

# Study on Polysemy under the View of Cognitive Metaphor and English Lexical Teaching

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**Abstract.** Polysemy is a common phenomenon in language, which is an objective requirement for the development and change of language. Polysemy, on the one hand, reduces the necessary vocabulary and the memory burden of learners, on the other hand, causes ambiguity and increases the difficulty of language communication. The study of polysemy from the perspective of cognitive metaphor could reveal the rule of senses extension from basic senses or central senses to metaphorical senses and the relationship among senses. Accurately and efficiently mastering polysemy in English vocabulary can improve students' English expression ability and communication accuracy, which is of great practical and theoretical value to English teaching and research.

**Keywords:** Polysemy; cognitive metaphor; lexical teaching.

## 1. Introduction

In the book linguistic semantics, Lyons states it is almost certain that there is no such a natural language in which all the words have only one sense[1]. As a tool and means of communication, language plays an irreplaceable role in people's daily life. In reality, polysemy is a common phenomenon in language, which is a necessary requirement for language to develop and change constantly. In the face of the fact that every language has a huge vocabulary and almost every word has several senses, whether we can master and properly use the polysemy of a language will directly affect the accuracy of communication. The generation of polysemy is in accordance with the principle of time and labor saving of human beings. Giving multiple senses to a word can greatly reduce the number of vocabularies used in a language, thereby greatly reducing the memory burden of learners. But at the same time, because of polysemy, there are also communication barriers such as ambiguity in daily communication, which become even more serious in the communication between people from different countries. Therefore, as for the English teaching in China, if teachers can help students master polysemy in English words, students' English expression ability, communication accuracy, and even English comprehensive ability will be greatly improved. So the study of polysemy in English words has important theoretical value and practical significance for English teaching research.

## 2. The Study of Polysemy from the Perspective of Cognitive Metaphor

### 2.1 The Definition of Polysemy

There is a common phenomenon in almost every language, that is, a word carries two or more senses. Linguists regard this phenomenon as an important research topic, which is called polysemy[2]. Breal first proposed the concept of polysemy. He believed that absolute stability does not exist and every part of language would change constantly, and the research found that the change of meaning is the most obvious and most difficult for the learners to master. Ullmann holds that polysemy is a basic feature of human language[3]. The society is always developing and language is always changing, and language must follow the principle of economy, so polysemy is an inevitable result. Langacker maintains that several senses of a word constitute a hierarchical semantic structure or network[4]. Linguists have concluded from the process of language evolution that word senses can be divided into basic senses and extended senses[5-6]. Basic sense refers to the

most commonly used and most primitive sense, which is firstly produced based on human experience, and extended sense is derived from the basic sense. The purpose of studying polysemy is to find out the internal relations among different senses.

## 2.2 The Study of Polysemy from the Perspective of Cognitive Metaphor

The study of metaphor can be traced back to the time of Aristotle, but at that time, the study of metaphor was limited to the field of poetics and rhetoric. In the 19th century, Plato school believed that metaphor is not only at the level of language, but it is human-specific. In the 1980s, with the rise of cognitive linguistics, metaphor became the research focus of cognitive science, no longer limited to the language level. Cognitive linguistics holds that metaphor is cognitive, and thinking itself is metaphorical, metaphor is an important part of human's unique cognitive ability[7]. It participates in the generation, transmission and processing of meaning. According to cognitive semantics, polysemy is a process in which the basic sense of a word is extended to other senses by means of metaphor, which is the result of cognition categorization and conceptualization. Metaphor involves the comparison of two concepts, one concept is used to understand the other. In metaphor, they are called target domain and source domain. Target domain is the concept and experience that metaphor needs to understand, and source domain is the method that people use to describe experience. For example, in the sentence "we are wasting our time here", the target domain is time, and the source domain is money, the abstract concept of time is described by concrete experience of money.

Cognitive linguistics holds that polysemy is also based on the projection principle of the conceptual domain. In the process of cognition, people establish the connection between things through similarities, and project from a concrete and familiar conceptual domain to an abstract and unfamiliar conceptual domain. Along with this process, extended senses or metaphorical senses are derived from basic sense. For example, in Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary (published by Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, 1st edition, January 2008), the noun senses of the word "head" are as follows:

1. the part of the body above the neck that contains the eyes, nose, mouth and ears and the brain.
2. the person or animals when considered as a unit.
3. a measure of length or height equal to the size of a head.
4. the mind and mental abilities.
5. the top or highest part of sth.
6. someone in charge of or leading an organization, group.
7. the part of a tape or video recorder.
8. the larger part of a plant where a flower or leaves grow.

It can be seen from the above senses that besides the basic sense—human body parts, the senses also include the highest position of the head, namely, the top. Through analysis, it is not difficult to find that the sense expansion and association of head as a body part are limited, and the position of head can produce more similarities and establish more links with other things, so more senses are generated from this sense. Based on the position of head in the human body, sense 7 and 8 come by concept projection, because head is the highest part and the top of the body, and the hammer head and the magnetic head are the top parts of the two objects, based on their similarities, these two metaphorical meanings are generated, which is also in line with the cognitive law that human beings recognize and infer new knowledge through their own familiar conceptual domains, such as the body. It should be noted that the extended senses can also lead to the expansion of word senses. For example, based on the position of the head in the human body, the sense of "head" is extended, and the extended sense could expand a new sense again, that is, the importance of the head, the related sense is sense 6. According to the similarities between the importance of the head and other things, the domain projection produces the sense that the most important person in a department—the supervisor, that is, the sense of leader. Through the trigger point of the function of head, sense 4—intelligence, brain is generated

From the above discussion, we can know that metaphorical cognition plays an irreplaceable role in the generation of polysemy of a word, and different senses of a word are related to each other. Polysemy is a phenomenon that human beings establish similarities between things through cognitive process such as metaphor, in which conceptual projection occurs. Extended meaning is generated from the basic or central sense as a result of human cognitive categorization and conceptualization [8].

### **3. Enlightenment on English Lexical Teaching**

To sum up, applying cognitive metaphor theory in vocabulary teaching and highlighting the function of metaphor in the extension of word senses are conducive to the systematic understanding of polysemy. The generative feature of cognitive metaphor theory is also good for students' senses expansion, with the help of which, students could explore as many senses as possible in a given word, and finally improve their English ability. In this way, the shortcomings of previous lexical teaching methods could be made up, and a new model for more efficient vocabulary learning could be established.

#### **3.1 Enlightenment on Teachers**

Language is not in a vacuum, it carries certain culture and thinking mode. Presently, English teaching in our country is only for the purpose of teaching language knowledge, excessively emphasizes the accuracy of the language, and adopts cramming teaching method, the result is that students cultivate a learning habit of memorizing the words by rote, and form a wrong thought that English learning is only a passive acceptance without their own independent thinking, which cannot stimulate their initiative and independent learning.

In English lexical teaching, teachers should try to introduce metaphorical knowledge intentionally, so that students could understand the relevant cognitive metaphor theory, which could help them find the connection between senses, establish similarities and associations, so as to deeply understand every sense and the relation between the different senses of a word. Therefore, when explaining polysemy in class, teachers should first teach basic cognitive metaphor theory, try to introduce basic sense to students, and inspire students to understand the relationship between the basic sense and the extended senses. When the extended sense appears, teachers should encourage students to guess the extended sense suitable for the context according to the basic knowledge of context and cognitive metaphor, so that students can deeply understand the polysemy of a word, cultivate a good habit of autonomous vocabulary learning, and understand the metaphorical thinking mode in language.

#### **3.2 Enlightenment on Students**

In the process of learning English, students should not only know what it is, but also know why it is. English vocabulary is like a vast ocean. No matter how hard one tries, he can't remember every sense of every word. At the same time, in the process of learning English vocabulary, difficulties appear endlessly. To improve the efficiency of vocabulary learning, it is not enough to learn ten words today and memorize twenty words tomorrow. It is important to master an accurate and efficient vocabulary learning method. Learning English vocabulary on the basis of cognitive metaphor is in line with the laws of language acquisition and human cognition. When learning vocabulary learning, students should refer to the latest ideas of contemporary metaphor theory, and cultivate their own metaphorical ability and autonomous learning ability. Foreign language scholars agree that polysemy is the difficulty of vocabulary learning, and learning vocabulary under the guidance of cognitive metaphor theory is an effective learning method. Students first learn the knowledge of cognitive metaphor, study vocabularies under the guidance of cognitive metaphor, and actively associate different senses of words. When the various senses of words can be linked together, students could deeply understand the basic sense and extended senses of words. This requires students to take the basic meaning of vocabulary as the starting point in specific learning,

associate the possible extended senses of a word according to their cognitive metaphor knowledge, so as to avoid rote memorization, improve their awareness and ability to use the extended meaning of vocabulary accurately, and finally improve their English comprehensive ability.

#### **4. Summary**

The improvement of English vocabulary teaching is not a matter of one day. It needs to summarize the experience and lessons of students in the process of learning and change the teaching methods and strategies at the right time under the guidance of the latest theory. At the same time, it also needs students to figure out the learning methods suitable for themselves according to their own needs. The interpretation of polysemy from the perspective of cognitive metaphor is explored, and its applications into lexical teaching are analyzed in this paper. In the future English lexical teaching, teachers should encourage students to actively seek extended senses and help students cultivate a good vocabulary learning method, so as to improve their English level.

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