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A Thesaurus in Focus: A Media Review Of <https://www.thesaurus.com/>



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Abstract

Many applications, software, websites, and online dictionaries have been introduced thanks to the advent of computer- and mobile-assisted technologies. Recent technological advancements have resulted in more targeted apps (e.g., *BoldVoice* for pronunciation) or reference tools (Etymonline.com for an etymology dictionary) for language learning and practice. One such tool is Thesaurus.com, an online thesaurus freely accessible through mobile devices and computers. Given the significance of synonyms and antonyms for vocabulary learning and the problems English as a foreign language learners have with these lexical subfields, this media review evaluated the aforementioned online thesaurus. The results indicated potential pedagogical opportunities and several areas of improvement. The review concludes with suggestions for further research to corroborate the findings.

Keywords: dictionary, lexicography, reference tool, technology review, thesaurus

Introduction

Vocabulary is a salient component of language learning (Shi & Tsai, 2024) in general, listening/reading comprehension (Zhang & Zhang, 2022), and spoken/written interactions (Uchihara & Clenton, 2023) in particular. Vocabulary knowledge includes “meaning and form” and semantic “associations” (Richards, 2015, p. 298). However, knowing what words mean may not be sufficient in specific situations, such as avoiding monotony in spoken and written interactions or adding lexical variety/range to one’s vocabulary knowledge (Toner & Reynolds, 2016). Plus, vocabulary range is one of the criteria for oral assessment (Council of Europe, 2020). Hence, a language learner’s lexical repertoire must encompass synonymy and antonymy, in addition to “form and use” (Richards, 2015, p. 298), to avoid

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repetition or to show lexical variety in speech and writing. Previous research conducted in diverse educational contexts revealed poor vocabulary knowledge and performance (Khan et al., 2018; Teng & Mizumoto, 2023; Vu & Peters, 2021), especially regarding synonyms and antonyms (Al-Jarrah & Ismail, 2018; Alsharif, 2022).

Synonymy and antonymy, two crucial subfields of semantics in linguistics (Gao & Zheng, 2014), play a significant role in vocabulary expansion. Synonymy refers to words with similar meanings, while antonymy deals with words of opposite meanings. These two semantic groups are used to teach words in meaningful clusters (Richards, 2015) and can be employed in vocabulary assessment, prompting learners to match the target words with similar or opposite meanings (Richards, 2015). They form two dimensions of word knowledge, particularly word relations (Richards, 2015). Understanding synonyms and antonyms can aid learners in broadening their vocabulary (Oxford & Crookall, 1990; Wu et al., 2021) and can enhance speech and writing (Enayat & Derakhshan, 2021; Yen & Hoaini, 2022).

The advent of linguistic fields (e.g., computational and corpus linguistics) and educational mobile/computerized technologies (e.g., apps, online dictionaries, software, and websites) has significantly aided language learning, particularly vocabulary learning (Hao et al., 2021). Online dictionaries (ODs), a technological advancement in language reference tools, are utilized at the application level in language learning (Levy, 2010). The pedagogical advantages of dictionaries, both online and mobile, have been extensively documented in the literature, from word pronunciation (Huang & Eslami, 2023) and writing (O'Neill, 2019) to vocabulary learning (Van der Merwe, 2020) and retention (Dziemianko, 2022). For example, Jin and Deifell (2013) reported the manifold uses of ODs, such as creating or editing digital texts. Similarly, Çolak and Balaman (2022) revealed that ODs are essential to accomplishing intercultural tasks and validating learners' existing knowledge. Another study indicated the positive impact of ODs on learners' autonomy and motivation (Tananuraksakul, 2015). Niitemaa and Pietilä (2018) reported an association between word recognition and OD usage skills. Equally, Collins (2016) noted vocabulary gains thanks to ODs. In addition, Momcilovic and Petrovic (2017) declared that students preferred ODs for their accessibility, speed, and better understanding. Trinh et al. (2021) claimed that students preferred ODs for their vocabulary assistance. Ferret and Dollinger (2021) provided supporting evidence concerning mobile online accessibility.

Dictionaries come in various formats (e.g., printed vs. electronic), cater to different audiences (e.g., monolingual vs. bilingual speakers), and serve specific purposes (e.g., pronunciation and etymology), thereby offering a wealth of benefits to language learners. One such dictionary is the thesaurus. Derived from Latin, a thesaurus means "treasury." However, it received its current meaning (i.e., an encyclopedia filled with information) in the mid-1800s (Harper, 2001). Kilgariff and Yallop (2000) categorized thesauruses into four: Roget-style, WordNet and Euro WordNet, manual, and automatic thesauruses. The first type includes "rarely used words, non-English words, names, obsolete and unidiomatic expressions, phrases" (Landau, 1989, p. 108). Roget's thesauruses categorize lexical items based on their meanings (Roget, 2022). The second type, WordNet (Fellbaum, 1998), is a lexical database designed using psycholinguistics (Kilgariff & Yallop, 2000). Information retrieval thesauruses are the third type, utilizing synonymy and taxonomy to retrieve matched synonyms based on a query (Kilgariff & Yallop, 2000). The last type of thesaurus includes automatic thesauruses compiled from large corpora, exploiting mainly neurolinguistic programming (Kilgariff & Yallop, 2000).

All things considered, including the challenging nature of learning synonyms and antonyms (Kostadinovska-Stojchevska, 2018), this review intends to critically evaluate <https://thesaurus.com>, since it is one of the popular thesauruses freely available to users. The criteria for selecting this online thesaurus (OT) included, among other factors, its popularity, free availability, extensive synonym coverage, intuitive user interface, and cross-platform usability (<https://www.dictionary.com/e/about/>).

General Description

Thesaurus.com (Appendix 1) is one of the Roget-type thesauruses that allows users to search for an item and directs them to headword entries (Murphy, 2013). It is an online resource, a language reference tool launched by Lexico Publishing, which also initiated Dictionary.com, one of the first online reference tools of the time (Kramer, 2008). The website allows users to search for synonyms, antonyms, and related words merely by typing the query item in the search bar (Figure 1).

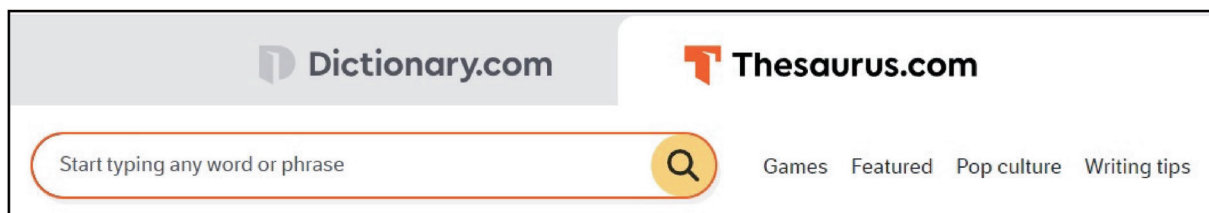


Figure 1 Search bar.

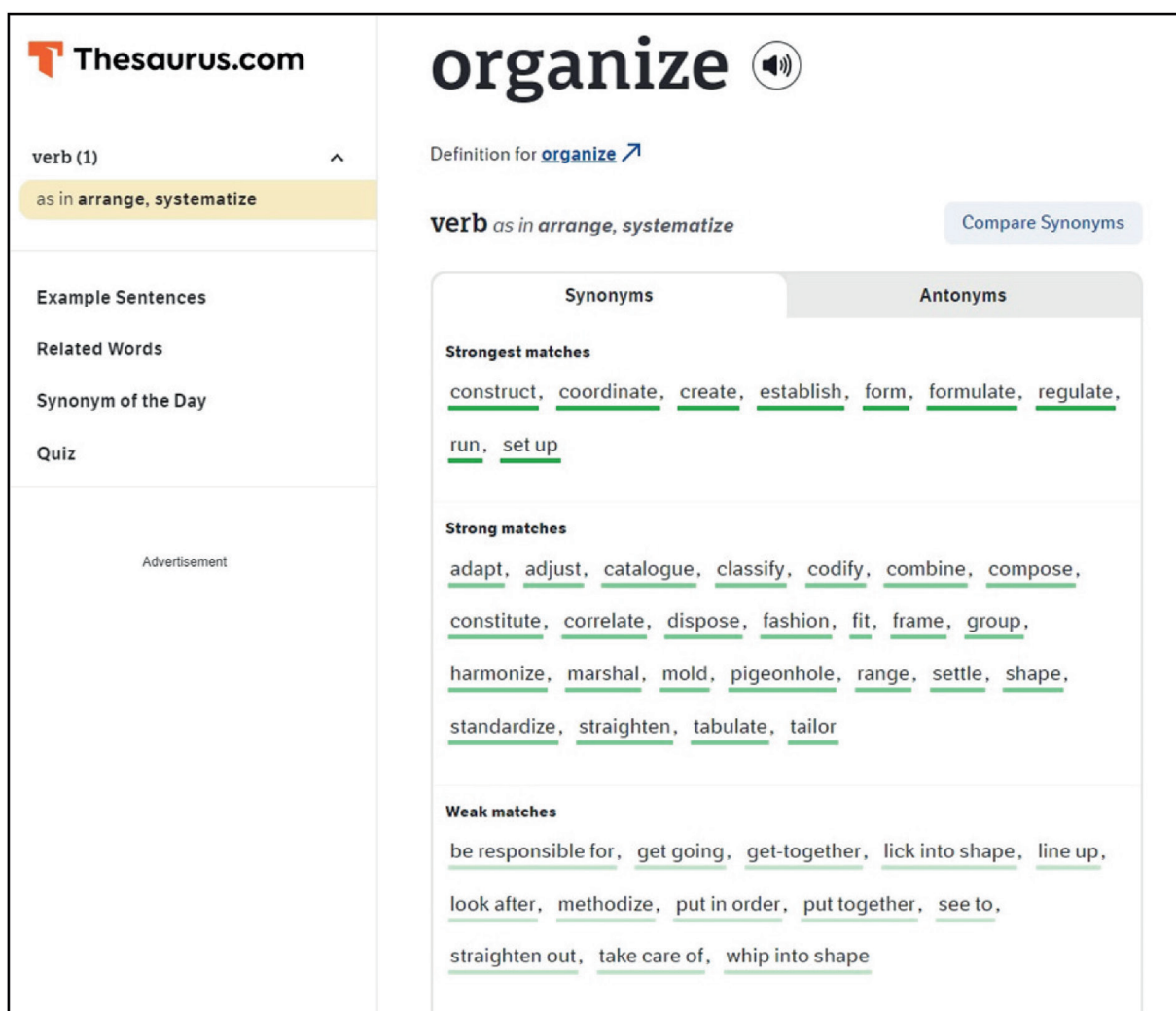


Figure 2 Search results.

With its user-friendly and intuitive interface, this OT lists the results (Figure 2) based on the user's query. The results include the searched word in bold, with its pronunciation attached next to it. Word definitions are provided with a hyperlink right under the bold query item. When the links are clicked, users are presented with word definitions in American and British English, along with the word's pronunciation, phonetic transcription (standard and IPA), word forms (-ed and -ing), example sentences, and synonyms/antonyms (Figure 3). The synonyms and antonyms of the searched word are given as hyperlinks, categorized as strongest, strong, and weak matches.

View synonyms for [organize](#) ↗

American

British

organize



[awr-guh-nahyz] ☒ Phonetic (Standard) ☐ IPA

verb (used with object), or-gan-ized, or-gan-iz-ing.

- 1 to form as or into a whole consisting of interdependent or coordinated parts, especially for united action:
| to organize a committee.
Synonyms: [frame](#), [dispose](#)
Antonyms: [destroy](#)
- 2 to systematize:
| to organize the files of an office.
Synonyms: [order](#)
- 3 to give [organic](#) structure or character to:
| Cells become differentiated and organized into tissues.
- 4 to enlist or attempt to enlist into a labor union:
| to organize workers.
- 5 to enlist the employees of (a company) into a labor union; unionize:
| to organize a factory.
- 6 *Informal.* to put (oneself) in a state of mental competence to perform a task:
| We can't have any slip-ups, so you'd better get organized.

Figure 3 Word definitions.

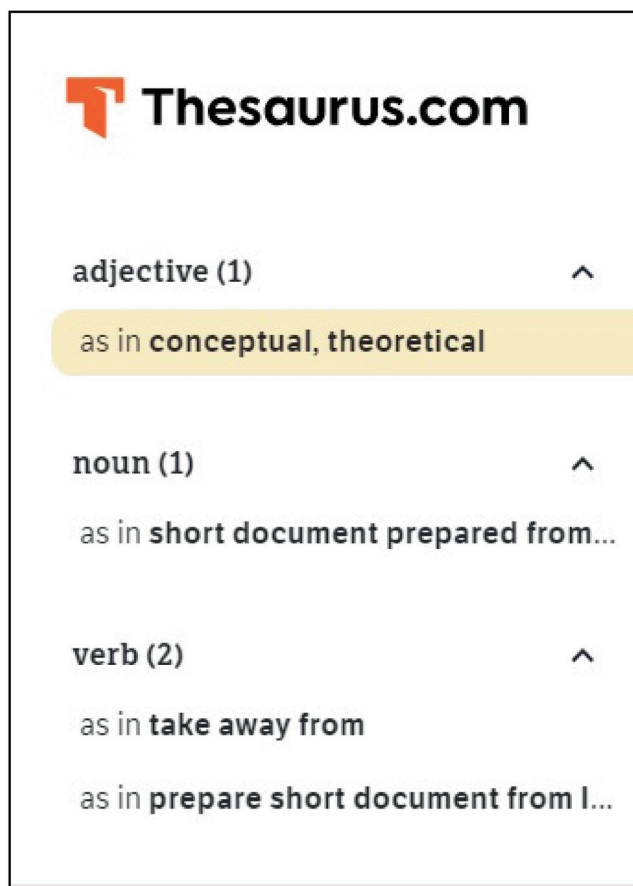


Figure 4 Parts of speech for “abstract”.

Under the hyperlink for word definitions, users are shown the part of speech and the meaning of the searched item. Other parts of speech, if any, are also provided on the left side of the results page (Figure 4).

The OT also enables users to compare three of the synonyms of their choice (Figure 5). This comparison includes definitions and synonyms/antonyms shared among the selected items.

Additionally, users can discover more by scrolling down or clicking on the left-hand sidebar menu to access example sentences (Figure 6) including the query item. The sentences are retrieved from authentic sources, such as online news sites (e.g., *Washington Post*) and miscellaneous websites (e.g., Project Gutenberg and The Daily Beast).

As they scroll down further, the OT’s webpage allows the users to access related words (Figure 7) which are not direct synonyms but words associated with the search item.

The OT further provides users with two means of assessment: the synonym of the day (Figure 8) and a quiz (Figure 10). The website utilizes an engaging means of evaluation in the form of the synonym of the day in multiple-choice format.

Users can click on the hyperlink (“Get the answer”) to see the answer provided in detail (Figure 9). Word pronunciation and additional information (e.g., contextual use) are provided alongside the answer.

[← BACK TO organize](#)

Compare Synonyms of *organize*

[Compare More](#)

construct
Definition(s)
1. assemble, build

Shared synonyms between *construct* and *organize*

create set up compose
establish fashion
put together constitute
frame form formulate
shape

Shared antonyms between *construct* and *organize*

disorganize destroy
disorder disarrange
break ruin

adapt
Definition(s)
1. adjust to a different situation or condition

Shared synonyms between *adapt* and *organize*

tailor fashion shape
harmonize fit

Shared antonyms between *adapt* and *organize*

unfit disorder
disarrange disturb

create
Definition(s)
1. bring into being; make or develop

Shared synonyms between *create* and *organize*

construct set up
compose establish
fashion constitute form
formulate shape

Shared antonyms between *create* and *organize*

destroy break

Figure 5 Comparison of matches.

The other type of assessment available on the website is the quiz section, which includes multiple quizzes by category (e.g., synonyms and antonyms). Currently, six quizzes about synonyms and antonyms are available to users.

Technical Features

User Interface and Navigation

Thesaurus.com has a user-friendly and navigable interface. The design is focused on providing a clean and clutter-free experience, with a prominent search bar on the homepage. When users search for a word, the results page displays synonyms and antonyms in a clear, scrollable list, often organized by relevance or complexity. The website is responsive and works well on both desktop and mobile devices. It features simple menus and prominent icons, such as the speaker icon for pronunciation, contributing to an efficient user experience.

Search and Filtering

The website's standout feature is its powerful search function. It swiftly provides autocomplete suggestions as users begin typing in the search bar, making word searches a breeze. Post-search, users can filter the results by word category and arrange them by usefulness, with the most relevant synonyms displayed first. However, the absence of context-specific or domain-specific filters can be a hurdle, particularly for lower-level students.

Discover More

Example Sentences

Dustin Stockton, a former Breitbart employee who was helping plan the event, helped find space for them at a rally the prior evening, which had been organized by a group called the 80 Percent Coalition.

From [Washington Post](#)

When cleverly organized into “networks,” the result is a “quantum brain” that can process data and save it inside the same network structure—similar to how our brains work.

From [Singularity Hub](#)

Consider organizing your image content so that URLs are constructed logically.

From [Search Engine Watch](#)

It is unfortunate to see the president of the organizing committee make a remark like that.

From [Fortune](#)

She organized prayer chains for strangers and friends dealing with illness or loss.

From [Washington Post](#)

The Canterbury Tales was, Strohm writes, “one of the volumes around which the new trade would organize itself.”

From [The Daily Beast](#)

“The union did not organize any official contingent to participate in the protests,” Kim said.

From [The Daily Beast](#)

Figure 6 *Example sentences.*

Database and Cross-Referencing

Thesaurus.com boasts many words with similar and opposite meanings, covering many languages. However, the OT lists insufficient results for antonyms. Still, the positive impact of learning antonyms on vocabulary comprehension and retention is as significant as learning synonyms (Tajik, 2018; Webb, 2007). In this respect, the website could benefit from an enhanced antonym database that includes

[Discover More](#)

Related Words

Words related to *organize* are not direct synonyms, but are associated with the word *organize*. Browse related words to learn more about word associations.

adjust
verb *as in* **bring into agreement or to a standard** ^

[accord](#) [allocate](#) [arrange](#) [clarify](#) [conclude](#) [conform](#) [coordinate](#) [doctor](#)
[fiddle with](#) [fine-tune](#) [fix up](#) [grade](#) [methodize](#) [modify](#) [organize](#) [reconcile](#)
[regulate](#) [settle](#) [sort](#) [standardize](#) [straighten](#) [systematize](#) [tally](#)

adjusts
verb *as in* **bring into agreement or to a standard** v

administrate
verb *as in* **administer** v

arrange
verb *as in* **put in an order** v

arrange
verb *as in* **make plans, often involving agreement** v

Viewing 5/84 related words

Show 10 more

Figure 7 *Related words.*

direct, nuanced, and context-specific antonyms, offering users a wide selection rather than just binary opposites. The website consistently updates its content to reflect the latest language trends, including informal expressions and specialized terminology. However, the lack of customization could lead to issues with accurate selection and use of synonyms and antonyms.

SYNONYM OF THE DAY
SEPTEMBER 10, 2024

Which one is a synonym for **begin?**

maintain dispose undertake

[Get the answer](#)

Start each day with the Synonym of the Day in your inbox!

Enter your email address Sign Up

By clicking "Sign Up", you are accepting Dictionary.com [Terms & Conditions and Privacy Policies](#).

Figure 8 *Synonym of the day.*

Integration and Mobile Access

The website is fully optimized for mobile devices and performs effectively on different platforms, such as tablets and desktops. Still, the mobile experience could be improved by addressing the pop-up ads or slower loading times caused by heavy ad content. Furthermore, the website directly connects to its partner dictionary site, Dictionary.com, providing easy access to definitions, synonyms, and antonyms. On the other hand, the extent of integration with different language tools, like a pronunciation guide or grammar checker, is restricted. Moreover, the website loads fast and promptly presents results for most users, enhancing efficiency. Nevertheless, the presence of many ads can be troublesome regarding speed. Lastly, the OT's contact tab currently malfunctions, making administration inaccessible.

Overall, Thesaurus.com is efficient and user-friendly with essential features, but ads hamper its performance and it lacks advanced search filters that could improve the users' experience.

Pedagogical Opportunities and Drawbacks

Word Categorization and Search Precision

The OT's one prominent feature is that it lists the query results in categories as "strongest," "strong," and "weak" matches, allowing users to choose relevant matches to a certain degree. Similarly, the website enables users to compare matches for synonyms and provides them with definitions and synonyms and antonyms shared among the selected items. However, Yevchuk (2022) reported that EFL learners

SYNONYM OF THE DAY

TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 10, 2024

undertake

undertake is a synonym of **begin**

verb [uhn-der-teyk] 

UNDERTAKE IS ANOTHER WORD FOR **BEGIN**

-  To **begin** means to start or initiate something (*They will begin the project tomorrow*).
-  To **undertake** refers to committing oneself to and beginning a task or responsibility that may take a long time (*She decided to undertake the restoration of the old mansion*).
-  Both terms describe the start of an action or task.
-  **Begin** is a more general term used in many contexts, while **undertake** implies a formal or serious commitment to a task or project (*She will begin her painting class this week; They will undertake the construction of the new bridge*).

[SEE ALL SYNONYMS FOR BEGIN](#)








Sign Up Now For Synonym Of The Day

Get grammar tips, writing tricks, and more from Thesaurus.com ... right in your inbox!

I'M IN

By clicking "I'M IN", you are accepting Dictionary.com [Terms & Conditions](#) and [Privacy policies](#).

Figure 9 *Synonym of the day's answer.*

lacked the required vocabulary depth and knowledge to choose the most appropriate word among near synonyms. Despite being a local finding, this highlights the necessity of further examining into the issue. Another essential feature of OT is that it provides parts of speech based on the search item. That is, the OT guides users to select the part of speech for which they intend to obtain results – a tagged search that adds some supervision to aid word extractions (i.e., retrieving the intended synonym or antonym) (Leeuwenberg et al., 2016).

Vocabulary Expansion Through Associated Words and Pronunciation

An additional benefit of the OT is that it presents not only synonyms but also words associated with the searched item. Despite addressing advanced language users, this feature might save time on related

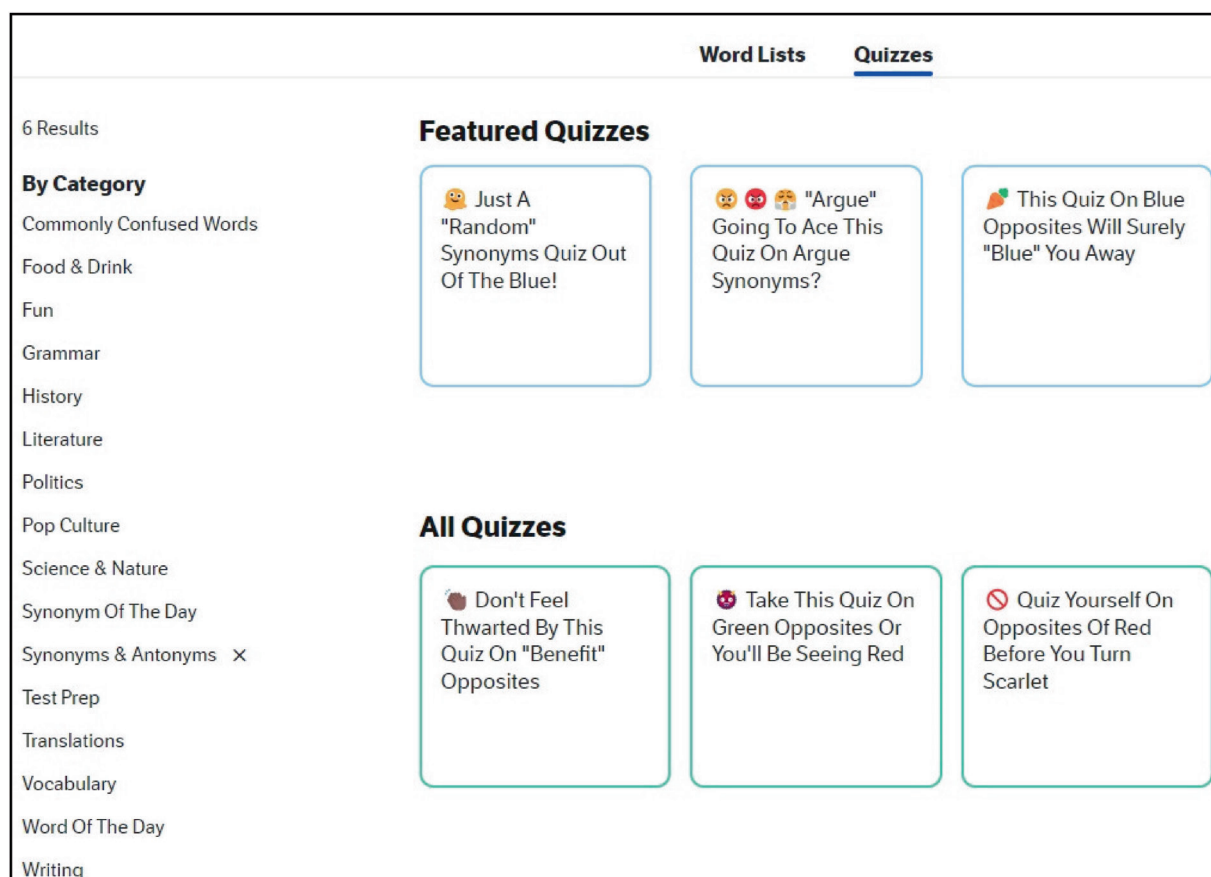


Figure 10 *Quizzes.*

word hunts. Tinkham (1997) concluded that learning associated words fostered vocabulary learning. Similarly, Baxter et al. (2022) supported this finding, reporting that contrasting orthographically similar words promoted adult second language vocabulary learning. Additionally, the OT provides word pronunciation. Supporting evidence comes from Ambarwati and Mandasari's (2020) study, suggesting lexical and pronunciation improvement through the use of ODs. Metruk (2017) also reported similar findings in the Polish context.

Contextual Learning and Word Definitions

The website also provides word definitions used in American and British English contexts. Word definitions are the most searched feature in dictionaries (Gürlek, 2023; Levy & Steel, 2015). Hence, contextual use might also encourage appropriate word usage, as previous research has indicated (Boers, 2024; Walldén, 2024). In addition, example sentences retrieved from authentic sources presented under the word definitions also provide learners with further contextual clues, fostering meaningful vocabulary learning (Iravi & Malmir, 2023; Fauzan et al., 2022). The website's contextual inflexibility, which means that users are not provided with information on word usage in specific contexts, such as formal and academic, requires advanced linguistic knowledge and competence.

Engagement Tools and Self-Assessment

The website enables users to assess themselves through two means: the synonym of the day and quizzes in multiple-choice format. Such assessment might promote learners' engagement and vocabulary retention (Al-Jarf, 2022; Uchihara, 2023). Limited assessment options (six quizzes about synonyms

and antonyms) are available to users, which might be increased for a more engaging and motivating user experience (Ptasznik, 2023). Additionally, incorporating different question types (e.g., drag-and-drop, matching, and open-ended), gamified and interactive elements (e.g., timed challenges, level progression, and achievements/badges), dynamic assessment options (e.g., quizzes that change based on the user's performance), and collaborative learning opportunities (e.g., team challenges) might resolve this problem. Several online dictionaries, although not thesauruses, include such interactive assessment options on their websites: Collins Dictionary (<https://www.collinsdictionary.com/>), Longman Dictionary (<https://www.ldoceonline.com/exercise/>), and Cambridge Dictionary (<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/plus/quiz/image/>).

User Experience and Limitations

The ad overload can be highly frustrating for dictionary users (Godwin-Jones, 2015; Kosem et al., 2018). Pop-ups or web ads are prevalent in online dictionaries (Ferrett & Dollinger, 2021). Ad blockers or premium memberships can be purchased to overcome this nuisance. Moreover, using the OT requires an advanced command of language to differentiate between words. The website could provide contextual examples of word usage, a built-in style guide, interactive tutorials or tips, tailored (e.g., domain-specific) search filters, and additional explanations/prompts for ambiguous words to assist lower-level learners. An additional drawback is the need to highlight subtle differences in meaning. Put differently, the oversimplification of semantic differences might require more clarity in choosing the most appropriate synonyms or antonyms among the suggested matches. The website might provide context-sensitive explanations (e.g., contextual examples and semantic gradients) that descriptively and visually highlight shifts in meaning to minimize the effects of this limitation. In addition, semantic relationships (e.g., shades of meaning and register differences) could be displayed to facilitate the contextual use of synonyms/antonyms, and a disambiguation feature could be integrated for clarification. Moreover, the website might allow users to customize their inquiries with such filters as formality and domain-specific usage.

Conclusion

Employing Topal's (2022) adapted framework, this review evaluated Thesaurus.com, a subsidiary website of Dictionary.com. The review revealed distinctive features of the OT, prompting potential pedagogical opportunities, including categorizing matches according to the strength of synonymy/antonymy, comparison of lexical matches, part-of-speech indication, lexical association, word pronunciation/definition, example sentences from authentic sources, and means of formative assessment. However, the OT also suffers from several limitations, including excessive ads, the requirement for advanced command of the language, limited assessment means, inadequate results for antonyms, and a lack of subtle semantic differences. According to these findings, the review urges content adjustment and technical modifications to enhance the user experience. Nevertheless, the extensive coverage, user-friendly interface, search functionality, cross-platform usability, and integration with an online dictionary (<https://dictionary.com>) make Thesaurus.com a promising language reference for advanced-level learners, language teachers, writers, and academics. However, experimental research is recommended to corroborate the review's findings.

Reflection

The most striking feature of Thesaurus.com in my use as a lecturer and researcher has been its quick and comprehensive inquiry results. As an advanced language user, I have surmounted semantic subtleties, typically with the help of cross-checks in other ODs, such as monolingual and collocation dictionaries. Despite the invaluable assistance of listing the results according to parts of speech, I opine that interactive elements must be incorporated to support language users at varying proficiency levels

in accurately using synonyms and antonyms. In addition, various filters must be included within the website for all kinds of language users (e.g., learners of English as a foreign language, English for academic purposes, and English for specific purposes) to perform effective and efficient searches. Specialized vocabulary requires careful use, hence the urgent need for customizable filters and contextualized examples of word usage. Additionally, ad-free or premium accounts must be an option, since ads appearing in different places on the website are considerably distracting and frustrating. Moreover, users would exploit the OT more significantly if various assessment options were incorporated for user engagement and learning support.

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Appendix 1: The product at a glance

Title	Thesaurus.com
Developer	Lexico Publishing
Website	https://www.thesaurus.com/
Product type	Language reference tool (online English thesaurus)
Desktop operating systems	Windows, macOS, Linux (through browsers such as Chrome, Firefox, Safari, etc.)
Mobile operating systems	iOS 11.0 or later, iPadOS 11.0 or later, iOS 11.0 or later, macOS 11.0 or later, Mac with an Apple M1 chip or later, watchOS 7.0 or later, visionOS 1.0 or later; Android 7.0 and up
Registration	Not applicable
Hardware requirements	Desktop computer or mobile device and a stable internet connection
Price	Free