Sense Relations and the Applications In English Vocabulary Teaching

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Abstract: **Vocabulary acquisition is central to language learning and of critical importance to the students. There are many occasions when students cannot use words precisely and correctly due to their inadequacy of vocabulary knowledge. This paper aims to prove the significance of sense relations construction in vocabulary teaching. The idea of applying sense relation to vocabulary teaching is not a new one. But the application of different theories in sense relation construction and the designing of various exercises and activities in sense relation is a new attempt in this research field. The paper aims to provide a more effective way and a new perspective for vocabulary teaching to help students so that better learning will occur in the classroom as well as in the self-teaching environment.**

Key words: sense relations, componential analysis, markedness theory, theory of basic level category

I. INTRODUCTION

English has become the most widely used language in the world. To master English is to gain an important tool for global communication. Therefore, English teaching and learning has become more and more popular in domestic education. But investigations tell us many learners have problems in their learning process especially in vocabulary acquisition, the basic and essential part in language learning. The inadequateness of learners' command in vocabulary acquisition mainly lies in: great efforts but little results in vocabulary memorizing; lack of the understanding of the real meaning of the words taught; inability to retrieve the words that have been taught when the case of use comes up; inability to use the appropriate word according to the situation.

According to semantic theory, words do not exist in isolation but are related to each other and thus form the massive word store of a language. So vocabulary is an integrated system of lexemes interrelated in sense. We can divide the whole vocabulary of a language up into different fields of concepts which may consist of many subfields. The meaning of a word does not exist in the word itself but rather spreads over the neighboring words, since it is the neighboring words that help pin down the meanings of the word. In other words, the meaning of a word can only be adequately described through its semantic relations and contrasts to other words. Probably we all have experience that remembering words from lists that contain semantically

related subsets is much easier than remembering words from lists of unrelated words. Thus we may suggest that

meaning organizes the vocabulary and teaching vocabulary through sense relations should be the best way to give organized access to the lexicon (Ronald Carter, 1998).

Human mind usually unconsciously takes account of such relatedness of meaning when organizing the words of a language and store them in the brain. So it is quite reasonable to assume that a method of teaching that takes account of the psychological process underlying semantic relatedness must be more pedagogically efficient.

II. SEMANTIC FIELD THEORY

The Saussurean structural semanticist takes the view that a semantic field is a paradigmatically or syntagmatically structured subset of the vocabulary since the meaning of any linguistic unit is determined by the paradigmatic and syntagmatic relations ehich hold between that unit and other units in a language-system. (Lyons, 1977b:268) The lexical items that that are sematically related to each other fall into the same semantic field. The most famous semantic field theory is that of Jost Trier, a German linguist, who regards the vocabulary as an integrated network composed of lexical items interrelated to each other in sense, and every lexical item is surrounded by the network of relations which in turn connect the lexical item with others. So to know the meaning of a lexical item we must first compare and contrast it with other items in the same semantic field or the items of the neighboring semantic field. Here is what Trier says about semantic field "Fields are living realities intermediate between individual words and the totally of the vocabulary; as parts of a whole they share with words the property of being integrated in a larger structure and with the vocabulary the property of being structured in terms of small units."

Since the whole vocabulary of a language is a huge, integrated and complex network, it is impracticable to contrast and analyze the lexical items on this basis. It is essential and workable to divide the whole network into smaller subfields and further divide the smaller fields into even smaller ones until the smallest field of concept is found can we analyze the lexical items efficiently. According to Hadumod Bussmann(2000),semantic field theory reflects the general tendency to move from an isolating, atomistic, discrete view to a holistic, systematic approach. The following are premises fundamental to Trier's semantic field theory:

1) The meaning of an individual word is dependent upon the meaning od the rest of the words of the same lexical or conceptual field.

2) An individual lexical field is constructed like a mosaic with no gaps; the whole set of all lexical

fields of a language reflects a self-contained picture of reality.

3) If a single word undergoes a change in meaning, then the whole structure of the lexical field changes.

Consequently, the isolated historical study of words can be superseded by the study of lexical fields. (Hadumod Bussmann,1996:275)

Semantic field theory was further developed by John Lyons in his *Semantics* (1977). According to Lyons, the sense of a word is "its place in a system of relationships which it contracts with other words in the vocabulary", so the whole lexical system of a language "is to be described in terms of the sense relations holding between the lexical items".(Lyons,1977) He accepted the Saussurean structural semantists' view that "the meaning of any linguistic unit is determined by the paradigmatic and syntagmatic relations which hold between that unit and other linguistic units in a language system".(1977) A semantic filed is therefore "a paradigmatically and syntagmatically structured subset of the vocabulary"(Lyons, 1977).

According to Palmer, in almost all cases the words within a semantic field are incompatible. If we say "*This is a red car*", we cannot say "*This is a green ca*r" at the same time. This is because in the semantic field of color, "*red*" and "*green*" are incompatible. We can, however, recognize terms that seem to be mixtures: a hat can be orange-red, while a tigon is the cross between a lion and a tiger. But by introducing such terms we merely increase the words within the field and divide the field up more finely. (Palmer) Generally the items within a semantic field are unordered: that is to say there is no natural way, as far as their meaning is concerned, of arranging them in any kind of order. (Palmer) But there are some groups of words that seem to have some order such as the days of a week and the months of a year.

The pedagogical implications we get from semantic field theory in vocabulary teaching is that we should teach vocabulary by setting up sense relations between words. Since vocabulary is not a random collection of lexical items but a systematic network of interrelated items, it seems more reasonable to present and interpret words to students in a systematized way which will exemplify the systematic nature of vocabulary and help them to integrate the new words into the whole store of those they are familiar with as well. Also the application of semantic field theory in vocabulary teaching can help students expand their vocabulary.

III.   THE ANALYSIS OF VOCABULARY DESIGN IN A NEW ENGLISH COURSE(ANEC)

A.   . *Exercises Focusing On Synonymy Learning*

In this book exercises focusing on synonymy learning mainly fall into seven types. Here are some of the examples of each type.

Type 1

In the following sentences three alternatives are given in parenthesis for the italicized words. Select the one which you think is the most suitable in the context.

(1)A clumsy (heavy, stupid, unskillful) workman is likely to find fault with his tools.

(2)As John is a deft (skillful, clever, ready) mechanic, he was hired by the joint-venture in no time.

………

In this exercise, all the target words are the new words or words found in the unit under discussion. This will help students set up synonymous groups of words by identifying their synonyms. Also the sentences provide the students with a specific context which makes the task easier.

Type 2

Choose the one word or phrase that keeps the meaning of the original sentence if it is substituted for the italicized word or phrase.

*(1)That car model has become **obsolete.***

A. outmoded   B. out of stock   C. popular   D. modern

*(2) **Current** demographic trends, such as the fall in the birth rate, should be favorably accelerate economic growth in the long run.*

A. modern   B. rapid   C. contemporary   D. nowadays

………

This exercise not only practices the students' knowledge of synonymy, but also stimulates them to distinguish the shades of meanings between synonymous groups. In example 2 students will have to distinguish the meanings of synonymous groups: *modern, contemporary* and *nowadays*. The teacher can apply CP to show the differences of meanings of the synonymous groups.

Type 3

In each word group below, three or four of the words are similar in meaning. Point out the words which do not fit into their groups.

(1)inevitable, unnecessary, unavoidable, inescapable

(2)sufficient, enough, adequate, stinting

………

This exercise is quite helpful for students to set up synonymous groups for the newly learned word, and to further integrate the new words with learned ones.

Type 4

Find the inappropriate word in each of the following sentences and replace it with a suitable word.

(1)Mother Teresa is notorious for her fine work with the poor and sick in India.

(2)Old Tom is conspicuous for his great achievements in science.

………

The students will find this exercise require more efforts than the previous ones since they first have to find the mistakes in the sentences and then correct them. In example 1 the word *notorious* means *famous or widely known for something bad*. While the context of the sentence tells us the derogative meaning of *notorious* is inappropriate here. The teacher now should stimulate students to figure out another word with the similar meaning. The students might give answers such as *noted, famous, well-known, known*. The teacher can add more like *celebrated*. Then the teacher should point out that synonyms can have clearly different

affective values which result in the inappropriateness in the given sentence. Some are neutral like known, some are appreciative like celebrated, and others are derogative like notorious. In this way the students will set up synonymous relations for the target word notorious as well as broaden their knowledge of synonyms.

Type 5

Suggest a word or a phrase that might be used in informal speeches and writings for each of the words listed below.

(1)exhort   (2) attest to   (3) procrastinate   (4) reluctance

………

All the words chosen here are the new words the students are required to master in the unit. Through this exercise the teacher can illustrate that synonyms can be different in connotations. Here *exhort* is more formal compared with its synonym *advise*, so they differ in their stylistic appropriateness. The teacher should also mention that many borrowed words in English such as are generally more formal than native words. For example, *respond, forest, manual* are more formal than *answer, wood and handy.*

Type 6

Replace each phrase in italics with an appropriate word group listed below.

in disharmony with

in great disorder

*(1)Lucy felt sad and **out of keeping with** the general air of festivity that reigned in the house.*

*(2)The family had left in a hurry, leaving everything **at sixes and sevens.***

Type 7

Fill in each gap in the following sentences with the appropriate form of a suitable word taken from the list at the head of each group.

replace, substitute

(1)At last the arrogant manager resigned and was ( ) by a promising young man in his early thirties.

(2)I am afraid the jewels she returned to you are not genuine; they are fake ones that have been ( ) for the originals.

………

This exercise aims to help students distinguish differences between synonyms. In this example, the synonymous pair *replace* and *substitute* shows difference in application. In other words, they have different word collocations: replace A by B while substitute B for A. The teacher can also provide more examples for students to have a better understanding: *empty box, empty street, vacant position, vacant seat, hollow promise, hollow trunk, etc.*

B.   . Exercises Focusing On Antonymy Learning

There are mainly four types of exercises designed for practicing antonymy in the book *A New English Course.*

Type 1

Select the word or words most nearly opposite in meaning to the word in capitals.

(1)ALIVE
A. deadly   B. deathly   C. dead   D. deathlike
(2)FILTHY
A. impure   B. clean   C. spotless   D. unsoiled

………

This exercise practices vocabulary capacity on antonyms. As long as the students know the antonymous pairs, they can easily choose the correct answers. Besides providing the correct answers, the teacher should point out the four groups of antonyms: gradable antonyms, complementary antonyms and relational antonyms. In this exercise, *alive/dead* are complementary antonymous pairs; *filthy/ clean (spotless, unsoiled)* are gradable antonymous pairs.

Type 2

Select the word or words most nearly opposite in meaning to each other of the words in capitals.

(1)The river DROPPED some 34 feet overnight.
A. drooped   B. rose   C. fell
(2)The COLD-BLOODED assassination of the duke was the sensational news in today's papers.
A. warm   B. humane   C. callous
(3)Always bear in mind the proverb "Practice makes PERFECT."
A. exemplary   B. immaculate   C. imperfect

………

This exercise is similar with the previous one except that the contexts in the sentences here can help students pin down the precise meaning of the capitalized words. Take no. 3 for example, the teacher should introduce some affixes and suffixes that are used to form antonyms. Besides, knowledge about the markedness and unmarkedness terms should be touched upon. Here *imperfect* is formally marked, while *perfect* is formally unmarked.

Type 3

Give antonyms of the following words.

(1)majority   (2) stimulate

………

This exercise aims to help students set up antonymous pairs for the newly learned words.

Type 4

Fill in each blank with an appropriate word by adding to the given word in brackets the necessary prefix or suffix or both as is required.

(1)Our director made   (remit) efforts to improve the performance of our corporation.____

(2)The story you told seemed quite   (credit) but we were compelled to believe you.   _____

………

Adding affixes and suffixes is an important way to form antonyms in English. The teacher should introduce some common affixes and suffixes such as *un-, in-, im, ir-, anti, non-*, etc. and *–less.* In this way the students will be more familiar with the word formation in English.

C.   . Exercises Focusing On Hyponymy Learning

In the book A New English Course the exercises for practicing hyponymy are designed very well. From the

various types of exercises the students can understand what is hyponymy and the function of it.

Type 1

Fill in each blank with a suitable word or suitable words chosen from the list in the proper form.

remember, memorize, recall, recollect, remind, retain, review, reminisce

(1)He returned to the site of the Huai Hai Campaign to the battles he had witnessed.

(2)The Monument to the People's Heroes us of the sacrifices the martyrs made for the liberation of our ~~country~~.

………

All the words listed in this exercise are from the same field of concept of "remember". The teacher should use the word remember as a bridge to introduce other new words listed here. According to the theory of basic level category, the words at the basic level of the hierarchical relationship of hyponymy are learned more easily. Here the teacher should first tell students all the words here are more specific words under the same general covering word remember. Then the teacher can apply CP and principles of collocation to elaborate the precise meaning of each word. By constructing relationship of hyponymy among the words, the students will grasp and locate the meanings more easily.

Type 2

Make a list of more specific words for each of the following general terms.

(1)SAY
(2)SEE
(3)BEVERAGE

………

This exercise requires students to provide the subordinate terms of the superordinate. For each group, the general words are those basic level categories which the students have first grasped. The teacher should introduce the function of hyponyms which is to make our speech or writing more precise and vivid. The students should know how to apply the subordinate and superordinate terms appropriately.

Type 3

Give one generic term that covers each of the following groups of words.

(1)bandit, poacher, swindler, fraud, embezzler, imposter, smuggler

(2)drowse, doze, slumber, hibernate, coma, rest, nap

………

This exercise helps students group the specific words under a more general term systematically and form the relation of hyponymy, which can extend memory retention.

Type 4

Arrange the following groups of words in ascending order.

(1)whisper, roar, shout, speak
(2)canter, trot, gallop, walk

………

In this exercise the students are required to put all the words according to the intensity in meaning. This will help students grasp the precise meaning of both subordinates and superordinates. The teacher can provide some sentence examples to clarify the meaning respectively.

Type 5

Group the following words and phrases under 5 different headings as follows.

(1)pleasant
(2)sharp
(3)sweet

………

appetizing   peppery   treacly   delicacy   piququnt honeyed ………

D. **Exercises Focusing On Collocation Learning**

Collocations in this book especially focus on the collocations of preposition.

Type 1

Choose the word or phrase which best complete each sentence.

(1)Newly woven Indian baskets often ( ) a strange smell.
A. *give away B. give over C. give off D. give up*

(2)As the medicine took (   ), the nervous patient became quieter.
A. action   B. force   C. effect D. influence

(3) The writer was not used to speaking in public, but when the opportunity presented itself, he rose to the ( ).
A. chance   B. circumstance   C. event   D. occasion

(4)Although he hadn't got any academic qualifications, he had a lot of practical knowledge of navigation ( ).
A. at his back B. at his fingertips   C. under his belt D. in his grasp

These exercises cover collocations of verb and adverb, verb and noun, etc.

Type 2

Complete each phrase with an appropriate word chosen from the lists.

A. bevy, flight, grove, school, brood, flock………
(1)a ( ) of steps   (2)a ( ) of trees (3) a ( ) of larks
(4)a ( ) of fish   (5)a ( ) of bird   (6)a ( ) of chickens

B. board, committee, litter, swarm ,bunch, fleet
(1)a ( ) of representatives   (2)a ( ) of bees   (3) a ( ) of directors
(4) a ( ) of cats   (5) a ( ) of ships   (6) a ( ) of flowers

Type 3

Besides there are many closes after each unit in this book which cover practices of collocation, synonymy, antonymy and hyponymy.

IV. SUMMARY

Sense relations have been studied by many linguists and its practical value in teaching has already been accepted. As for this paper, sense relations application is limited in vocabulary teaching. Due to the content limit of this paper we just focus on three types of sense relations: synonymy, antonymy, hypnymy and collocation. In teaching and constructing these sense relations we apply componential analysis, markedness theory and basic level category respectively. Collocations are discussed with some guidelines.

After the elaboration on sense relation teaching we suggest a synthetical teaching approach following Brown and Payne's model of lexical teaching, which includes five steps in vocabulary teaching: encountering new words, getting the correct spelling and pronunciation of the word, meaning acquisition through sense relation construction, extending memory retention through exercises of various sources, and using the words in actual application.

Vocabulary teaching, a subject having received a great deal of discussion, still remains a tricky problem for researchers. This paper can hardly cover all the aspects involved for the limit of the content. Other aspects in vocabulary teaching are yet to be explored. The innovative idea of vocabulary teaching by establishing sense relations presented in this paper is an attempt expected to stimulate more creative and innovative researches in this field.

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