

# Research on Vocabulary Teaching of College English based on Category Correlation Theory

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**Abstract.** As the basis of language, the teaching of vocabulary is an important part of English teaching. Prototype category theory is one of the theories of cognitive linguistics, which has a strong guiding role in vocabulary teaching and can provide a certain reference for vocabulary teaching college English. College English is a discipline which emphasizes practice, its teaching goal is to cultivate students' ability in listening, speaking, reading, writing and translating, the basis for improving English is to master English vocabulary proficiently, therefore, vocabulary teaching plays a crucial role in students' English learning. This paper studies vocabulary teaching of college English from the perspective of cognitive linguistics, the prototype category theory as basis, studies the application of prototype category theory in college English vocabulary teaching, and improves the teaching level of college English.

**Keywords:** prototype category, college English, vocabulary teaching.

## 1. Introduction

It is generally known that vocabulary is the foundation of language and the basic unit of expressing people's thoughts, which directly affects people's language ability. English teaching is inseparable from vocabulary teaching, vocabulary teaching problems affect the English level of English learners, which is one of the core problems of language learning. The level of vocabulary application affects the fluency and accuracy of language expression, how to help student better master vocabulary in English learning is the primary problem facing vocabulary teaching of college English. However, because teachers lack an effective vocabulary learning theory to guide vocabulary teaching in English learning, so they mostly read item by item from the text, select some important words and explain their multiple interpretations, while students spend a lot of time and energy memorizing mechanically after class., but it often doesn't work very well.

In recent years, many linguists at home and abroad believe that the prototype category theory in cognitive linguistics can guide English vocabulary teaching, with the continuous development of the times, this theory has also been widely used in various fields of linguistics, and it also receive English teachers' attention, prototype category theory is gradually applied to the teaching of English vocabulary, thus improving the level of vocabulary teaching. For college students, the main problem that hinders their improvement in English is to accurately and comprehensively grasp the meaning of words in English vocabulary learning. This paper starts from the prototype category theory of cognitive linguistics, combines the problems in English vocabulary teaching and explores methods to solve these problems.

## 2. The Concept of Prototype Category Theory

Prototype theory is an important part of cognitive linguistics, which is derived from the traditional category theory. The representative figure of the traditional category theory is Aristotle, he advocated rationalism as the theoretical basis and based on the binary division, he believed that the category is jointly defined by necessary and sufficient conditions; there are obvious boundaries. Categorization refers to the overall process by which humans organize experience into various general concepts and related language symbols. Based on experience, interaction, generalization, and classification, categorization is one of the most basic abilities in advanced cognitive activities such as human thinking, language, reasoning, and creativity. Prototype refers to all typical models or original images of a word or a type meaning, and it is a typical set of features of a type. In prototype theory, the

meaning of words exists in the form of prototype categories. The prototype category is a structure consisting of a prototype and an edge. The prototype is a typical member of the category, and the edge is made up of atypical members of the category. The classification of categories is based on prototypes, and the change degree of category is judged by the prototype. The category of words forms a prototype. Nouns and verbs are typical members of them, they are located at the two ends of the continuum, and other words are located in the middle of the continuum. Prototype category theory is clearer and more flexible in explaining the meaning of words, and it is conducive for learners to understand and learn the meaning of words. Prototype category theory can help learners to put word meaning memory activities into the objective world, human cognitive activities and language structure with connection and development, so as to significantly improve the meaning acquisition and memory efficiency.

The categorization theory is applied to vocabulary teaching, which can activate cognitive structures and make them participate in information processing. At the university level, a certain amount of empirical knowledge has been accumulated in the students' minds, but some of these experiences are stable and clear, and can directly establish a very appropriate connection with the new vocabulary of learning; others are unstable and vague, cannot directly establish contact with new vocabulary. Clear and stable experience and knowledge can be activated automatically in the process of learning vocabulary, while fuzzy and unstable experience and knowledge is difficult to activate automatically, and it is difficult to participate in the processing of new information. Teachers should be good at discovering the relationship between students' experience and knowledge and knowledge of new words, try to activate them to participate in the learning of new English vocabulary, and promote the understanding and absorption of vocabulary. As part of linguistics, vocabulary coexists and is interconnected in many forms. Vocabulary is stored in the memory of students in a complex and huge relationships network, it can be inferred that the prototype category theory has important guiding significance for the teaching of English vocabulary.

### **3. Problems in Vocabulary Teaching of College English**

There is a misunderstanding in the current vocabulary teaching, namely, the larger the vocabulary, the better. It is true that people with large vocabulary can express their thoughts better and more accurately, but if vocabulary teaching blindly pursues mechanical memorizing of a large number of words, then the actual effect is not good. Many students, especially science and engineering students have memorized a lot of vocabulary when prepared for the CET4 and the TOEFL, these words have some help for reading comprehension and listening, but the writing part and spoken language part of the TOEFL makes most students feel difficult. The common feeling of the students is that the Chinese meaning of these words is clear, but how to apply it flexibly and accurately in the sentence is a big problem. In fact, according to research, learning 1000 words commonly used in English, people can understand about 80.5% of the content of one article; learning 2,000 words commonly used, people can understand about 89% of the content of one article; learning 3000 commonly used words, people can understand 93% of the content of one article; learning the commonly used 4000 words, people can understand about 95% of the content of one article;; learning the commonly used 5000 words, people can understand about 97% of the content of one article. When teaching vocabulary, teachers should let students change their idea and realize that English vocabulary is huge, and it is not necessary or possible to grasp the meaning and usage of all vocabulary.

### **4. Vocabulary Teaching under the Application of Prototype Category Theory**

Vocabulary is the building material of language and the basic structural component of language. It can be seen from psycholinguistics that there are two interrelated links in vocabulary learning: one is the understanding and memory of vocabulary; the other is the search and use of vocabulary. The task of vocabulary teaching is not only to make students know a word, but also makes students to associate the word with an object or concept, and correctly use, read and write, master the proper

collocation with other words, and to use occasion, implied meaning and associative meaning and so on. Applying the prototype category theory to vocabulary teaching can help students to establish English vocabulary cognition, so that students can regard the whole English vocabulary learning process as a process of continuously establishing English vocabulary cognition. Students have relevant cognition for English vocabulary, and new vocabulary knowledge is easily processed and stored in memory.

Teachers should help students construct an interconnected vocabulary network structure with the basic category words as the center from the perspective of cognition, in this way, this is not an isolated vocabulary in the students' minds, but is vocabulary entity related to each other. For students, the words that are the easiest to memorize, and the words that are most likely to produce associations based on these meanings, and they can be regarded as the basic category words. In the vocabulary teaching, the students' cognitive rules should be met, and focus on teaching students to use basic category words. The knowledge related to the vocabulary stored in the long-term memory of the brain is called the "mental lexicon". According to the spreading activation mode, the organization of the mental lexicon approximates a spider web composed of interconnected points. Activation starts at a certain point and then spreads to other points throughout the network in parallel. When any word in a mental lexicon is extracted, its attributes are activated, including its meaning, spelling, pronunciation, relationship with other words and other relevant information. English vocabulary teaching should highlight the characteristics of vocabulary learning association, because English vocabulary is not learned in isolation, and must be based on context, cognition, culture, etc.

Teachers can use the two networks of vocabulary to teach: one is the semantic net and the other is the structure net. Teachers can classify vocabulary by synonym, near-synonym, antonym, etc., which can help students construct a semantic net in the brain, and so that students can learn the words which they have learned in association with other words. Semantically related words are often stored together. According to the semantic field theory, some words can form a semantic field under the control of a common concept or semantic component, so teachers can help students construct multiple semantic nets to improve learning efficiency.

Through the understanding and research of the above prototype category theory, it is known that the prototype category has significant cognitive characteristics and can guide us to effectively conduct vocabulary teaching. In fact, since the prototype category appeared, it has been widely used in all aspects of linguistics, from vocabulary to sentence pattern to grammar; each is infiltrated by the prototype effect. In college English vocabulary teaching, teachers can use the prototype category theory, focus on the teaching of vocabulary in the basic category, as well as the teaching of polysemy, pay attention to the use of prototype category word formation and metaphor teaching, and gradually expand vocabulary teaching. Specifically, teachers can start from the following aspects in vocabulary teaching:

Attach importance to the teaching of basic vocabulary. In English learning, vocabulary with high frequency of use and strong word-formation ability is called basic category vocabulary, it is characterized by a small number of syllables, simple word form, and it is easy for students to remember and master them, these words are occupying an important position in English teaching. In the teaching of college English, teachers should emphasize the basic vocabulary as a prototype, analyze and explain the vocabulary of their subordinate categories, which will not only help the expansion of students' vocabulary, but also improve students' writing and oral level. Therefore, teachers should pay great attention to the basic category vocabulary in the vocabulary teaching of college English, put it in the primary position of vocabulary teaching, and some abstract category vocabulary should be placed after the basic level vocabulary, otherwise, if teachers do not pay attention to the teaching of basic vocabulary, just blindly pursue difficult words, which will bring many teaching problems to reading and writing, and cause teaching effects to be not good.

Lay emphasis on polysemy. Polysemy, in short, is a word with different meanings. According to the prototype category theory, in the meaning of a word, a word meaning is the most basic, and other meanings are further radiated and extended on the basis of this meaning, thus forming the radiation category of the meaning of this word. Taking "over" as example, explain the relationship between

polysemy meanings is explained. The various meanings of a polysemous word constitute a category of meaning, each meaning does not have the same characteristics, but they are related in some way and have many typical members. In English vocabulary teaching, some teachers often only briefly describe the meaning of a vocabulary in a certain context; ignore the central meaning of the lyrics, thus increasing the memory burden of students. Therefore, when explaining polysemous words, teachers should focus on the meaning of prototypes, and cultivate students' ability to infer the specific meaning of the full text according to the context, so that they can learn to integrate and use vocabulary flexibly.

Emphasize the teaching of metaphor. With the continuous development of cognitive linguistics, people gradually find that the ability of metaphorical thinking changes with the development of human cognition, which belongs to the advanced stage of cognitive development; it is an indispensable ability for people to know the world, especially when they know abstract things. The metaphors can be into three categories: orientation metaphors, structural metaphors, and ontological metaphors. Human beings first know themselves, and then recognize the things around them, and then recognize the remote things, and then begin to understand abstract concepts. In recent years, with the development of society, People need to know more and more things, and then there will be more and more members in the category, at this time, the human brain will adopt a metaphorical way to use the relevance of things to project the expression of language from one concept to another, and so-called cognitive projection is formed. If teachers properly explained from the perspective of substantive metaphor in vocabulary teaching, which will definitely make students better understand metaphor, thus helping students master the vocabulary.

## 5. Conclusion

Vocabulary teaching is an important part of language teaching. In the process of vocabulary teaching of college English, if relevant linguistic theories are applied as a guide, the teaching can achieve twice the result with half the effort. Based on the prototype category theory, this paper explores some new methods of vocabulary teaching of college English, strengthens the teaching of basic categories of vocabulary, pays attention to the importance of basic vocabulary for students in the primary stage, lays a foundation for learning senior class, and emphasizes teaching of polysemous words, understands the connection between different meanings; pays attention to the role of metonymy and metaphor thinking for vocabulary teaching, and understands the evolution process of different meanings. The vocabulary teaching of college English under the guidance of prototype category theory can improve students' vocabulary learning interest, mobilize students' learning enthusiasm and improve teaching quality.

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