a human, concrete, importable place.

3. The verb *burglarize* implies an illegal activity of stealthily forcing a way or breaking into a secure place in order to steal something from it. This activity may involve resorting to weapons and violence if disturbed. The object of *burglarize* is a non-human, concrete and importable place.

The following chart clearly shows the similarities and the differences between the three verbs. It summarizes the distinctive features that make each of these verbs distinct from each other.

Table 1. Semantic features of the verbs *steal*, *rob* and *burglarize*

| Feature           | Object |          |          |         |       | Man-<br>ner | Location           |    | Connotation |          |
|-------------------|--------|----------|----------|---------|-------|-------------|--------------------|----|-------------|----------|
|                   | Human  | Concrete | Abstract | Movable | Place |             | Force/viole<br>nce | in | out         | positive |
| <i>steal</i>      | -      | +        | (+)      | +       | -     | -           | +                  | +  | (+)         | +        |
| <i>rob</i>        | +      | +        | (+)      | -       | +     | +           | +                  | +  | -           | +        |
| <i>burglarize</i> | -      | +        | -        | -       | +     | +           | +                  | -  | -           | +        |

Table 1 above clearly shows how the three target verbs stand different from each other, and which features are distinctive between these verbs. The minus sign (-) means the absence of the feature from the basic meaning of the verb, whereas the plus sign (+) indicates that the feature so marked is a basic component in the meaning of the relevant verb. The parentheses are used in the chart to signal the possibility of using the verb in an abstract metaphorical sense. This analysis is far from being comprehensive. However, it sheds some light on the semantic components and the syntactic features that may help in differentiating the verbs *steal*, *rob* and *burglarize*.

The analysis revealed that although these verbs are often cited as synonyms, they are not interchangeable. The three verbs are in fact mutually exclusive, i.e. each verb has its own context. Dictionary compilers should take into account

that despite the fact that these verbs share some basic meaning components, there are still other features that set them apart from each other. Therefore, it is essential that these distinctive features be incorporated in dictionary entries as well as the general features. The exclusion of such distinctive semantic features from both monolingual and bilingual dictionary entries may create a potential source of error for foreign language learners since they might be led to think that verbs, or even words in general, that are listed as synonyms are interchangeable in all contexts.

Curricula designers and textbook writers should not neglect these subtle differences between seemingly synonymous words. The minute distinctions between such verbs should also be highlighted in teaching translation from English into Arabic and vice versa.

Further research is recommended in the area of componential analysis or semantic features that distinguish words that belong to the same semantic field such as verbs of saying, verbs of completion, verbs of motion, verbs of complaint, or any other set of verbs that are usually listed as synonyms.

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