Contextual Considerations in the Use of Synonymous Verbs: The Case of *Cease, End, Finish and Stop*

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Abstract: *This corpus-based study endeavors to explore the semantic differences among the verbs cease, finish, end and stop when used in different contexts. The author analyzed a set of data that comprised 500 contextualized instances in which these verbs are used. The data were culled from different sources including BNC, novels and spontaneous speech. In addition to the syntactic constraints that govern the use of these verbs, the findings of the study reveal a number of contextual features that distinguish them from one another, including completeness, finality, conclusiveness, animacy, abruptness, gradualness, among others.*

Keywords: context, semantics, synonymous verbs, verbs of ending.

1. Introduction

Synonymous terms tend to be one of the rather intricate areas that ESL/EFL learners stumble upon in the process of their learning the language. Many studies have pointed to the difficulty that such learners encounter when dealing with synonyms. Khuvasanond et al. (2010), for instance, found that "synonyms were more difficult for ESL/EFL to produce than antonyms" (p. 180). More often than not, ESL/EFL learners tend to question the significance of having more than one term to express a certain activity and wonder whether there exist some semantic differences among them or not. Unfortunately, teachers, dictionaries, and textbooks do not always offer answers to such learners' legitimate queries. The terms *cease, end, finish* and *stop* are a case in point. They are among the synonymous verbs that are very frequently used in daily communication and which, at times, constitute a difficulty for English learners. This study, therefore, aims at exploring the semantic differences that can manifest themselves among the verbs *cease, finish, end* and *stop* when used in different contexts. More specifically the study seeks answers to the following two questions:

1. What are the features that differentiate these verbs from one another?
2. To what extent can context help in deciphering the meaning of these synonymous verbs?

2. Review of literature

The notion of synonymy has been the focus of many studies including Lyons (1977), Lyons (1995), Saeed (1979), Palmer (1981), Cruse (1986), Gregory (2000), Kearns (2000), among others. In scrutinizing the myriad of definitions

that this notion has received, one could find that virtually all of them categorize as synonyms any two-word forms that share a sense or many senses. Gregory (2000), for instance, maintains that "if two word forms share at least one word sense, then they are synonyms" (p. 2). On the other hand, none of the definitions associates synonymy with absolute interchangeability. Although Lyons (1995: 60-61) defines synonymy as expressions that have "the same meaning," the word 'same' does not imply identicalness, for he, in the same context, argues that "absolute synonymy is *extremely* rare" (emphasis added). Saeed (1979: 65) points out that, "true or exact synonyms are rare". Kearns (2000) holds the same view, arguing: "true lexical synonymy is rare" (p. 10). Palmer (1981) asserts that "there are no real synonyms." He also contends that "no two words have exactly the same meaning. Indeed, it would seem unlikely that two words with exactly the same meaning would both survive in a language" (p. 89). Palmer ascribes the plethora of synonyms in English to a historical reason, pointing out that English vocabulary "has come from two different sources, from Anglo-Saxon on the one hand and from French, Latin and Greek on the other" (p. 88).

These views prove the problematic nature of the concept of synonyms. Dictionaries, as will be illustrated below, do not do much to help learners. Palmer maintains that "dictionaries, unfortunately, (except the very large ones), tell us little about the precise connections between words and their defining synonyms or between the synonyms themselves" (p. 91).

One of the approaches that has been resorted to as a way of tackling the problem posed by synonyms is to study them in context. Only through context can one decipher the areas of closeness and areas of overlap in any pair or group of supposed synonyms, and this is, indeed, what many studies have attempted to do. Some of these studies include Rea (1968), Freed (1979), Riddle (1989), Clift (2003), Saeed and Fareh (2006), Wang (2009), Phoocharoensi (2010), Shen (2010), Chung (2011), among others. Rea (1968) explored the uses of *lend* and *loan* in American English while Freed (1979) investigated, among other things, the differences between *start* and *begin*. Riddle (1989) attempted a semantic analysis of three transition expressions that tend to be perceived by learners as synonymous namely *however*, *nevertheless*, and *in spite of*, demonstrating how a detailed lexical semantic analysis of such highly utilized synonymous transitions could help EFL learners decipher their various meaning and range of uses. Clift (2003) examines the use of *actually* and *in fact*. Her data revealed "interactional differences" between these two items, which are virtually always considered synonyms. These differences may, as she puts it, "be identified with reference to the position of each in a turn-at-talk, and the composition of that turn" (p. 182). Saeed and Fareh (2006) explored the contextual factors that govern the use of the verbs *steal, rob* and *burglarize* in authentic contexts "in an attempt to identify the semantic and syntactic constraints that differentiate them from one another" (p. 323). Their investigation delineated a number of semantic features that determine which verb to choose in a given context. These features include location of activity, object of activity, and manner of action. Wang (2009) explored "the different meaning and usages between the two Chinese

near-synonyms verbs of running: *Ben* and *Pao*…" He identified some semantic patterns that govern the use of these two verbs. Such patterns, as he puts it, can provide non-native speakers of Chinese "with guidelines to use the words appropriately" (p. 399). Phoocharoensi (2010) studied the lexical, syntactic, and stylistic information of five synonyms: *ask, beg*, *plead, request,* and *appeal*. His analysis revealed that "despite being similar in core meaning, these words in reality differ in some particular details or senses of meaning, connotations, styles, dialects, grammatical patterns, and collocations" (p. 243). Shen (2010) used the synonymous pair *glad* and *happy* to investigate Chinese EFL learners' errors in the use of these terms in writing. He states: "English has many words that are considered synonymous and Chinese EFL (English as Foreign Language) learners tend to mix them up and make certain kinds of errors" (p. 1). Chung (2011) examined, using corpus-based data, the similarities and differences between *create* and *produce*. The author found that "although many of the senses of the two verbs, and even their object types, might seem unrelated, they could be linked through the notion of PRODUCT." She proposed an explanation "encompassing the non-discrete semantic features of 'create' and 'produce' and discussed the literal and/or metaphorical extensions of PRODUCTS of both verbs" (p. 419).

Despite the number of studies on synonymous verbs, none has attempted to explore the distinguishing features that characterize the four synonymous verbs in the study. The only study whose focus was found to be slightly close to that of our study is that of Nagy (2006). Nagy attempted a description of what he calls "aspectualizers," drawing on Freed's study (1979). He focused on aspectualizers "expressing initiation (begin vs. start), continuity (continue, keep, resume and repeat), interruption or cessation (stop, quit, cease) and termination (finish, end and complete)." Nagy's treatment discusses some syntactic and semantic constraints in the use of these aspectualizers. Although the study provides interesting observations related to the use of these aspectualizers, it does not provide a comprehensive account of the features that characterize each group of these aspectualizers. In other words, Nagy's account does not go into a great enough depth to produce plausible generalizations. Our study differs from Nagy's in that it is, among other things, corpus-based.

One of the sources that contribute to the difficulty of such a group of synonyms, and almost certainly to similar groups, is ascribed to the fact that they are underdefined by both monolingual and bilingual dictionaries. Both monolingual and bilingual dictionaries offer incomplete information on their meaning and use, which does not help the learner to use the terms appropriately in 'a normal range of context' to use Riddle's words (see Riddle, 1989). In fact, many researchers including Wang (2009), Saeed and Fareh (2006) and Riddle (1989), among others, have addressed the incomplete nature of the information offered by dictionaries. In his investigation of the Chinese near-synonymous verbs of running, Wang (2009) states: "[T]he definition given by the dictionary is often circular and far from enough to help distinguish near synonymous verbs" (p. 399). Indeed, circularity is manifest in the treatment that most

monolingual and bilingual dictionaries offer to synonymous terms. Table 1 shows the definitions that three monolingual learners' dictionaries give to the four synonymous verbs under study. These dictionaries are among the ones frequently used by EFL learners. It is not the intention of the author to compare these dictionaries or doubt their usefulness, but rather to show their treatment of the four verbs in the study.

Table 1. Monolingual learners' dictionaries' definitions of *cease, finish, end* and *stop*

| Dictionary | Verb | | | |
	Cease	*End*	*Finish*	*Stop*
Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary	To stop something	To *finish* or *stop*, or to make something *finish* or *stop*	To complete something or come to the *end* of an activity: To *end*…	To *finish* To finish doing something
The Compact Oxford English Dictionary of Current English	-	come or bring to an *end*; finish.	bring or come to an *end*; *end* by doing something or…	come or bring to an *end*;… *cease* or cause to *cease* moving or operating
Longman Dictionary for English Language and Culture	To *stop* (esp. an activity of state)	To (cause to) *finish*; come or bring to an *end*	To come or to bring to an *end*; reach the *end* of (an action or activity)	…to (cause to) *end*

In examining this table, one finds that virtually all these dictionaries define the four verbs by means of each other. Thus, the *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary* uses *stop* to define both *cease* and *end,* and uses the word *finish* to define *end* and *stop* and finally uses the word *end* to define *finish* and *stop*. The treatment that *The Compact Oxford English Dictionary of Current English* offers is more interesting; this dictionary uses the phrase '*bring to an end*' as a definition to *end*, *finish* and *stop* and offers no definition of *cease*. The *Longman Dictionary for English Language and Culture* uses this same phrase to define *end* and *finish*. Such unhelpful treatment of these synonymous words may contribute to the already existing misconception that learners have, namely that such terms can be used interchangeably. It is true that these dictionaries list other meanings of the words; however, learners usually look at the first one or two definitions. Since the first definitions in these dictionaries convey the impression that these verbs mean the same, confusion on the part of learners is inevitable and a misuse of these verbs is to be expected.

Some of these dictionaries such as the *Longman Dictionary of English Language and Culture* present useful notes on usage; however, such notes, though helpful, are not enough. For instance, this dictionary compares the use of *end* and *finish* stating: "when used transitively, *finish* is much more common than *end*… when used intransitively, *finish* is more informal than *end*, but *end* is commonly used in writing" (p. 421). Such information, though important, does not help learners grasp the various uses and meanings that these verbs can assume.

Bilingual dictionaries are not any better. In fact, the situation here is even thornier. For instance, the *Atlas encyclopedic dictionary*: *English – Arabic*, a dictionary whose electronic version is widely used amongst Arab EFL learners, uses the Arabic translation *yatawaqqaf* '*to stop*' as one of the primary meanings for both the verbs *stop* and *cease*, and uses the Arabic term *yantah* '*to end*' to define both *to end* and *to finish*. Other dictionaries such as *Al-Mawrid dictionary*: *English-Arabic* and *Al-Mughni Al-'akbar Dictionary*, two of the most widely used English-Arabic dictionaries offer more or less similar treatments. Although monolingual dictionaries help the learner by presenting illustrative examples, bilingual dictionaries hardly ever offer examples.

Teachers and vocabulary textbooks do not always do much to tackle the problem either. Studies that have focused on EFL learners' acquisition of synonymous terms have shown that learners experience difficulties when learning such terms. Fareh's study (2007) is an example. Fareh explored EFL Arab learners' acquisition of verbs of saying: *say, speak, tell* and *talk* at the level of recognition and production. His study revealed that EFL learners do encounter a great deal of difficulty when learning these synonymous verbs. Although his subjects' level of competence in English was quite high (500-550 on the TOEFL), the level of mastery of these verbs was remarkably low. He concluded that both teachers and textbooks fall short of providing learners with an adequate treatment that enables them to use these words accurately.

In fact, the problem of misusing synonyms can, at times, be observed at the fairly advanced stages of learning the language. The following sentence was written by an MA student.

*I will *end* my degree in 2011. Then I will go to the States to study for my PhD.

Committing such an error by an MA English major graduate implies that the problem of synonymy can manifest itself even at the relatively advanced stages of learning the language.

The overlapping nature of the four near synonyms in the study necessitates the use of the notion of context as a vital element that motivates the use of a particular verb rather than its near synonym(s). Context here refers to what surrounds the verb in the study, a word or any entities bigger than a word, subjects, objects, etc. This agrees with Werth's stance regarding context. Werth (1999: 78-79), cited in Requeju (2007:171) states, "The context of a piece of language (…) is its surrounding environment. But this can include as little as the articulatory movements immediately before and after it, or as much as the whole

universe with its past and future". In addition, the subcategorization properties and selectional restrictions of the verbs are also important in opting for a particular word as opposed to any of its synonyms. Although the focus of the study is semantic-oriented, it is hard to completely ignore the role that syntactic constraints play in licensing the use of a verb rather than its synonymous counterpart. In this regards, Oliver Sacks, 1993 (cited in Wierzbick, 1996:22) states: "it is increasingly clear, from studying the natural acquisition of language in the child, and, equally, from the persistent failure of computers to 'understand'… that syntax cannot be separated from semantics." Partington (1998:3) argues that "the close correlation between the different senses of a word and the structures in which it appears implies that syntactic form and meaning are interdependent in the sense that each helps define the other".

3. Methodology
3.1 Data collection
In order to recognize and analyze the semantic differences among *cease*, *end*, *finish* and *stop*, the researcher collected nearly 500 instances in which these verbs were used. The data in the study were drawn from several sources including the British National Corpus (BNC), a novel, newspaper articles and spontaneous speech. Altogether, four hundred (400) examples were randomly drawn from the (BNC) (i.e. 100 tokens for each term in the study) and one hundred (100) examples were collected from other sources, 25 for each term. The data drawn from the BNC could have been enough; however, the author thought that drawing some instances from other sources should strengthen the reliability of the findings. To make sure that the balance granted by the data contained in the BNC is retained, the author extracted the additional 100 examples from similar sources and in a balanced manner: 20 tokens from a novel, 60 from articles of different types (educational, political, literary etc.) and 20 from spontaneous speech. Each verb of the four in the study received the same number of tokens, i.e., 25 each. For instance, each verb received 5 tokens of the 20 examples extracted from novels, 15 each from the different types of articles, and 5 each from spontaneous speech. The novel used in the study is *The Adventures of Sally*, by Pelham Wodehouse, which is an e-book available in the net. This novel is among the ones that the author had read in the past, and selecting it as a data source was completely arbitrary. As for the newspaper articles, they come from different sources in the net.

The author is aware of the fact that this group of synonyms has other members including *terminate*, *pause*, *quit*, *suspend*, etc, yet the decision to opt for these four is based on the following:

   a. These verbs, particularly *end*, *finish* and *stop*, are among the most frequent ones in daily communication, whether this communication is basic daily exchanges or scholarly discourse. In fact, these three verbs are among the first 400 of the 3,500 most common English words listed in the *Macmillan Essential Dictionary*. (See also "Most Common English Verbs").

b. Based on the database of the BNC, the frequency of use of these four words is remarkably higher than the use of any other words in the extended family of these synonyms such as terminate and quit, for instance (see BNC).

c. Words such as *terminate* do not occur as much in simple everyday exchanges but rather in more formal settings or genres. In *The Adventures of Sally*, a novel that consists of more than 77 thousand words, there is only one single occurrence of *terminate*. In this novel, the word *stop*, on the other hand, is used 45 times, as a verb.

d. It is true that occurrences of the word *cease* are not as frequent as is the case with the other three members, yet including this word in the study stems from the fact that virtually all thesauri cite *stop*, *finish* and *end* as primary synonyms of this word. On the other hand, a number of thesauri do not include the word *quit* as a primary synonym of any of the four words in the study.

e. Finally, although the verb *complete* is a synonym of both *end* and *finish* it is not a synonym of *cease* or *stop*. Therefore, it was not included in the group in the study, for the four verbs in the study are listed by virtually all thesauri as synonyms to one another (See http://www.thefreedictionary.com/)

In drawing a random sample for the verbs in the study from BNC, the author used all forms of the verb as search items. For instance, *stop*, *stops*, *to stop*, *stopping*, *stopped*, etc. The same approach was applied when drawing data from the other sources in the study, i.e., the novel, articles, etc. Then the collected data items were numbered, and the nth item was selected.

3.2 Data analysis

In analyzing the data, the author accorded special attention to context. As indicated above, context plays a vital role in enabling language users to opt for a certain term as opposed to its synonyms. Other important aspects that were considered in the analysis include the subcategorization properties and selectional restrictions of the verbs, which also play a significant role in restricting the use of a particular word as opposed to any of its synonyms.

When the author completed his analysis, he consulted two native speakers of English colleagues to see whether they agreed with his judgments and conclusions. The author gave them the paper to read and comment on his judgments. Both of them agreed with virtually all the judgments he made based on his analysis of the data. In the few cases where both of them did not find the explanation he offered plausible, the author reexamined the data and attempted to find other explanations.

Before embarking on the discussion, it should be made clear that this analysis will not discuss the metaphorical meaning of these verbs nor their collocations or idiomatic usage, i.e. phrasal verbs, prepositional

verbs, and phrasal prepositional verbs, since these constitute separate studies in themselves.

4. Discussion

As indicted above, the data in the study comprised 500 instances exemplifying the use of the four verbs in the study, 125 items representing each. Before discussing the major considerations that govern the use of these verbs, it is worth highlighting briefly the features that these verbs require in their subjects and objects, as the findings revealed. Table 2 summarizes these features.

Table 2. Features that the verbs in the study require in their subjects and objects

Category	Features	Verb			
		Cease	*End*	*Finish*	*stop*
Subject	+animate %	31 24.8%	35 28%	83 66.4%	102 81.6%
	-animate %	94 75.2%	90 72%	42 33.6%	23 18.4%
Object	+animate %	5 4%	0 0%	20 16%	60 48%
	-animate %	14 11.2%	64 51.2%	68 54.4%	39 31.2%
	+Action-Oriented %	9 7.5%	18 14.4%	15 12%	52 41.6%
	-Action-oriented %	0 0%	30 24%	73 58.4%	5 4%
No object		106 84.8%	61 48.8%	37 29.6%	26 20.8%

As the table shows, the subjects of the verb *cease* are mostly (-animate), whereas the subjects of the verb *stop* are mostly (+animate). On the other hand, as many as106 of the 125 instances exemplifying the use of *cease* co-occur with no object compared to 26 only in the case of *stop* that do not show use of an object. The feature of animacy is also important in the case of the verbs *end* and *finish*. While 83 of the subjects that the verb *finish* co-occur with are +animate, only 35 of the subjects that the verb *end* co-occur with are +animate. Sixty-one (61) of the examples that contain this verb show that the verb is intransitive.

We will show the importance of the features animate vs. inanimate and action vs. non-action NP object in determining the use of a verb rather than its synonymous counterparts after highlighting the contextual-oriented factors which emerged as the major governing elements in the use of these verbs. In the discussion below, the first verbs in the examples (the ones in bold) are the original ones, i.e., the ones used in the data; the other ones are made-up for discussion purposes.

4. 1. Completion of an activity

One of the features that the findings reveal as determinant in distinguishing these verbs from one another is the completion of an activity, as the following example illustrates.

(1) I ***finished*** /*stopped*/ **ended* painting today.   (Walden, 2011)

Although the two verbs *finish* and *stop* share the feature of transitivity, among other things, their impact on their objects differ. With the verb *finished*, the sentence implies the completion of the activity of painting that presumably started at some point in the past, and was completed at some point before the time of speaking. With the verb *stop*, however, the sentence, given the limited context here, could imply that the painting process was in motion, but for some reason it was *stopped,* i.e. something caused it to stop before its completion. Therefore, painting has not finished yet, and it is possible that it will resume at some point in the future. Putting this sentence in a bigger context, however, may affect the acceptability of the verb *stop*.

(2) I thought I'd introduce you to my most recent print that I ***finished***/ *?stopped*/ **ended* painting today! (Walden, 2011)

Here the additional context makes the use of *stop* rather improper, for the speakers here wanted to show the addressee the 'finished version' of his or her most recent print, which clearly indicates that the process of painting has been completed. The following example illustrates further this point:

(3) His opponent was one of the Shadow forge figures I ***finished*** /**stopped*/**ended* painting today, bringing my gladiator accumulation up to 67 figures. I think that's it though - I don't have any unpainted gladiator figures around now - I shall have to buy some more. (Hero Defeated, 2014)

In this example, the verb *stop* is not acceptable, for the painting is definitely completed, and the protagonist now has "no unpainted gladiator figures," as his statement affirms. The verb *end* is not acceptable, either, for with *end*, the activity of painting is brought to a close, complete or incomplete, but since we are certain that the painting is complete, using *end* is not felicitous. Besides this, this verb is not acceptable for syntactic reasons, since it, unlike the verbs *finish* and *stop*, does not normally select for a gerund. It becomes acceptable in sentence (1) if it is paraphrased to become: *I ended the painting,* wherein the gerund is replaced by a noun, but here the meaning will be 'ending the painting process.' Ending the painting might have been a decision on the part of the speaker, for instance. The sentence, *I ended the painting* could continue as follows:

(4) I *ended* the painting today. The lady I was working for kept interfering and suggesting modifications. I couldn't take it anymore – I said to her "that's it – I end it here."

As the verb *finish* entails a completion of an activity, it also implies the completion of a process,.

(5) You finish your orange juice and we'll go and watch the rest of the race. *BNC*

(6) "At least *finish* your course, get your degree," Aunt Kit cried. *BNC*
In these examples, the interlocutors addressed are encouraged to take the time to finish what they are engaged in, i.e., finishing their orange juice or the course. Using the verbs *stop* and *end* won't be fitting here, either grammatically or semantically i.e., we do not stop or end our intake but rather can stop consuming it, for 'intake' implies an amount of something, i.e., a static entity, whereas consuming it is a process. (See discussion below about the kind of complement the four verbs in the study require). The sentence becomes appropriate with the verb *stop* if it is paraphrased to become:

(7) *Stop* drinking your orange juice...
Here the object is an action-oriented NP, namely *drinking* (more about the role of the object in verb choice is below). In the case of (7), we know that drinking is not complete. The verb *finish*, however, is appropriate here, albeit with a different meaning. It indicates the complete consumption of the object – the completion of the whole can or bottle of orange, rather than some of it. The verb *end* is not appropriate for, as indicated above, the verb cannot be followed by a gerund, and semantically, we do not end our intake.

These examples illustrate clearly the fact that the verb *finish* implies completion of an activity or completion of a process (of something), whereas the verb *stop* indicates a pause before completing an activity or a process. An important element in this generalization is the fact that the complement/object has to involve duration. If the activity, action or process does not involve duration, neither *stop* nor *finish* can be appropriate. Consider the following example cited in Freed (1979):

*The guest stopped/ finished arriving.
Here both *stopped* and *finished* are not appropriate because of the nature of the complement that follows the verbs, which is here an achievement activity. In this respect, Freed (1979) argues that since achievements "are over as soon as they have begun, they cannot be stopped (or interrupted), and since *finish* also requires its complement to denote an eventuality with duration, they cannot occur with *finish* either" (p. 28). Note, however, that this sentence becomes acceptable if the subject is in the plural form.

(8) The guests *stopped/ finished* arriving at 8:45.
Here arriving of 'guests' does take some time, and thus both *finish* and *stop* can be used.

To sum up, we can say that the verb *finish* implies completion of an activity or a process that involves duration, whereas the verb *stop* indicates a pause before completing an activity or a process. As for *end*, it implies either completion of an activity or a decision to stop for good. Syntactically, the verb selectional restrictions, the state of the subjects, as in example (8) above, can play a role in the acceptability of a verb.

4. 2. Temporary discontinuity
The verb *stop* implies a momentary pause or temporary discontinuity of an event, after which the activity may resume.

(9) He has been so busy in the last two or three months that he has been forced to temporarily ***stop/ ?finish/ *end*** promoting his products. *BNC*

In this example, we assume that the protagonist is usually actively engaged in promoting his products, but in the last three months he has been so busy that he was forced to stop temporarily. Once the unexpected circumstances that have made him busy come to an end, he will resume promoting his products. The sentence with the verb *finish* sounds odd, for things do not 'temporarily' finish, but rather stop, once and for all. In fact, even without the adverb 'temporarily' in the sentence, the statement remains clumsy, for it will mean that this promotion process comprises some steps that can be carried out over a certain period of time.

The verb *end* in (9) is inappropriate syntactically, since, as indicated above, it does not select for a gerund. However, if it is paraphrased to become:

(10) He has been so busy in the last two or three months that he has been forced to temporarily *end* the promotion of his products

the sentence becomes fairly acceptable syntactically, yet semantically clumsy due to the presence of the adverb 'temporarily.' The use of *end* becomes appropriate when this adverb is removed from the sentence.

(11) He has been so busy in the last two or three months that he has been forced to *end* the promotion of his products.

4.3. Abruptness vs. gradualness

Another feature that can help distinguish the verbs in the study from each other is the binarity of abruptness vs. gradualness. The feature of abruptness can be illustrated by means of the following example:

(12) The band *finished* /*stopped* playing and everybody left.

In the case of *finished*, we are certain that the band played all the pieces of music they had prepared for the occasion and stopped when they had completed their last piece. With the verb *stop,* however, something abrupt might have happened that interrupted the music or caused it to stop instantly, which resulted in everybody leaving the venue. In the following example, *stop* is appropriate.

(13) The band *stopped*, and a group of the groom's more drunken friends broke into song. *BNC*

Here, stopping could have been final or just a pause. From the sentence, we feel that the groom's drunken friends might have been so noisy that the band felt that they should stop for a while. The phrase "broke into song" once the band stopped implies that there was some kind of interruption from these "drunken friends".

The feature of gradualness can also distinguish *stop* from *end* as in:

(14) The legal position is clear, so can we please ***stop/ end/ *finish*** this nonsense? *BNC*

In using *stop* here, the addresser requires that the nonsense terminate immediately and with no delay. However, with the verb *end*, it is felt that the termination of this nonsense does not have to be abrupt or swift since the crucial

matter is to put an *end* to it even if this takes time. The verb *finish* is acceptable, but sounds rather odd in this sentence, for the asker requires that the addressees continue the nonsense, which makes no sense.

The following is another example that further illustrates the features of abruptness vs. gradualness.

(15) "I would therefore like to ***finish*** by thanking you all most sincerely for helping us to write a further chapter in what continues to be a major UK success story." *BNC*

The speaker here declares that he wants to finish his speech by a note of thanks, which enables him to approach the final phase of his address or speech. Both *finish* and *end* are acceptable; although with *end,* the sentence becomes more acceptable if the verb has an object, i.e., end *my speech* by… On the other hand, the verb *stop* will not be appropriate here, for if you stop you freeze. That is why sentences such as the following are anomalous:

(16) *We are stopping dealing with this company.

Here the progressive tense sounds odd, for once the decision to stop dealing with the company is taken, it is supposed to be carried out instantaneously. Thus, the feature of gradualness distinguishes *finish* and *end* from *stop*.

The verb *cease*, unlike *stop*, can indicate gradualness as in:

(17) [*Talking about people leaving a theatre*.] Gradually the floor emptied. The shuffling of the feet *ceased. Adventures of Sally*.

Here the shuffling of the feet of the people leaving the theater cannot stop suddenly; it will definitely take time for the sound of the feet to vanish completely. The preceding sentence in the example supports this explanation: "*Gradually* the floor emptied."

4.4. Finality and conclusion

Both *end* and *finish*, unlike *stop*, convey a sense of finality, with the verb *end* also indicating a sense of conclusion. The following example shows how the verb *end* conveys a high sense of finality.

(18) "What's the bad news?" asked Sally abruptly. She wanted to *end* the suspense. *Adventures of Sally*

In this example, *end* is the best choice, for the speaker wants to bring this suspense to an end. Using *stop* is acceptable, but in this case, suspense will not stop for good, but may continue after a period of time. *Finish* is not appropriate in this instance, for it portrays the suspense involved as something that should continue till it is finished which is not what the speaker means. *End*, therefore, is the most appropriate choice as it means that the requester wants to put an end to this suspense, i.e. to terminate it completely and for good.

The fact that the verb *end* conveys a high finality and conclusiveness sense is seen clearly in the following example:

(19) The marriage ***ended*** /?*stopped* /**finished* in 1926, and the same year Jane married the writer J. B. Priestley. *BNC*

In this example, *stop* is appropriate syntactically, but not very apt semantically, for, as mentioned earlier, *stopping* something can be temporary. The context of

the sentence here indicates that separation was final; Jane married somebody else in the same year she was divorced from her first husband. *Finish* is not appropriate either for marriage is not a practice or an activity that continues for some time and then comes to a predictable conclusion. *End* is the only suitable option, for it implies that this marriage was terminated for good. Hence, *end* collocates naturally with the word marriage. The fact that we say *end* at the end of stories, chapters, roads, etc. indicates that the verb *end* denotes a strong sense of finality and conclusiveness, i.e., with *end* the story or event reaches its closing stage.

The following is another example that shows that the verb *end* conveys a conclusion sense:

> (20) THAT HURT! MIKE Dixon shows the effects of the beating he took from Lewis after the referee ***stopped*** / e*nded* /ʔ*finished* / *ceased the fight. *BNC*

Both *end* and *stop* are appropriate here, yet with different meanings. With the verb *end*, the meaning is that the referee declares the winning fighter victorious, which brings the fight to its end even if the fight rounds have not finished, which proves our claim that the verb *end* expresses a sense of conclusion. On the other hand, using the verb *stop* means that the referee commanded the fighters to stop fighting even before the fight rounds were over. Here the meaning of *stop* is "to *prevent* completion of an activity". The referee may or may not instruct the fighters to resume.

The verb *finish* in (20) is not acceptable, semantically speaking, since the subject (the referee) is not a participant in the activity, and also since this activity – fighting—does not imply a specific amount of work that should be completed in a specific period of time. However, we can say:

> (21) The match *finished* on a Tuesday. *BNC*

In this case, we know that the match is over and a winner has probably been declared, which, again, denotes that the verb *finish* conveys a finality sense. The verb *cease* is not acceptable in (20), since we do not cease things, they cease, i.e., the verb is intransitive and thus cannot denote a process that can affect a patient.

The sense of finality is also a primary factor in the choice between *cease* and *stop*. Consider the following examples:

> (22) The music *stopped* abruptly. Insistent clapping started it again, but Sally moved away to her table, and he followed her like a shadow. *Adventures of Sally*
>
> (23) The music stopped. There was more clapping, but this time the orchestra did not respond. Gradually the floor emptied. The shuffling of the feet *ceased.Adventures of Sally*

In the first example, the band stopped playing, but the clapping of the audience motivated them to play some more, which agrees with our explanation above that *stop* implies possible resumption of a terminated activity. The second example states that the band played some more, responding to the clapping of the audience and then they finally stopped. There was more clapping from the

audience, but this time the band did not respond. Members of the audience left and none remained in the theater. The narrator did not say "The shuffling of their feet *stopped"* but rather, "*ceased*," which means that *cease,* unlike *stop*, transmits a strong sense of finality.

The seriousness and sense of finality found in the verb *cease* make it form a collocation with the word *fire*, as in *cease fire*. The following example illustrates the features of seriousness and finality in the verb *cease*.

(24) Without this extensive support, many of our newspapers, for example, would either cost much, much more or **cease / stop/*end /*finish** to exist. *BNC*

Both *cease* and *stop* are acceptable here, yet the tone of seriousness and finality is stronger with the verb *cease*. Also the complement 'to exist' in this sentence dictates the choice of the word *cease*, i.e., *cease to exist* has become a collocation.

Since *cease* conveys a high sense of seriousness and finality, it sounds less appropriate than *stop* in:

(25) The pain *stopped* /*ceased when* I took the aspirin.

In this context, the more fitting choice is *stop*. The verb *cease* is somewhat appropriate, yet the focus will be on the medication. In other words, with the verb *cease* the sentence implies how effective the medication – aspirin – is, as it causes the pain to stop forever.

4.5. Animate vs. non-animate agent or object
The type of agent can play a role in the choice of one verb rather than the others.

(26) The coin *stopped /*finished /*ended/ ceased* rolling.

(27) The champion *stopped / finished /*ended/ ceased* rolling

In (27), *stop, finish* and *cease* are acceptable for the agent here (+animate) is in control of the action, a feature that does not exist in the case of example (26) where the agent is (-animate). The inappropriateness of *end* in this instance is due to selectional restrictions, i.e., the verb does not select for a gerund.

As is the case with the agent, the type of the object (+animate vs. -animate) does, in certain cases, determine the type of verb to use.

(28) Out in the dark cold hall, she **stopped** /*finished* /*ended* /*ceased* him at the foot of the stairs. *BNC*

This example shows that the verbs *cease*, *finish* and *end* do not tend to take an animate object.

4.6. Action-oriented vs. non-action oriented object
The type of object can play a role in the choice of the verb.

(29) I **finished** /*ended* /*stopped* /*ceased* the food in my bowl, feeling quite kindly disposed toward Marcus for giving me real meat. *BNC*

(30) A police photographer **finished** /?*stopped* / *ended* /?*ceased* the task of photographing the body. *BNC*

In example (29), only *finished* is appropriate, whereas in (30) three are acceptable. The only apparent motivation here is the nature of the object. In the second example, the object is of the type that can be labeled 'action NP', similar to what Dowty (1979) calls "incremental theme," whereas in the first it is not. Thus, while we can *finish*, *end* and or *stop* something that is *action-oriented*, we cannot do so with *non-action-oriented* objects.

The notion of action NP vs. non-action NP also applies in the case of the subject, as is shown below.

(31) My money has **finished** /*ended* /*stopped* /*ceased* and my friends have gone. *www.5steps2english.com*

(32) The game has *finished / ended / stopped /?ceased.*

Again, here the examples show that the notion *action vs. non-action* plays a vivid role in accepting the verb; we do not stop, end, or cease non-action oriented NPs.

5. Conclusion and implications

The results of the analysis have shown that the four verbs in the study share many features that make them a group by themselves, yet each one of them can be distinguished from the other members by means of the meaning and the subtle nuances that it can convey when used in different contexts. Thus, in addition to the syntactic constraints that differentiate them from one another, the findings of the study reveal many distinctive features that characterize each. These features include *completeness* vs. *incompleteness*, *finality* vs. *temporariness* and *abruptness* vs. *gradualness*. Other features that the findings reveal include those that are both semantic and syntactic-oriented, motivated by the type of complement/object NP that these verbs require. Such features include *animate* vs. *inanimate* and *action* vs. *non-action* NP.

The main differences and distinctive features that differentiate the four synonymous verbs in the study from each other are summed up in the componential analysis presented in table 3.

The features presented in this table are not inclusive; a larger corpus of data is likely to reveal more distinguishing features. In the table, the sign in parentheses indicates that the verb might in certain cases be used in two ways. For instance, the verb *end* virtually always implies completion, but in rare cases, the activity may not be complete. Therefore, the norm for *end* is denoting completion of an activity and the exception is the opposite.

The findings of this study show that the differences that distinguish a synonym from its counterpart tend to be hard to pinpoint unless sufficient context is provided. Only through a contextualized type of data can language learners recognize the subtle different meanings that distinguish a verb from its close synonyms. As shown in the discussion above, if a context is added, the meaning and or the use of any one of the verbs in the study changes. This necessitates the need to teach EFL learners both the syntactic and semantic constraints that characterize any set of synonyms. The syntactic features may, to some extent, be acquired via grammar teaching; nonetheless, the semantic

features, which account for most uses, cannot be deciphered except through context – textual and/or situational. Since these differences tend to be very subtle, the information found in dictionaries is not enough; therefore, EFL/ESL teachers and textbook writers should rely, among other things, on corpus data when teaching the meaning and use of synonyms. Aijmer (2009) maintains:

> Corpora are invaluable for teachers, in that they can employ them in a number of ways, such as…to create exercises, demonstrate variation in grammar, show how syntactic structures are used to signal differences in meaning and level of style, discuss near-synonyms and collocations… (p. 49).

Table 3. Semantic and syntactic features of the verbs *cease, end, finish* and *stop*

Feature / Verb	Syntactic Features			Semantic Features			
	Object			Action			
	Animate	Action-Oriented NP	Gerund	Complete	Temporary	Final	Gradual
Cease	-	- (+)	+	+	-	+	+
End	-	+	-	+ (-)	-	+	+
Finish	- (+)	+	+	+	-	+	+
Stop	+/-	+	+	-	+	- (+)	-

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