



# Hyponymy: Special Cases and Significance

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**Abstract.** The learning of sense relations in semantics plays a very important role in students' linguistics learning. However, in the learning process, students feel very confused about some special cases of hyponymy and couldn't explain them clearly. In view of this situation, this paper first reviewed the definitions of hyponymy and related terms according to different literature. Then, it summarized the major special cases from various sources and explained them in detail. Last, it stressed the significance of hyponymy in reading, writing, translation and cross-cultural communication. It is concluded that hyponymy refers to inclusiveness or a kind of membership relationship, in which a superordinate may be a superordinate to itself, a hyponym may be a hyponym of itself, a superordinate may be missing, hyponyms may also be missing and not every hyponym is of the same position in the relation of hyponymy, and that a clear knowledge of hyponymy helps students to see the difference of two languages as well as the difference of two cultures and benefits them in both language input and output.

**Keywords:** Hyponymy · Superordinate · Hyponym · Special Cases · Significance

## 1 Introduction

Sense relations refer to the “semantic relations between one word and another, or more generally between one linguistic unit and another” [1]<sup>91</sup>, which is an important part required not only in the course linguistics, but also in Teachers' Qualification Examination and Postgraduates Entrance Examination.

However, based on the undergraduates' confusions and the author's observation, it is found that when the chapter of semantics in linguistics course is taught to the undergraduates in ethnic minority areas, most students only have a basic idea of sense relations such as synonymy, antonymy, hyponymy, polysemy and homonymy, lacking a deeper understanding of them, particularly the special cases of hyponymy and their significance. Since the textbook also lacks a comprehensive explanation and related exercises, it is quite necessary and important to make it clear to students because it is not only the key and difficult points of semantics, but also the learning requirement for “English Linguistics” course at the undergraduate stage, as well as the requirement for their further study and research.

## 2 Hyponymy and Related Terms

### 2.1 The Definition of Hyponymy and Related Terms

“Hyponymy refers to the sense relation between a more general, more inclusive word and a more specific word” [2]<sup>69</sup>. The word which is bigger, broader or more general in meaning is called the superordinate or hypernym, while the more specific words are named its hyponyms, which means the superordinate includes all its hyponyms and all the hyponyms are included in the same superordinate. Hyponyms which belong to the same superordinate are co-hyponyms to each other. For example, *flower* is more general in meaning, thus is the superordinate to all its hyponyms such as *rose*, *carnation*, *tulip*, *violet*, *sunflower*, *morning glory*, *lily* and so on, and *rose*, *carnation*, *tulip*, *violet*, *sunflower*, *morning glory*, *lily* are co-hyponyms to each other.

“Hyponymy is the lexical relation described in English by the phrase kind/type/sort of” [3]<sup>75</sup>. That’s to say, hyponymy is the inclusiveness sense relation: the meaning of A is included in the meaning of B, or A is a kind or type or sort of B. For instance, the meaning of *chair* is included in the meaning of *furniture*, or *chair* is a kind of *furniture*.

Or, “hyponymy is a matter of class membership. The upper term, the class name, is superordinate, and the lower terms, the members, are hyponyms” [1]<sup>95</sup>. A superordinate usually has some different hyponyms. For example, under the cover term *furniture*, there are *table*, *desk*, *bed*, *sofa*, *dresser* and many others apart from *chair*. The hyponyms sharing the same superordinate or the members of the same class are co-hyponyms, just as *chair*, *table*, *desk*, *bed*, *sofa*, *dresser* are co-hyponyms to each other.

“In semantics hyponymy is described according to unilateral implication” [4]<sup>144</sup>: if it is a *chair* then it is *furniture*, but if it is *furniture*, it is not necessarily a *chair* because it may be a *desk* or *sofa* or something else. “If the implication is bilateral, then it is synonymy” [4]<sup>144</sup>: if it is an *elevator* then it is a *lift*, and if it is a *lift*, it is an *elevator* because *lift* and *elevator* actually refers to the same entity, they are synonyms, but they are used in different regions, *lift* is used in British English while *elevator* is used in American English.

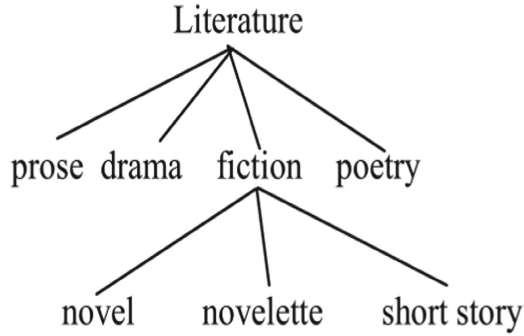
### 2.2 Further Explanation of Hyponymy

About hyponymy, the following four points should be noted:

First, a term may be both a superordinate and a hyponym depending on what words it is related to.

The relationship of hyponymy can be represented in a tree-like hierarchical diagram like “Fig. 1”, where *literature* is a superordinate to its hyponyms like *prose*, *drama*, *fiction* and *poetry* and *fiction* is a superordinate to its hyponyms like *novel*, *novelette* and *short story*. From this example, it can be seen that one word may be a hyponym in one hierarchical relation but a superordinate in another, just like *fiction* above, whether it is a superordinate or hyponym depends on which semantic hierarchical relation it is in, or depends on the words to which it is related.

Second, not only terms for “thing” can be hyponyms, terms for action or state can also be hyponyms [5]<sup>119</sup>, which means not only nouns can be hyponyms, verbs and adjectives can also be hyponyms, or namely, hyponyms are usually nouns, but not only



**Fig. 1.** The relationship of hyponymy.

nouns, it may include verbs and adjectives. For example, for verbs, *boil*, *braise*, *roast*, *bake*, *steam* and *pan-fry*, are co-hyponyms which have the same superordinate *cook*, and for adjectives, *quick*, *rapid* and *swift* are co-hyponyms of the superordinate *fast*.

Third, there is a type of lax hyponymy, pseudo-hyponymy. The previous implication rule for hyponymy doesn't apply to this type, but pseudo-hyponymy can also show the relationship within semantic fields corresponding to social or psychological concepts. For example, in particular contexts, we may regard *watches*, *ties* and *cameras* as presents by saying “watches, ties, cameras and other presents”, but it doesn't mean that if it is a watch, then it must be a present [4]<sup>145</sup>.

Last, there is quasi-hyponymy, which means the superordinate does not have the same grammatical class as its hyponyms. In English, the adjective color words like *red*, *green*, *yellow*, *blue*, *white*, can not find a upper term in the same grammatical class, because the term “color” is a noun, and the term “coloured” usually excludes white and black, and when it modifies human races, it mainly refers to yellow people and black people, excluding white people, thus, strictly speaking, there is no superordinate for the different adjective color words mentioned above. Here, the relationship between the noun “color” and its different adjective hyponyms is quasi-hyponymy.

Similarly, for the adjective words showing different shapes like *round*, *square* and *oblong*, and for the adjective words expressing different tastes as *sour*, *sweet*, *bitter*, *spicy* and *salty*, they all lack a superordinate in the same grammatical class, thus, the relationship between the noun “shapes” and its different adjective hyponyms, and between the noun “tastes” and its different adjective hyponyms, all belong to quasi-hyponymy.

### 3 Special Cases of Hyponymy

#### 3.1 Sometimes a Superordinate May Be a Superordinate to Itself

From the superordinate perspective, in “Fig. 2”, it is seen that the *living* is a superordinate of *animal*① and “plant”. Here, *animal*①, referring to “all the living creatures”, together with “plants” are co-hyponyms of *living*, which means that all the living things include all the living creature and plant. Then in the second hierarchy, *the animal*①, is a superordinate to *birds* in the sky, *fish* in the river, *insect* in between and *animal*② on the

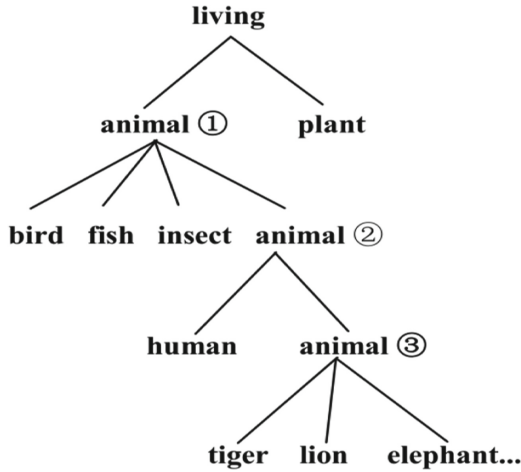


Fig. 2. Special cases of hyponymy [1]<sup>96</sup>.

earth, and here *animal*② means “mammal”. While the *animal*③ in the sense of “beasts”, is a superordinate of words like *tiger*, *lion*, *elephant* and so on. It is clear that the first animal is a superordinate of the second animal and the second is the superordinate of the third when the word *animal* is used for different meanings in different hierarchies, thus, a superordinate may be a superordinate to itself.

### 3.2 A Hyponym May Be a Hyponym of Itself

From the hyponym’s point of view, obviously, *animal* ② is a hyponym of *animal* ①, because the mammal is a kind of living creature, and *animal* ③ is a hyponym of *animal* ② since beasts are included in mammal, thus, a hyponym can be a hyponym to itself, which is called auto-hyponym [1]<sup>96</sup>.

This phenomenon is not rare in language, just as *man*, referring to all the human being in a broad sense, is a superordinate to *woman* and *man* referring only to male in a narrow sense. This is also true for *dog* and *bitch*, *lion* and *lioness* and so on, in which the former can be used both in a general sense, as superordinate, and in a narrow sense, as hyponyms.

### 3.3 A Superordinate May Be Missing Sometimes

Not every hyponym has its own superordinate. This is true with English words like “*beard*, *moustache* and *whiskers*”, since *beard* refers to “hair that grows on the chin and cheeks of a man’s face” [6]<sup>130</sup>, *moustache* refers to “a line of hair that a man allows to grow on his upper lip” [6]<sup>1131</sup> and *whiskers* refer to “the hair on a man’s face, especially on the sides of his face” [6]<sup>2012</sup>, the three all refer to the hair grown on a man’s face, but the positions of the hair are slightly different, and the three all lack their upper term.

Similarly, for the nouns showing body parts like *hand*, *foot*, they all lack a superordinate in English, and for the words like *car*, *bicycle*, *motor-scooter*, *bus*, *taxi*, *truck*,

*train* and so on, they can't find their upper term in English, which reveals a gap in the English language [7]<sup>47</sup>.

### 3.4 Hyponyms May Also Be Missing

Unlike the various specific Chinese family member terms, there is only one word in English for the different types of uncles: 伯伯, 叔叔, 舅舅, 姑父, 姨夫, which brings us so much confusion in communication because it is unclear whether “the uncle” is the elder brother or younger brother on the father's side, or the brother, older or younger sister's husband on the mother's side. In English, for the word *uncle*, there is no specific member terms, no hyponyms. While in Chinese, there are specific terms for specific family members under *uncle*.

This phenomenon is quite common in family member terms, since there is only one English word *aunt* for the Chinese 姑姑, 婶婶, 阿姨, 舅妈 and 姨妈, only one English word *brother* for both the Chinese 哥哥 and 弟弟, only one English word *sister* for both the Chinese 姐姐 and 妹妹, only one English word *grandma* for both the Chinese 奶奶 and 外婆, only one English word *grandpa* for both the Chinese 爷爷 and 外公, and so on.

In the same way, there is only one English word *rice*, used in different senses for the Chinese characters like 稻(rice seedlings), 谷(unhusked rice), 米(uncooked rice) and 饭(cooked rice), all of which shows not only the difference of Chinese and English, but also the different cultures behind them.

### 3.5 Not Every Hyponym is of the Same Position in the Relation of Hyponymy

It is well known that a hand has five fingers, including the thumb and the other four fingers. In this case, the *hand* is a superordinate to its five fingers, the *thumb* and the other four fingers are co-hyponyms of *hand*. Here the hyponyms *hand* and *the other four fingers* are of the same position. But in the following two sentences, they are slightly different:

A: The thumb and one finger were missing from the hand [7]<sup>47</sup>.

B: Two fingers were missing from the hand [7]<sup>47</sup>.

From the sentence A, it is seen that *thumb* is not considered as a typical finger, equal to all the other four fingers, and from sentence B, clearly, the two fingers exclude *thumb*, thus, the hyponyms *hand* and *the other four fingers* are not of the same position [7]<sup>47</sup>.

## 4 Significance of Hyponymy

The sense relation of hyponymy is very helpful in the process of language input and output, such as in reading comprehension, writing, translation and cross-cultural communication.

### 4.1 Significance of Hyponymy in Reading Comprehension

In reading comprehension, a good knowledge of hyponymy helps the readers to guess and understand the meaning of some new words. For example, “an asp, a kind of snake”, from the appositive, it is known that an asp is a kind of snake, where asp is a hyponym of snake. Here we may know nothing about the meaning of an asp than that it is a kind of snake [5]<sup>119</sup>.

In reading comprehension, hyponymy is an important cohesive ties, for instance, “There was a fine rocking chair that his father used to sit in, a desk where he wrote letters, a nest of small tables and dark, imposing bookcase. Now, all this furniture was to be sold, and with it his own past” [4]<sup>146</sup>. In this paragraph, the writer resorts to a set of hyponyms such as *a rocking chair*, *a desk*, *small tables* and *bookcase* under the superordinate *furniture*, which makes the writing coherent and facilitates the readers to understand the text.

### 4.2 Significance of Hyponymy in Writing

In writing, the knowledge of the semantic features of hyponyms and their superordinates can avoid simple repetition, help to achieve vividness, exactness, concreteness and definiteness [4]<sup>146</sup>, which is shown by the following two examples:

- A. Trees surround the water near our summer place.
- B. Old elms surround the lake near our summer cabin.

It is not hard to tell that sentence B, is clearer than sentence A, because in B, the writer uses specific words, hyponyms, which are concrete and precise, showing the reader a vivid verbal picture whereas in A, the words used are general words, superordinates, which convey only a general and vague idea.

Another example is from “Diogenes and Alexander” in Contemporary College English, second edition, book III: A titter broke out from the elegant Greeks. The Macedonian officers, after deciding that Diogenes was not worth the trouble of kicking, were starting to guffaw and nudge one another. Here, the context is that the Macedonian king Alexander called upon Diogenes and asked Diogenes what he could do for him, but Diogenes replied “yes, stand to one side. You are blocking the sunlight.” After hearing this, Greeks tittered, and the Macedonian officers guffawed and nudged one another. *Titter* means “to laugh quietly, especially in a nervous or embarrassed way” [6]<sup>1857</sup>, *guffaw* “to laugh noisily” [6]<sup>780</sup> and *nudge* “to push somebody gently, especially with your elbow, in order to get their attention” [6]<sup>1179</sup>. Instead of the superordinate “laugh /smile or push”, *titter*, *guffaw* and *nudge* are more specific, vividly describing the different behaviors and responses of people in different social statuses.

However, this doesn’t mean that hyponyms are better than superordinates. A good piece of writing often involves both superordinates and hyponyms working together to achieve the desired effect [4]<sup>146</sup>.

### 4.3 Significance of Hyponymy in Translation and Cross-Cultural Communication

Chinese people have complicated family relationship and there are specific terms for different family members, and Chinese people attach great importance to social relations

and may use the family terms to address other people outside the family, for example, they address anyone who is older than themselves “哥哥, 姐姐”, “叔叔, 阿姨”, “爷爷, 奶奶” depending on the specific ages even if they are not blood-related or even they meet each other the first time. While for the Americans, they do not address anyone outside his family sisters or brothers, uncles or aunts and grandma or grandpa. Instead, they just say “hi” if they do not know each other, or call the person’s first name directly if they are familiar or call them by their titles and the family name to show respect, for example, Professor Smith.

When a Chinese mom took her son to play and met an American mom with her son Steven, the two moms smiled and said hello to each other, then the Chinese mom told her son “叫Steven哥哥”. “叫Steven哥哥” is proper greeting in Chinese and by addressing someone older 哥哥, it shortens the social distance and brings them closer to some degree, but this is strange and improper in foreign contexts because they are not brothers if they were not born by the same parents. Thus, in this situation, “叫Steven哥哥” can not be translated as “call him brother Steven”, instead it should be translated “say hi to Steven”.

So, a good knowledge of hyponymy may guide us to do the Chinese-English translation properly in cross-cultural contexts and help to improve the cross-cultural communicative awareness and competence.

## 5 Conclusion

The learning of sense relation plays a very important role in students’ language learning and a clear knowledge of hyponymy can help them better understand the semantic relationship, increase the awareness of its significance, prepare students to be future English teachers and facilitate their future language learning and researching.

To students’ confusion about the special cases of hyponymy, it is concluded that a superordinate may be a superordinate to itself, a hyponym may be a hyponym of itself, a superordinate may be missing, hyponyms may also be missing and not every hyponym is of the same position in the relation of hyponymy, and that a clear knowledge of hyponymy helps students to see the difference of two languages as well as the difference of two cultures and benefits them in reading comprehension, in writing, in translation and in cross-cultural communication.

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