Research on English Lexical Motivation and Pedagogical Implication

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Abstract: Based on the research and development of lexical motivation theory and the present situation and demand of English vocabulary teaching in China, the study researches into the motivation of English vocabulary and discusses its enlightenment to English vocabulary teaching, putting forward the teaching advice on vocabulary acquisition and memory strategies. The purpose of this study is to enrich the research on the motivation of English vocabulary and to apply its conclusions to the practice of vocabulary instruction.

1. Introduction

On the one hand, there have long been studies of arbitrariness and motivation of linguistic sign in the field of linguistics. The study of lexical motivation has also been paid good attention to by linguists who have tried to explain "lexical motivation", explore its underlying mechanism and classify motivations into different categories. On the other hand, China has put great emphasis on the study of English in recent years. As a major subject, however, English is difficult for some Chinese students to learn, the main reason for which is the poor command of English vocabulary. It is conspicuous that there is a real demand for the improvement of vocabulary teaching methods. Therefore, studying the motivation of English vocabulary and putting the research conclusions into the practical teaching activities may be of good benefit and significance.

2. Arbitrariness and Motivation of Linguistic Sign

Ferdinand de Saussure, the renowned Swiss linguist, is the first person who has proposed the idea that linguistic sign possesses the feature of arbitrariness, that is, there is no intrinsic and natural connections between word form and its meaning. In Course in General Linguistics, Saussure elucidates that "The linguistic sign unites, not a thing or a name, but a concept and a sound image. The latter is not the material sound, a purely physical thing, but the psychological imprint of the sound, the impression that it makes on our senses."[1] To avoid ambiguity he changes the notions of "concept" and "sound image" into "signified" and "signifier" respectively. After that, he proposes the principle of "the arbitrary nature of the sign", the connotation of which is interpreted as "The bond between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary." Moreover, Saussure disputes the motivation of onomatopoeia and interjections, arguing that the choice of them is already arbitrary to some extent and they are only similar in pronunciation, and parts of them are conventional imitations of some sounds. Therefore, at that time, when people talk about the characteristics of

linguistic sign, the principle proposed by Saussure has been regarded as the first priority and recognized to a relatively large extent in linguistics area.

As cognitive linguistics has developed step by step, motivation of linguistic signs has been concerned by researchers more and more. Many studies have shown that there are some relations between linguistic signs and things they represent, that is, the adoption of language is motivated from some aspects. The choice, formation and usage of language are logical as well as verifiable. Hence some linguists begin to question Saussure's view on arbitrariness and come up with the notion that language forms have relation to their meanings, which is called motivation of linguistic sign.

Some linguists' opinions about motivation of linguistic sign are as follows. Wang Yin[2] believes that linguistic signs possess the feature of iconicity, which is the major relation between the signifier and the signified. Besides, he thinks that iconicity plays greater role than arbitrariness in language and Saussure's argument overstates arbitrariness of language signs. The scholar Yan Chensong summarizes some research achievements of motivation in his paper A Close Study of Motivations in Language[3]. The study of linguistic motivation, from his perspective, is to interpret the meaning of linguistic signs and reflect the connection between the signifier and the signified. What's more, he draws a conclusion that there are motivations in a broad sense and in a narrow sense respectively–the former involves categories above words while the latter is limited to the linguistic forms below words.

Actually, the controversy over the priority between arbitrariness and motivation of linguistic symbols is not that necessary. As two intrinsic characteristics of linguistic sign, arbitrariness and motivation do not exist as opposites and they complement each other instead.

3. Lexical Motivation

3.1 Definition

As is mentioned above, although the form and meaning of linguistic signs possess the feature of arbitrariness, there is also motivation between them. Then this paper will focus on motivation of language at the lexical level, mainly discussing motivation of words, that is, motivation reflected by the relations between the form and the meaning of words. As for lexical motivation, there is no universally recognized definition in the academic circle at present, but different scholars have put forward different definitions for it. For example, as defined by Lu Guoqiang in Modern English lexicology, "motivation of words refers to the reason for objects and phenomena to obtain names and it explains the relation between meanings and names."[4] Pan Dongting defines lexical motivation as "the formation basis for the words expressing things, phenomena, and concepts in language."[5] Although the researchers have various definitions of lexical motivation, the essence of their expressions is to explain the logical relation between the forms of words and the entities they represent. Therefore, lexical motivation can be defined as the foundation for the creation and invention of words.

3.2 The Main Four Lexical Motivations

Since there has not been a clear and conventional classification of lexical motivation in the studies of linguistics, this paper will study the main four lexical motivations, namely phonetic motivation, morphological motivation, semantic motivation and etymological motivation according to the mainstream classification in researches.

3.2.1 Phonetic Motivation

Phonetic motivation refers to the fact that there is perceived connections between the pronunciation and meaning of words, that is, the phonetic form and the meaning of words have relevance and logical relation.

Onomatopoetic words are commonly recognized as words with phonetic motivation. According to Ullmann's and Wang Fengxin's[6] researches, onomatopoeia can be divided into two categories– primary onomatopoeia and secondary onomatopoeia–the former refers to the words whose pronunciation directly imitate the sounds made by the represented entities; the latter refers to the words whose pronunciation can be suggestive of their meanings. The scholar Ma Bingyi[7] divides onomatopoetic words into three categories: animal onomatopoetic words, natural phenomena onomatopoetic words and knocking and collision onomatopoetic words.

Besides onomatopoeia mentioned above, Huang Yuanzhen[8] and other scholars think that the words translated directly from English pronunciation and the words whose English and Chinese pronunciation are similar also possess phonetic motivation. Grasping motivations of this kind of words can have a tremendous help for Chinese students to learn English vocabulary efficiently. To sum up, the words that can reflect the relation between their pronunciations and meanings can be classified as words with phonetic motivation.

3.2.2 Morphological Motivation

Morphological motivation of words refers to the connection between structure of word formation and word meaning. The significance of studying morphological motivation lies in the analysis on the structure of word formation, by which we can infer its meaning and have a better grasp of the word.

Hu Zhuanglin [9] divides morphological motivation of words into pictographic motivation and word-formation motivation–the former means that there is similarity or connection between the shape of words and the things they represent; the latter refers to the motivation embodied in the way of word-formation. Between the two kinds of morphological motivation, word-formation motivation is more widely used. Hence it is very necessary to master the way of word-formation in order to explore morphological motivation of words. According to the research achievements at home and abroad, the common ways of word-formation are as follows: compounding, derivation, conversion, acronym, back-formation and so on. Among the mentioned ways, the words formed by the method of compounding are called compounds, which are composed of two or more words. By associating the meanings of the components, their meanings can usually be inferred. The words formed by the way of derivation are called derived words, which are usually composed of one root and one or more affixes. Roots are mostly simple words without motivation and affixes are mainly divided into prefixes and suffixes. What's more, affixes generally have fixed meanings. By grasping the common simple words and affixes, we can judge the meaning of derived words better. It can be seen that compounds and derived words can well reflect morphological motivation of words, therefore, the study of which can be carried out mainly by studying the principle of compounding and derivation.

3.2.3 Semantic Motivation

Semantic motivation of words means the connections between the original meaning and the extended meaning of them. And it is mainly reflected in the extension and figurative usage of word meaning. The latter is generally realized by metaphor, synecdoche, metonymy, analogy and other rhetorical devices. Metaphor is to allude to one thing by means of another without using the words "like" or "as". Synecdoche refers to the substitution of part for whole or whole for part, category for

individual or individual for category, and material for the goods made from it. Metonymy means not directly saying the name of the thing to say, but call it by the name of another that has something to do with it. Analogy is to modify and describe one thing based on the characteristics of another and the similarities between them. Among these rhetorical devices mentioned above, metaphor is the most common one to embody semantic motivation of words. Therefore, the study of metaphor is of great benefit to the research on semantic motivation of vocabulary.

In conclusion, semantic motivation refers to the connection between words' literal and figurative meanings. The main research purpose is to explain the relations between the original meaning and the meaning led by extension or figures of speech, so as to better understand the different connotations of words in different situations.

3.2.4 Etymological Motivation

Etymological motivation refers to that the meanings of words are related to the origin and evolution of them. Wu Huiqin et al. believe that "there are seven main sources of English vocabulary, namely historical events, cultural customs, literary allusions, Greek mythology, biblical stories, the names of people and place as well as loanwords."[10] The significance of studying etymological motivation is that by understanding the source and evolution process of words, we can know the formation foundation and development history of them, so as to have a better understanding and command of those words with etymological motivation.

4. Pedagogical Implication

4.1 Advice on Vocabulary Acquisition Strategies

Based on the above research on lexical motivation, teachers can classify English vocabulary according to different motivations and then teach with the corresponding methods, so as to promote students' vocabulary acquisition.

First, for words with phonetic motivation, teachers should emphasize the relation between pronunciation and meaning and let students associate the phonetic and semantic relations by themselves. Then teachers explain the relations to deepen the impression of students.

Second, for words with morphological motivation, teachers can focus on the teaching of compounds and derived words. For compounds, teachers can lead students to discover and summarize their main characteristics. When students can skillfully identify compounds, teachers can give some new compounds and let students try to guess the meanings. After that, teachers explain the given compounds, which can give students a deeper impression. For derived words, teachers can lead students to learn the roots and affixes. Through the explanation of common roots and affixes, students can master the characteristics of derived words, so as to improve their ability to guess the meanings of unknown words.

Third, for words with semantic motivation, teachers are supposed to teach vocabulary acquisition strategies based on figurative usage. Teachers make students understand relevant rhetorical devices by means of examples and then cultivate students' ability to guess the figurative meaning according to the basic meaning.

Fourth, for words with etymological motivation, the main teaching guideline is to lead students to learn the background knowledge behind vocabulary, which can not only stimulate students' interest in learning, but also make students understand the source and development process of vocabulary, so as to better achieve the teaching purpose of promoting vocabulary acquisition.

4.2 Advice on Vocabulary Memory Strategies

Students in China mainly memorize English vocabulary by rote, which ensures the accuracy of memory to some extent. But in the long run, the method leads to many problems, including low efficiency, poor effect, non-persistent memory, passive learning and so on. More importantly, memorizing words by rote is only low-level learning, which is not conducive to the cultivation of learners' creative thinking. When students encounter complex problems, their lack of problem-solving and deep-learning ability will be exposed. Therefore, teachers should change the way that students memorize words and teach effective vocabulary memory strategies to improve the quality, efficiency and persistence of vocabulary memory, so as to improve the overall English level.

In order to better achieve the goal of promoting students to memorize vocabulary efficiently, teachers should teach corresponding memory strategies for words with different motivations. For words with main four motivations, the following memory strategies are for reference. First, for words with phonetic motivation, the combination of pronunciation, form and meaning can increase the relevance and accuracy of vocabulary memory. Second, for words with morphological motivation, teachers can summarize common roots, affixes and basic words together with students, and then ask students to memorize them, so as to achieve the effect of memorizing other words. Third, the memory point for words with semantic motivation emphasizes the various meanings and their relations, not just the basic meaning. Fourth, words with etymological motivation can be memorized by connecting their etymological sources, which can make vocabulary memory more profound. In conclusion, the principle of vocabulary memory strategies is to process vocabulary according to their motivations and to get rid of mechanical method of rote.

5. Conclusion

As two important characteristics of linguistic signs, arbitrariness and motivation are interrelated and mutually influenced. What's more, there should be no priority between them and they cannot exist in isolation from each other. By analyzing motivation of language from lexical level, it can be found that words also possess motivation, which provides the basis for their naming. According to the present classifications in linguistics area, lexical motivations mainly include phonetic motivation, morphological motivation, semantic motivation and etymological motivation. This paper summarizes the definitions and viewpoints of different scholars on the four motivations. It can be concluded that many words have the characteristic of motivation, which provides great enlightenment for English vocabulary teaching. In the end, some teaching advice is put forward according to the analysis of lexical motivation. It is highly recommended that English teachers should teach the proposed acquisition and memory strategies actively and efficiently, so as to stimulate students' passion for learning, enlarge their vocabulary and enhance their English study level. In conclusion, this paper researches into English lexical motivation and propounds some advice on vocabulary teaching. The paper is intended to enrich the relevant researches and provide some inspiration for English teachers. However, there are still some deficiencies and imperfections in this paper. For example, some less common motivations are not discussed. So the author hopes to further study and research on this subject in the future, so as to find new understandings of lexical motivation and vocabulary instruction.

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