

# Lexis and Teaching

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**Abstract—**Lexis plays a crucial role in every aspect of literacy learning. Words are the keys to constructing meaning with texts. A rich vocabulary boosts a student's oral and written expression, reading comprehension, and viewing comprehension. At the same time, they not only help us name things, also help us think and talk about ideas. Therefore, mastery of vocabulary is of great significance in the process of teaching English. This paper focuses on the theoretical researches related to lexical semantics and its pedagogical implications.

**Keywords—**Lexical semantics; vocabulary; pedagogical implications

## I. INTRODUCTION

For many years vocabulary has been the poor relation of language teaching. Its neglect is in part due to a specialization in linguistic research on syntax and phonology which may have fostered a climate in which vocabulary was felt to be a less important element in learning a second language. Since the late 1970s, however, there has been a revival of interest in vocabulary teaching, especially in Great Britain, where lexical researches were in any case undertaken in the late sixties (e.g. Sinclair, 1970) and where deeper roots have always existed in the vocabulary control movement and EFL lexicography. Explorations in the lexical semantics (e.g. Lyons, 1968; 1977) were accompanied by developments in vocabulary teaching.

## II. THEORETICAL RESEARCHES ON LEXICAL SEMANTICS

The study of the meaning of words within linguistics is called lexical semantics. Under this banner a variety of spheres of interest, theoretical orientations and methods of study flourish. To a large extent, how one goes about the business of studying meaning depends on what picture one has of the sort of thing meaning is. There are three kinds of theoretical approaches which are the contextual approach, the componential approach and the conceptual approach. Essentially, a holist believes that the meaning of a word is fundamentally relational, that is to say, it is a matter of relations with other words in the language. A localist believes that a word's meaning is self-contained, and describable independently of the meaning of other words. However, the conceptual approach concentrates on the relation between linguistic meaning and concepts. Earlier semanticists (including Lyons and Haas) did not believe that anything solid was known about concepts; they therefore preferred to pursue their semantic studies without reference to such entities. The rise of cognitive psychology has made concepts more

respectable, and few would now deny their significance. [1]According to the conceptual approach, I prefer to analyze the prototype theory of vocabulary.

The prototype theory of vocabulary refers to the fact that words have whole meanings divided into basic level ('table'), superordinate ('furniture'), and subordinate ('coffee table'). Nevertheless many aspects of meaning cannot be split up into components but are appreciated as wholes. Prototype theory suggest that when humans group objects into categories, they set up a prototype—the most typical example. And they subconsciously rank all other items in the category in relation to the prototype. Consequently, when they grasp the meaning of a word, they automatically activate their subconscious ranking system. [2] According to this view, concepts and words are inextricably linked, and cannot be disentangled. An influential approach of this type is Eleanor Rosch's prototype theory (Rosch, 1977). An English person who is asked to give an example of a typical bird is more likely to say 'sparrow' than 'penguin' or 'ostrich'; sparrows are closer to the prototype for 'birds' than penguins and ostriches. Rosch's theory suggests that , rather than components of meaning, there is an ideal of meaning in our minds—'birdiness' in this case—from which other things depart. Speakers have a central form of a concept in their minds and the things they see and talk about correspond better or worse with this prototype.

Prototype theory also claim first learned words that are 'basic' because they reflect aspects of the world, prototypes that stand out automatically from the rest of what they see. 'Sparrow' is a 'basic level' term compared to a 'superordinate level' term like 'bird', or a 'subordinate level' term like 'house sparrow'. The basis level of vocabulary is easier to use and to learn. On this foundation children build higher and lower levels of vocabulary. Some examples of the three levels of vocabulary in different areas are seen in the below.

L1 children learn the basic level terms like 'apple' before they learn the superordinate term 'fruit', or the subordinate term 'Golden Delicious'. They start with the most basic level as it is easiest for the mind to perceive. Only after this has been learnt do they go on to words that are more general or more specific. Cook (1982) showed that L2 learners first acquired basic terms such as 'table', second more general terms like 'furniture', and finally more specific terms like 'coffee table'. Rosch's levels are therefore important to L2 learning as well as to first language acquisition.

Prototype theory works not only with nouns, but also with other parts of speech. Take the verb go: this has inspired an immense amount of discussion about whether it should be treated as one lexical item or two, since sometimes it implies movement ('on Mondays, Paul goes from London to Oxford'), and at other times it does not ('road goes from London to Oxford'). Prototype theory suggests that the road going to Oxford is still a case of go, but just not a prototypical one. And adopting this viewpoint means that there is no need to make decisions about borderline cases, such as rivers 'The Ganges goes from the Himalayas to the Indian Ocean', where it is unclear whether this is movement 'go', or static 'go': it is clearly not a prototypical instance of 'go'.

Prototype theory explains how people cope with extended usages and metaphor: 'The children tobogganed downstairs on a tea tray' is an example of toboggan, but not a prototypical one, which would involve ice or snow. 'The whisky tobogganed down Bill's throat' is an even less good example, so bad, in fact, that it must be regarded as a 'metaphor', a use in which important typicality conditions are broken: there is no sledge, and no ice or snow, simply fast downward movement.

At first sight, therefore, prototype theory seemed to be a model which explained almost everything, however, on closer examination; prototype theory raises a number of problems. Firstly, within a culture, there is sufficient agreement on choice of prototypes for the phenomenon to be taken seriously. Yet the more closely prototypes are examined, the more elusive they seem to be. Above all, it is hard to see the basis on which they are selected: frequency, appearance, and function are all important, but none is critical (Aitchison 1987). In the furniture category, items in most American homes such as television and icebox were ranked lower than 'better' examples of furniture such as bench and ottoman which are by no means universally owned. Appearance cannot be crucial, since carrot and pea were the top American vegetables, but look different, and vegetables similar in appearance to carrot such as parsnip were lower ranked. Function cannot be supreme because chair came (with table) at the top of the American furniture list, but bench, which is also used to sit on, came much lower down. Furthermore, even if a prototype can be unambiguously identified, such as the American choice of robin, and the Britain selection of blackbird as a prototypical bird, it is unclear how to arrange its features in order of importance. Clearly, feathers and ability to fly are important, but what about possession of a beak, nest-building, small size, or stick-like legs? The ordering of features presumably has some effect on the ranking of the other birds, yet there is no easy way to assess it. Finally, the term prototype itself has been claimed to show the 'family resemblance syndrome': there are different types of prototype, and no one definition covers them all (Geeraerts 1989).

### III. PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

Although there are many problems in the prototype theory, it has its beneficial pedagogical implications for vocabulary teaching.

Firstly, as for the process of teaching, the sequence is

different from the usual order of presentation in language teaching in which the teacher or textbook introduces or practices a whole group of words simultaneously. According to prototype theory, this is misguided; the superordinate terms should come only after the students have the basic level terms, not in the same exercise. The most important early words are basic level terms. The human mind automatically starts from this concrete level rather than from a more abstract level or a more specific one. Hence prototype theory ties in with the audiovisual method of language teaching that introduces new vocabulary with a picture of what it represents, in an appropriate cultural setting. The theory has particular implications for teaching of vocabulary at the beginning stages. Also, words are learned with bilingual dictionaries in the beginning stages and should then be used to check insufficiently understood explanations from monolingual dictionaries in the advanced stage.

Secondly, which meanings should be taught and in what order? Because it has been calculated that the 850 words of Basic English have 12425 meanings and that each of West's 2000 words has, on average, 21 meanings. High frequency of use may be less important than coverage (the contexts in which the word is used). Learnability is also a consideration: factors like spelling, syntactic or phonological difficulties can make a word difficult to learn. 'Familiarity' is another important issue, bringing together the concepts of frequency, concreteness and meaningfulness. In addition, low-frequency words are precisely those which demarcate topic and therefore carry essential meaning. It is clear that trying to identify a common core vocabulary for all learners is almost impossible; while students of general English may benefit from learning such a core, students with specific needs will have different vocabulary requirements. Decisions will be affected by whether students need access to spoken or written language and by whether lexical items need to be in the active or productive vocabulary, which is always smaller than the receptive or passive one. [3]

Thirdly, learners cannot be taught all the vocabulary they will need and therefore must develop inferential strategies for dealing with unfamiliar vocabulary. Research reported by Carter (1987) suggests more proficient learners benefit most from these techniques, such as cloze and words-in-context exercises. For all learners, the issue of how much unknown vocabulary impedes comprehension is an important one; Nation and Coady (in Carter and McCarthy, 1988) recommend West's guideline of a maximum of 2% unknown words in a written text.

In addition, teaching cannot ignore that the student has to learn not just the meaning and pronunciation of each word, but how to use it, because an aspect of vocabulary that has become important in recent years is the position of the word in the structure of the sentence. For example, the verb 'faint' can only occur with a grammatical subject such as 'Martin' in 'Martin fainted', never with an object 'Martin fainted John'. The verb 'meet' on the other hand has to have an object 'He met John', not 'He met'. Some verbs are followed by subordinate clauses: 'I hoped Mary would go' rather than

grammatical objects ‘I hoped Mary’. The Universal Grammar model of language acquisition claims that learning how each word behaves in sentences is crucial. One simple way of doing this is the traditional task of getting the students to make up sentences using particular words. The focus on a situational context makes the exercise more relevant and at the same time allows the student to use the words productively in the syntactic context of a particular sentence. [4]

Last but not least, as far as strategies for vocabulary building was concerned, there are four underlying assumptions to guide successful word learning. Firstly, it is personal. Successful word learning is different for each individual. Learners vary in terms of how they learn and what they know, greatly influencing what they learn. Secondly, it is active. Successful word learning requires students to manipulate information by thinking, talking, or writing to make knowledge their own. Thirdly, it is flexible. Successful word learning may occur easily, without much effort on the student’s part, or it may require intense, direct instruction. Finally, it is strategic. Successful vocabulary learning happens when learners use a variety of strategies, depending on the new word and the situation. Conscious use of a strategy, process, or way of learning new words helps students become independent. [5] Vocabulary can be practiced through analysis and memorization, but discovering and sharing high-level words and technical terms that students already know creates excitement about vocabulary study.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Vocabulary development is lifetime undertaking and vocabulary teaching is concerned with the selection and presentation of words for learners. As teachers, we should play a crucial role in enriching and extending students’ vocabulary. Effective teachers combine direct instruction of vocabulary and strategies for learning vocabulary with numerous opportunities for exposure and use of new vocabulary. Also, vocabulary should be learned in the context of experiences with listening, speaking, reading, writing, and viewing. Through that way, the complexities and nuances of word meanings are developed.

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