SIL Electronic Book Reviews 2012-004

A history of Roget's thesaurus: Origins, development, and design

By Werner Hüllen


Reviewed by Dirk Kievit
SIL International

1. Structure

A companion to Hüllen’s earlier book English Dictionaries 800–1700: The Topical Tradition (1999), this book, published five years later, focuses on the history of synonymy and argues how both the topical and synonym traditions converge in Roget’s Thesaurus. The author, the late Werner Hüllen (1927–2008), was a professor of English linguistics at the University of Essen (later to become the University of Duisburg-Essen) in Germany.

Naturally, the book will be of interest to those who are working on lexicography. But in its reflections on synonymy it will also be of interest to those who are working in the areas of discourse analysis and translation.

The book consists of eight chapters varying greatly in length, with chapters 1–7 tracing the “historical prerequisites” (p. 7) for an analysis of the Thesaurus itself in chapter 8. Even though the chapters are not arranged in parts, Hüllen groups them as follows in his introduction:

- Chapters 1 and 2: Roget and his thesaurus. Chapter 1 (7 pp.) presents the thesis and outline of the book while chapter 2 (18 pp.) gives an overview of Peter Mark Roget’s life and the publication history of his Thesaurus in Europe from 1852 (the year of its publication) to the end of the nineteenth century.
- Chapters 3–5: Synonymy. Chapter 3 (45 pp.) gives an overview of twentieth-century semantics; chapter 4 (45 pp.) discusses the use of synonymy from the classics up to Roget’s time; and chapter 5 (79 pp.) discusses synonymy in hard-word dictionaries from the seventeenth century on.
- Chapters 6 and 7: Synonym and topical dictionaries. Chapter 6 (78 pp.) traces the development of the English synonym dictionary and chapter 7 (45 pp.) does the same for the English topical dictionary.
Finally, chapter 8 (54 pp.) analyzes Roget’s *Thesaurus* as both a topical dictionary and a dictionary of synonyms.

The book concludes with:

- an Appendix, consisting of reproductions of the “Plan of Classification” and the “Tabular Synopsis of Categories” from the *Thesaurus*;
- a Bibliography, divided into Primary and Secondary Sources; and
- an Index.

The Table of Contents at the beginning of the book lists the chapter titles and main section headings while more detailed outlines introduce each chapter.

### 2. Argument

Hüllen approaches Roget’s *Thesaurus* as a historian. Roget’s *Thesaurus*, he claims, represents “a real achievement in linguistics-based lexicography” (p. 2). For centuries, two types of dictionary had been circulating in Europe: synonym dictionaries and topical dictionaries. Hüllen’s thesis is that Roget’s “unique achievement was to integrate these two types of dictionary by compiling a *topical dictionary of synonyms*” (pp. 4–5; emphasis his).

English synonym dictionaries had been popular for about a century before Roget’s *Thesaurus* appeared in 1852. Inspired by the French synonym dictionary of Abbé Gabriel Girard (1718), these dictionaries were comprehensive works in which the headwords, listed in alphabetical order, were explained primarily by means of synonymizing. This format, of defining a word by means of synonyms, can be traced back to the so-called hard-word dictionaries of the seventeenth century (which explained words that had entered the English language from other languages) and even further back to the Latin interpretative dictionaries of the fifteenth century.

Parallel to the synonym tradition, and going back even further, the topical tradition consisted of dictionaries which listed headwords not in alphabetical order but rather according to some classification scheme. The last great topical work in Britain was John Wilkins’ *Tables*, published in 1668. Its first category was God and the world as creation. Following it were various other categories including substance, quantity, and quality. The topical dictionaries reflected belief in an orderly world.

Roget’s *Thesaurus* is first of all a dictionary of synonyms. The entire lexis of the language is treated as a network of interconnected, overlapping words. But unlike its predecessors in the synonym tradition, the *Thesaurus* is not arranged alphabetically (although Roget always included an alphabetical index as a secondary entry point for finding synonyms). Instead, like the topical dictionaries, headwords are arranged topically.

Roget’s *Thesaurus* is a pivotal work in lexicography also because it anticipates future developments in the theory of semantics. Later semantic concepts such as semantic field, semantic feature, and prototypes—which all center on the notion of synonymy—can be traced throughout the book.
3. Applications

Hüllen’s book will be helpful to you if you are working in lexicography. It will help you understand the various components of a dictionary so that you can make informed decisions about the proposed structure of your dictionary. For example, rather than waiting until you are able to produce a comprehensive dictionary of the language you are researching, you might consider creating a topical dictionary for a specific domain (such as flora and fauna), a pocket dictionary for elementary school students, or perhaps a dictionary of synonyms of theological terms for Bible translators.

Hüllen’s book will also be useful to you if you are working in discourse analysis, especially in the area of synonymy. The book made me more aware of how we use synonyms in English. For example, often two or more synonymous terms are strung together, as in the following set of sentences which I heard. The focus here is on the overlap in meaning between the various terms, which is why this type of synonymy is known as cumulative synonymy.

- We are here to worship a huge, massive God.
- He never apologized—not a word of remorse or regret.
- It was not uncommon for many Irish immigrants to find themselves destitute, starving, and penniless.
- You see David’s faith and courage, trust and confidence.

Sometimes cumulative synonymy is used to explain or define what the speaker probably considers a more obscure term—just as was done in the old synonym dictionaries—as is the case in the following set of sentences. Note here that the first term is analogous to the headword in a dictionary and the second term to the definition.

- Your timing is indeed fortuitous, timely.
- He’s the head pooh-bah; he’s the main guy.
- He’s a man of straw; he’s nothing.
- They train you how to implement it and how to get it going.

Synonyms may also be used in quite the opposite way so that the focus is not so much on their similarity as on their contrast. This is the case in the following examples. While the synonymous terms in these two sentences clearly overlap to some extent, the focus is here on their contrasts. This type of synonymy is known as differentiating synonymy.

- I don’t think it was his smartness. It was more his cleverness.
- I’m not hungry—I’m starving!
Both cumulative and differentiating synonymy illustrate that while synonyms share a common core meaning, their total meanings never completely overlap. As Hüllen observes, strictly speaking, therefore, “synonymy is a name for a possibility in language which is not realized” (p. 37). The fact is that synonyms always partly overlap and partly differ but depending on our context and intention, we can “actuate” (Hüllen’s term) either their similarity or their difference.

How do synonyms function in the language you are researching? Can you identify examples of cumulative and differentiating synonymy? Do synonyms have a special place in public speaking, storytelling, proverbs, or in other genre?

Finally, Hüllen’s book will be of interest to you if you are involved in translation work—perhaps as a way of understanding and explaining the act of translation. While I’m sure Hüllen recognizes the importance of discourse studies in translation, he states that “linguistically speaking, the act of translating is nothing more than the act of finding interlingual synonyms” (p. 122). In other words, translation is really an extension of our everyday strategy of using synonyms. For this reason, it should not come as a surprise to find that cross-linguistically, as within a particular language, equivalent words may only partially overlap—especially so the more distantly related the languages involved are to each other.

For example, the Austronesian language Southwest Tanna (SW Tanna) spoken on the island of Tanna in Vanuatu does not have a generic term for cousin. Instead, you have to stipulate whether you are referring to a cross-cousin (the child of one’s father’s sister or mother’s brother) or a parallel cousin (the child of one’s father’s brother or mother’s sister), with further distinctions for gender. So, while SW Tanna has several lexemes that we might consider synonymous to the English word for ‘cousin’, none of them completely overlaps in meaning with the English term. All of the terms available are narrower, more specific, in scope.

4. Critique

Hüllen’s book contains a wealth of information as it charts the course of English lexicography up to Roget’s Thesaurus. The bibliography lists 94 primary sources and 197 secondary sources!

I close with a few criticisms of areas that I think detract from the usefulness of Hüllen’s otherwise monumental work. The first one concerns the title: A History of Roget’s Thesaurus. At first sight that might give the impression it’s the history of the Thesaurus following its publication that is in focus, while actually what is meant primarily is the history leading up to its publication. The subtitle (in much smaller font) does mention “Origins” and “Development” but I think that should have been brought to the foreground. A more descriptive title might have been something like Roget’s Thesaurus: Its Origins in the Synonym and Topical Traditions.

Second, with a mere four pages, the index certainly does not do justice to a book of nearly 400 pages of text. This is rather ironic given the fact that this is a book about a thesaurus! It appears that the index was generated (only) mechanically without regard to salience. For example, the entry “Roget, P. M.” refers to numerous pages whose only mention of Roget occurs in the phrase “Roget’s Thesaurus” and which have nothing to say otherwise about the person Peter Mark Roget.
In addition, many entries in the index are followed by a long string of page numbers without any subentries or cross-references. This is the case, for example, with the entry for “Roget, P. M.” just mentioned. Breaking the entry up into subentries would, admittedly, take up more space but the result would be an entry that would be eminently more practical for the reader—which is, after all, what Roget himself would have wanted. Finally, it would also have been helpful if the index had indicated pages where terms were first introduced or defined.

Finally, my copy of the book was missing pages 279–310 and repeated pages 311–341. Apparently, the cut (32 pages) for the earlier set of pages was omitted and the cut for the latter set of pages repeated. I was told this was an “isolated” problem. Even so, you may want to check to make sure all your pages (particularly pages 279–310) are intact when purchasing your own copy of the book.

Notes

1 For a popular introduction to Roget’s Thesaurus, including a discussion of its publication history and interesting facets of Roget’s life, see Blake 2008.

2 Example from Southwest Tanna courtesy of Kenneth Nehrbass. See his dictionary of Tannese lexemes.

References


In 1852, Peter Mark Roget eclipsed a rich tradition of topically based dictionaries with the publication of his Thesaurus of English Words and Phrases, Classified and Arranged so as to Facilitate the Expression of Ideas. Based on intuition as much as on specific linguistic principles, Roget's book has been a bestseller ever since and is one of the most widely used reference works ever published. This book gives the first history of its genesis and publication, and investigates the principles of its structural design. It opens with an account of Roget's life and his background in natu Roget's Thesaurus was first published in 1852 and has come to be one of the most famous and widely-used reference works in the world. This is the first account of its genesis. Werner Hüllen contends that synonymy (words with similar meanings) is a feature of language without which we could not communicate. He describes the development in the theory and practice of synonymy from Plato to the seventeenth century.