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SEMANTIC AND CONTEXTUAL ASPECTS OF SYNONYM CHOICE IN TRANSLATION

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Abstract:

Choosing an appropriate synonym is one of the most sensitive decisions in translation because synonyms rarely share identical meaning, connotation, register, and collocational behavior. This article examines synonym choice from semantic and contextual perspectives in English–Uzbek translation and shows how denotation, connotation, stylistic level, pragmatic intention, and co-text guide lexical selection. In line with the view that meaning is realized in context and that equivalence is functional rather than mechanical, the paper proposes a practical decision logic for translators and illustrates it with everyday Uzbek–English examples. Special attention is paid to graded adjectives (e.g., *go‘zal* → *beautiful/lovely/gorgeous*) and to frequent translation risks such as register mismatch, exaggerated intensity, and unnatural collocation. By combining theoretical insights and applied examples, the study argues that professional synonym choice requires contextual reading, awareness of semantic nuance, and justified decision-making rather than dictionary-driven substitution.

Keywords:

synonym choice; lexical semantics; context; connotation; register; collocation; equivalence; English–Uzbek translation; pragmatic meaning; translation strategy

Why Synonyms Are Not Interchangeable in Translation

In translation practice, “synonyms” are rarely interchangeable in the way learners often assume. Even when words share a core meaning, they differ in intensity, emotional coloring, social evaluation, stylistic level, and typical collocations. As Baker explains, equivalence is not merely word-to-word matching; it depends on how meaning functions in context. Newmark likewise stresses that lexical choices must preserve not only denotation but also the author’s attitude and tone. A useful habit for translators is to pause before selecting a synonym and ask: *What does this word do here—describe, praise, soften, intensify, or persuade?* This single question often prevents exaggerated or emotionally “mis-tuned” translations.

Key Semantic Parameters for Choosing Synonyms

A practical semantic checklist begins with four parameters: denotation, intensity, connotation, and register. Denotation is the basic reference; intensity is the strength of evaluation; connotation is the emotional or social “color”; register is the level of formality and stylistic suitability. When translating, it helps to map the source word along these four axes and then match a target synonym with a similar profile. For instance, if the Uzbek sentence is neutral and informational, choosing a highly expressive English synonym can unintentionally turn a description into advertisement-like language. In daily practice, translators can keep a small “scale” list for frequent adjectives (e.g., *pretty* → *beautiful* → *gorgeous*) and align it with Uzbek options and

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intensifiers (*chiroyli* → *go‘zal* → *juda go‘zal / betakror*). This makes intensity control much easier.

Context as the Main Filter

Context determines which synonym is acceptable. Polysemy, pragmatic intention, and co-text (surrounding words) narrow meaning and restrict choices. A translator’s simplest control technique is to test candidate synonyms in the full sentence rather than in isolation. If a synonym sounds “correct” but feels unnatural in the sentence, collocation is usually the problem. Corpus-based views of meaning (e.g., Sinclair’s “meaning through pattern”) support this: words carry meaning through repeated combinations. A practical step is to check whether the chosen adjective naturally combines with the noun in English (e.g., *gorgeous dress* is natural; *gorgeous weather* is possible but often sounds more enthusiastic than neutral). This quick collocation check dramatically increases naturalness.

Case Focus: “go‘zal” and English Beauty Synonyms

The Uzbek adjective *go‘zal* is a strong positive evaluator, but its exact force depends on context. In neutral descriptive sentences, *beautiful* is usually the safest choice because it is broadly acceptable across genres and does not strongly push tone into emotional praise. For example, *Samarqand go‘zal shahar* → *Samarkand is a beautiful city*. Here *beautiful* preserves positive evaluation while keeping the sentence informational. If the source context is warmer and more interpersonal (pleasant, friendly praise), *lovely* often fits better: *Bugun havoning o‘zi go‘zal ekan* → *The weather is lovely today*. This choice reflects English pragmatics: *lovely* often signals personal warmth rather than formal description. When the Uzbek sentence expresses stronger admiration—often marked by intensifiers like *juda*—*gorgeous* becomes appropriate: *Uning libosi juda go‘zal edi* → *Her dress was gorgeous*. A useful practice is to align Uzbek intensifiers with English intensity words: if the Uzbek has *juda / nihoyatda*, consider whether English needs a stronger synonym rather than simply adding “very.”

Register Control: Matching Style to Text Type

Synonym choice must fit the genre. In formal texts, highly emotional synonyms can sound unprofessional; in conversational texts, overly academic synonyms can sound unnatural. Consider Uzbek *aqli*: in casual speech, *smart* is natural; in academic evaluation, *intelligent* or *highly competent* may be better depending on whether you evaluate intellect or professional ability. A practical rule is to identify the text type in one phrase before translating: “*academic report*,” “*advertisement*,” “*dialogue*,” “*news*.” Then choose synonyms that normally belong to that text type. This is a simple step, but it prevents a common translator mistake: mixing formal and informal registers in one paragraph.

Collocation and “Naturalness” as a Quality Criterion

Even accurate meaning can fail if collocation is wrong. Near-synonyms often have different typical partners: *large amount* is far more natural than *big amount* in standard English; *big problem* is more idiomatic than *large problem* in many contexts. This matters for Uzbek *katta*, which often needs different English renderings depending on what “bigness” means. If *katta* refers to quantity, *large* is usually better (*katta miqdor* → *a large amount*). If it refers to seriousness or conversational emphasis, *big* fits (*katta muammo* → *a big problem*). If it refers to significance and evaluation, *great* may be the best match (*katta yutuq* → *a great achievement*). A

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useful habit is to test two candidates quickly: if one sounds “written English” and the other sounds “spoken English,” that contrast often tells you which register you are dealing with.

Connotation and Attitude Preservation

Synonyms can carry different social meanings. Uzbek *xafa* is often translated as *sad*, but context may require *upset*, *hurt*, *offended*, or *disappointed*. *Sad* is broad emotional state; *offended* indicates social insult; *disappointed* indicates unmet expectations. Choosing the wrong synonym changes the psychology of the sentence and may misrepresent the speaker’s attitude. A practical step is to identify the cause implied by context: *Is it loss (sad), irritation (upset), insult (offended), or expectation failure (disappointed)?* This “cause check” helps preserve connotation accurately.

A Translator’s Decision Routine for Synonym Choice

Professional synonym choice becomes easier when translators develop a routine: first, determine the contextual meaning; second, define the semantic profile (intensity, register, connotation); third, generate 2–4 candidate synonyms; fourth, test each candidate for collocation and tone in the full sentence; finally, choose the option that best preserves both meaning and communicative function. A good self-check is to justify the choice in one sentence (even mentally): *“I chose ‘lovely’ because the speaker’s tone is warm and conversational, not formal description.”* This justification habit strengthens consistency and reduces random synonym switching.

Conclusion

Synonym choice in translation is not decoration; it is semantic and contextual control. Near-synonyms differ in intensity, connotation, register, and collocation, and therefore cannot be treated as interchangeable equivalents. In English–Uzbek translation, adjectives such as *go‘zal* may correspond to *beautiful*, *lovely*, or *gorgeous* depending on communicative intention, textual genre, and collocational fit. Translators achieve professional accuracy when they read meaning through context, test synonym candidates inside real sentences, and preserve the author’s attitude as well as the denotational core. In practice, the best synonym is not the “strongest” or “most advanced” word, but the one that sounds natural in the target text while carrying the same meaning and tone.

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