

A Study of Vocabulary Teaching

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Introduction

“Language is not simply patterns of noise. No matter how systematic noise is, it cannot be language until it has been given a meaning ; and it derives this meaning largely from its use in real-life situations. Language does not exist in a vacuum : it has no independent existence apart from its users and the uses to which we put it. We ‘read’ meanings into words and sentences by seeing how they are used. A sequence of sounds remains nonsense until we see how people are using it in relation to some aspect of our experience,” writes Crystal.¹⁾ Language, then, is a symbolic system of communication.

Linguistic analysis of a language begins with the identification of the sounds of speech, shows how these sounds are combined into meaningful elements and examines the structure of words and their relationships in larger structures. Rivers and Temperley classify linguistic meaning into three levels ; lexical meaning, structural or grammatical meaning and social-cultural meaning——‘Lexical meaning’ means the semantic implications of the words and expressions, ‘structural or grammatical meaning’ is expressed at times by semantically empty function words, but also by interrelationships among words, and ‘social-cultural meaning’ is the evaluative dimension which English-speaking people give to words because of their common experiences with language in their culture.²⁾

1) Crystal, D., *What is Linguistics ?*, London : Edward Arnold, 1974, p. 50.

2) Rivers, W. M. and Temperley, M. S., *A practical guide to the teaching of English as a second or foreign language*, New York : O. U. P., 1978, p. 202.

Now that meaning is the most difficult aspect of language to treat in an objective way, linguists, who characteristically view language as a structured system, devote themselves mostly to the study of phonology and grammar. Wilkins writes, "Reflecting the linguist's concern with grammar and the related view that mastery of a foreign language depends upon complete control of its grammatical rules, we find the methodologist's emphasis on the subordination of vocabulary teaching to grammar teaching."³⁾ Linguistic studies of vocabulary and semantics (the study of language concerned with meanings), therefore, have been little investigated in the last fifty years. However, the obvious fact is that to communicate at all seriously and adequately through language, we need a good command of vocabulary as well as grammar, and also a proper understanding of semantics.

In this paper I would like to study of the system of meanings, examine what the problems of learning vocabulary, and attempt to discover any implications for language teaching.

I . Individual words and their meanings

When we use language, we express our ideas about the world around us ; we talk about things we see happening, with reference to the objects of the physical world and to their qualities ; we report activities and manner in which we do a thing ; we express the way in which events are related in time to one another. Since events occur in connection with space and time, we need to be able to describe locations, directions and movements. At the same time, as Wilkins says,⁴⁾ we need to express our attitudes about the truth and reliability of the report we are making, whether it is certain or uncertain, desired or doubted.

The popular view of words is that they serve as 'names' or 'labels' for things. It is clear that there is a relationship between linguistic elements,

3) Wilkins, D. A., *Linguistics in language teaching*, London : Edward Arnold, 1972, p. 109.

4) Ditto, *Second-language learning and teaching*, London : Edward Arnold, 1974, p. 5.

words, sentences, etc., and the non-linguistic world of experience, and this relationship is commonly described as 'denotative' or 'referential' meaning. Furthermore, it is certainly true that the child learns many of his words by a process of naming or labeling things.

There are, however, many difficulties with this view : It is not at all plausible for most adjectives to be regarded as 'names' ; in other words, most adjectives cannot be used as a label to identify something that they 'denote' or 'refer to'. It is impossible to identify what is 'named' by a verb ; "even in so far as we can distinguish 'someone' and 'what he is doing', it is far more difficult to identify precisely what are the essential characteristics of what is denoted by the verb than what is denoted by the noun."⁵⁾ There are some nouns that, while not referring to imaginary items, do not refer to physical objects at all ; 'love', 'hate', 'belief', for instance, relate to an idea or general notion, but they have nothing to do with physical entities at all. Even if we restrict our attention to words that are connected with visible objects in the world, they often seem to refer to a whole set of rather different object ; 'chairs' for instance, come in all shapes and sizes, but what is it that makes each one a chair rather than a sofa or a stool ? The dividing line between the items referred to by one word and those referred to by another is often vague and there may be overlap.

Although the citation from different languages of quite different words referring to the same thing or having the same meaning (e.g. *tree* in English, *arbre* in French, *ki* in Japanese), as Lyons points out, "tends to encourage the view that the vocabulary of any given language is essentially a list of names associated by convention with independently existing things or meanings, yet one soon comes to realize, in learning a new language, that there are distinctions of meaning made in one language that are not made in another."⁶⁾ For example :

5) Palmer, F. R., *Semantics*, Cambridge : C. U. P., 1976, p. 20.

6) Lyons, J., *Introduction to Theoretical Linguistics*, Cambridge : C. U. P., 1968, p. 55.

English	Japanese
bloom blossom flower	hana (=flower in general)
sheep ram ewe lamb	hitsuji (=sheep in general)
brother	kyodai (=brothers) ani (=elder brother) ototo (=younger brother)

So there is no word which is equivalent to 'blossom' in Japanese, just as there is no word which is equivalent to 'elder brother' in English. To take another example ; the English verb 'wear' or 'put on' can be translated into Japanese as 'kiru', 'kaburu', 'haku', 'hameru', 'kakeru', 'shimeru', 'hayasu', 'ukaberu' and so on. It happens that Japanese distinguishes the meaning of 'wear a jacket' from 'wear a hat', 'wear shoes', 'wear a ring', 'wear glasses', 'wear a tie' and so on, and uses different verbs for each ; whereas English covers a wide semantic area with one verb. These examples mentioned above, although they are not sufficient enough to be conclusive, imply that the words of a language often reflect not so much the reality of the world, but the interests of the people who speak it.

“Since our classification of the physical and abstract world is itself determined by the lexical structure of the language we speak”⁷⁾, we should keep in mind, in learning a foreign language, that learning the vocabulary is not simply a matter of acquiring a fresh set of labels to attach to familiar meanings, but a matter of learning a new way of classifying things.

7) Wilkins, D. A., op. cit., 1974, pp. 19—20.

II. Lexical structure

The study of the vocabulary of a language will lead us to realize that there are many aspects of meaning associated with words; that is, through the study of the meaning of words, we can find out not only their relations with the physical world but also their relations with one another. The term 'sense' is used, to contrast with 'reference', to distinguish between two very different, though related, aspects of meaning. The words 'bull' and 'cow', for instance, refer to particular kinds of animals and derive their meaning in a certain way, but at the same time they belong to a pattern in English that includes 'boar/sow', 'ram/ewe', 'dog/bitch', etc. There are many other kinds of relations between words such as 'father/son', 'male/female', 'buy/sell' and so on. Since there are complex and varied types of relations that exist between words, it is not too much to say that words are not comprehensible solely in terms of 'reference'. Lyons writes, "Whether the two elements have reference or not, we can ask whether they have the same meaning or not in the context, or contexts, in which they both occur. Since sameness of meaning, synonymy, is a relation which holds between two (or more) vocabulary-items, it is a matter of sense, not reference."⁸⁾ What we refer to as the sense of a lexical item is the whole set of 'sense-relations' which it contracts with other items in the vocabulary. There are many other sense-relations besides synonymy, and now I want to consider these relations in detail.

1. Synonymy

"Two, or more, forms may be associated with the same meaning (e.g. hide/conceal, big/large); in which case the words in question are synonyms." (Lyons, 1968)

8) Lyons, J., op. cit., 1968, p. 427.

It seems to me, however, that no two words have exactly the same meaning, or at least it seems unlikely that two words with exactly the same meaning exist within a language; in other words, 'synonyms' can be seen to differ in some ways: First, some sets of synonyms belong to different dialects of the language; in Britain, people commonly use 'autumn' instead of 'fall', just as the case with 'the railroad' instead of 'the railway' in the United States. Secondly, 'gentleman/man/fellow/chap/guy' differ one another in degree of formality; it is possible that 'a chap' can be substituted for 'a man' without changing the overall meaning of the utterance, but it may achieve different effects in the style. Thirdly, "some words may be said to differ only in their emotive or evaluative meanings; there is the emotive difference between 'politician' and 'statesman', 'hide' and 'conceal', 'liberty' and 'freedom', each implying approval or disapproval."⁹⁾ Fourthly, some synonyms are collocationally or contextually restricted; 'rancid' is used for bacon or butter, and 'addled' is used for egg or brains.

2. Homonymy

"Two, or more, meanings may associated with the same form (e.g. bank : (1) 'of a river', (2) 'for the deposit of money') in which case the words are homonyms." (Lyons, 1968)

Palmer, however, points out, "We cannot clearly distinguish whether two meanings are the same or different and, therefore, determine exactly how many meanings a word has."¹⁰⁾ To consider the verb 'eat', for instance; we eat different types of food in different ways, and the meaning of 'eat' overlaps that of 'drink'. But there is no clear criterion of either difference or sameness. Palmer also says, "There is the problem that if one form has several meanings, it is not always clear whether we shall say that this is an example of the word with several meanings or

9) Palmer, F. R., op. cit., 1976, p. 61.

10) Ibid., p. 65.

of 'homonymy'."¹¹⁾

3. Hyponymy

"By 'hyponymy' is meant a relationship of inclusion" (Wilkins, 1972); that is, it is the term for the words which refer to the class itself—'tulip', 'rose', 'daffodil' are included in 'flower', and 'vegetable' includes 'carrot', 'onion', 'lettuce' and so on.

Inclusion is thus a matter of class membership. The same term, however, may appear in several places; 'bitch' and 'puppy' are included in 'dog', and 'dog' is also a hyponym of 'dog' as distinct from 'bitch'.

4. Incompatibility

"The relation of 'incompatibility' is in a sense the reverse of hyponymy, in that it is one of exclusion." (Wilkins, 1972)

Simple difference of meaning is not an object of concern, but 'morning' and 'afternoon/evening/night/', 'Monday' and 'Sunday/Tuesday/Friday'; some colour terms (e.g. 'blue' and 'red', or 'black' and 'yellow') are incompatible, just as 'morning' and 'night' are incompatible.

5. Antonymy

The term 'antonymy' is used for 'oppositeness of meaning', for relations like that between 'young' and 'old', or 'wide' and 'narrow'. Some antonyms, however, can be seen in terms of degrees of the quality involved: To say 'not wide' is not necessarily to say 'narrow', so that there is a gradation from 'wide' to 'narrow'. There is a quite different kind of 'opposite', which exist between pairs like 'buy/sell', 'lend/borrow',

11) Ibid., p. 67.

or 'parent/child'.

So far, I have dealt with meaning in terms of the sense-relations. The meaning of words, however, is determined not only by the sense relationships but also by the relationships that a linguistic element has with other elements in particular sentences. In other words, a vocabulary item derives its meaning in two ways; first by means of the way in which it contrast with other items in a language (paradigmatic relations) and second by the way how it relates to other items in a particular sentence (syntagmatic relations).

If we discuss 'The book is on the table', we can talk of a syntagmatic relation between 'book' and 'table', whereas if we compare this with 'The notebook is on the table', then we can talk of a paradigmatic relation between 'book' and 'notebook'. Context, therefore, can be viewed as a way of providing the meaning of a word (in a syntagmatic approach), and as a way of restricting the meaning to a small number of all the senses that might have been available for the word (in a paradigmatic approach). Although the word is not confined to a particular area by the reference to other words in the lexicon, the syntagmatic relations to other items in a text somehow effect a sort of narrowing down. For example, within the range of meaning that 'drive' has by virtue of the relation to other items in the lexicon, there is a further narrowing down in 'She drove him to drink' and in 'She drove the car to the station'. Syntagmatic relations between lexical items, however, often make a language difficult to learn by presenting many kinds of co-occurrence to the learner, and consequently the complex interrelationship in context often causes non-native speakers to make errors. The development of the paradigmatic approach to vocabulary instruction, therefore, might be regarded as a prerequisite to the syntagmatic approach.

III. Implications for the teaching of vocabulary

Since words do not exist in isolation, and their meanings are defined through their relationship with other words, it is clear that knowledge of

the network of associations between words in a language will help the learner understand a new way of classifying things, when he learns a foreign language :

Knowing of a word means knowing the semantic value of a word (e.g. 'boy' contains +male, -adult, +human ; 'table' contains +inanimate, +nonhuman). Knowledge of such features will help the learner make use of different combination of words and some restrictions in the word usage.

- | | | |
|------|--------------|------------------------------|
| e.g. | female panda | pregnant woman |
| | * female ram | * pregnant man ^{a)} |

Knowing a word means knowing many of the different meanings associated with the word. Consequently whether the learner understands the word or not can be measured in word association tests like :

- | | | | | | |
|------|---------|--------|-------|------|----------|
| e.g. | hand | wrist | dial | face | (=watch) |
| | theatre | sister | bed | ward | (=_____) |
| | nursery | lift | slope | snow | (=_____) |

(source from Heaton, 1975)

Close study of the syntactic and semantic relationships among words will make the context easy to understand for the learner ; in multiple-choice test, for instance, the learner may easily choose a word for the context or find the right word for the context, if he knows the relations between words.

- e.g. The word 'astronauts' is used in the passage to refer to travellers in
- | | |
|-------------------|-----------------|
| A. an ocean liner | B. a space-ship |
| C. a submarine | D. a balloon |

- e.g. " _____ was Robert late last week ?"
- "Three times."
- | | |
|--------------|-------------|
| A. How much | B. How many |
| C. How often | D. How long |

(source from Heaton, 1975)

a) Conventionally, an asterisk before an item signifies that it is unacceptable.

Knowing a word means knowing the syntactic behaviour associated with the word; in other words, knowledge of a word may lead the learner to specify the structural and grammatical behaviour of words in the context.

e.g. The verb 'give' commonly occurs in the frame S P (O¹) O^d (A)^b)

I gave him the money.	S P O ¹ O ^d
I gave the money to him.	S P O ^d A
He gave 50 pence.	S P O ^d
* He gave them.	S P O ¹

(source from Young, 1977)

While being aware of these things mentioned above, then, how can we apply them to our teaching? How could the teacher of English as a foreign language use his study of vocabulary in his teaching.

Since it is impossible for us to teach the whole of a language we are forced to select the part of it we wish to teach. The vocabulary selection, by which we intend to provide the learners with an indispensable minimum vocabulary and to let the learners avoid wasting their time on unnecessary items outside the minimum, should be made in order to meet the needs of various goals and conditions: In speaking and writing, one can choose one's words, but in listening or reading, one cannot, so that a minimum vocabulary for listening and reading will be larger than one for speaking and writing. The criteria used in making the deliberate choice of a particular set of words are 'frequency', 'range', 'availability', 'teachability' and 'classroom need'. 'Frequency', 'range' and 'availability' are criteria which help to determine the 'usefulness' of the item once the learner has learnt it—usefulness outside the classroom, as the terms are commonly used.

We should, however, take into account non-linguistic factors such as learners' ages, different levels, and different national environments, as

b) Here, the letters S, P, O¹, O^d and A stand for the elements of structure 'subject', 'predicator', 'indirect object', 'direct object' and 'adjunct' respectively.

well as linguistic factors. In Japan, as far as teaching English as a foreign language is concerned, very limited vocabulary is used in the junior high schools, where pupils are taught using a book based on syntactic principles, and this consists mainly of classroom words ; whereas in the senior high schools, a much wider vocabulary is used, but there is very little repetition of the word. We should, therefore, keep in mind, in making vocabulary selection, such questions as : Is the course for adults, for children, or for learners of all ages ? How long is the course supposed to take ? How long is each lesson ? What teaching methods are to be used ? and so on.

Some words, especially content words from the immediate environment, will be preferred and found useful at the early stage, for not only the reason that they may be of great use to the beginner, but also the reason that we can refer to the physical entities or concepts by them. A certain number of structural words (or functional words), which are capable of putting the rest of the words to work, will be selected without question in any course, as it is impossible to speak or write English without them ; the selection here depends neither on physical environment nor on the age of the learner.

Since it is impossible for us to teach all of what we have selected at once, we are forced to put these teaching items into the most appropriate order for practical teaching purposes. Lado says, "Once the vocabulary has been selected, it needs to be graded as to difficulty on the basis of similarity to and difference from the first language. Words which are similar in form and meaning can be used freely with little effort given to their presentation or learning. Words that differ in form or meaning, however, have to be taught more formally."¹²⁾ In fact, the process of grading teaching materials is regarded very important in foreign language teaching. The criteria for the grading vocabulary are the same as for the selection ; 'frequency', 'range', 'availability', 'teachability' and 'classroom need'.

12) Lado, R., *Language Teaching*, New York : McGraw-Hill, 1964, p. 120.

From the point of lexical grading, the large number of content words may be divided into “concrete nouns, abstract nouns, quality word, and verbs”¹³⁾, and then may be arranged in sequence to make the patterns in connection with the grammatical patterns. Structural words will also be put in order in connection with the grammatical patterns with which they are associated.

From the point of semantic grading, the vocabulary of a language may be put in order along with its lexical meaning (paradigmatic relations between words out of context) and structural meaning (syntagmatic relations between words in context). For example: ‘the mouth of a man’ or ‘a beautiful flower’ may come before ‘the mouth of river’ or ‘beautiful people’; that is, some sets of synonym, hyponym or antonym such as ‘flower/blossom’, ‘flower/tulip/rose’, ‘animal/dog/sheep’, ‘big/small’ can be introduced at the same time even in a beginners’ course, but some sets of synonym, homonym, hyponym or antonym such as ‘hide/conceal’, ‘lead (metal)/(dog’s) lead’, ‘cattle/cow’, ‘hot/warm/cool/cold’ are best introduced later. Idiomatic collocations will be introduced for the advanced students, and technical and scientific vocabulary will be defined for particular purposes and so on.

Conclusion

Language is a system which relates sounds with meanings. As Crystal writes, “Semantics studies the meaning or meanings of linguistic forms firstly by showing how these forms relate to each other (for example, one way of defining a word like ‘good’ is to tell someone what its opposite is, another way is to give various equivalents—synonyms—and so on); and secondly, by looking at the relationship which exists between these forms and the phenomena the forms refer to in the ‘outside world,’”¹⁴⁾ so Wilkins writes, “To describe the meaning of words it is

13) Mackey, W. F., ‘The Meaning of Method’ in Lee, W. R. (ed.), *E. L. T. Selection 2*, London: O. U. P., 1967, p. 25.

14) Crystal, D., op. cit., 1974, p. 50.

necessary to look at them in two respects—in terms of their relations with the physical world, and in terms of their relations with one another.”¹⁵⁾ Learning the vocabulary of another language, then, is not simply a matter of acquiring a fresh set of labels to attach to familiar meanings.

However, “in the past, vocabulary was taught mostly by translation : either a list of words with their translation at the beginning of the lesson or the translation of the material containing new words or glossaries at the end. The error in this was to confuse translation with language use, and to assume that putting across the meaning was the whole of teaching vocabulary.”¹⁶⁾

Actually, to give a translation equivalent of an unfamiliar word is not to teach its meaning, and besides, the lack of equivalence between the lexical items of different languages causes many problems of learning vocabulary. Wilkins points out, “Vocabulary learning is learning to discriminate progressively the meanings of words in the target language from the meanings of their nearest ‘equivalents’ in the mother-tongue. It is also learning to make the most appropriate lexical choices for particular linguistic and situational contexts. The contribution that our understanding of vocabulary acquisition makes to teaching is largely that it enables us to define the necessary conditions for learning. The evaluation of vocabulary teaching is then a question of whether or not it meets these conditions.”¹⁷⁾

In order to establish what principles should be followed in the teaching of foreign languages, therefore, we must look at the nature of language itself, to say nothing of the nature of language learning. If the teacher, considering the role of vocabulary teaching, could give proper aspects of vocabulary to his students, there will be many students who extend not only their vocabulary knowledge but also their language skills.

15) Wilkins, D. A., *op. cit.*, 1972, p. 119.

16) Lado, R., *op. cit.*, 1964, p. 120.

17) Wilkins, D. A., *op. cit.*, 1972, p. 130.

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