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Research Article

THE ROLE OF SEMANTIC FIELD THEORY IN VOCABULARY INSTRUCTION

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Karimova Iroda
Teacher Of Linguistics Faculty, Uzbekistan

ABSTRACT

This article is about syntagmatic and paradigmatic relations of the vocabulary which are effective in teaching process. Moreover, it investigates the pedagogical procedure of teaching new words and the relationship of lexical items in explaining and presenting new words.

KEYWORDS

Lexical item, paradigmatic and syntagmatic approach, synonyms, antonyms, polysemy, semantic link, brainstorming and natural language.

INTRODUCTION

The different versions of the semantic field theory have one general feature in common: lexical items are grouped in certain fields under various criteria. According to Zhao, things in the objective world are in disorder, so in order to fully understand them, our human mind must deposit and memorize them through analyzing, judging and classifying. As far as vocabulary learning is concerned, learners remember words by sound clot or by semantic links. Adult college students have already had an existing schema about the world and language. When new second language words appear, what they should do is to find a suitable place for the words in this schema by certain links. It seems that a semantic interrelationship is an effective choice. Therefore, it seems feasible to enlarge vocabulary gradually and deepen the understanding of vocabulary items on the basis of the semantic field.

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The discussion of semantic relations leads to semantic fields grouped under certain unifying features. In this paper, both paradigmatic relations of synonymy, antonym, hyponymy and syntagmatic relations of collocation, polysemy and metaphorical meaning will be studied. It is predicted that constructing semantic fields by paradigmatic and syntagmatic relations can be a teaching approach that is effective in helping learners develop an interrelated system of vocabulary.[1:47]

When it comes to English vocabulary, learners usually go through the following five essential steps proposed by Brown & Payne:

-encountering the new words; -getting a clear image, either visual or auditory or both, for the forms of the new words;

-learning the meaning of the words;

-making a strong memory connection between the forms and meanings of the words;

-using the words.

It appears that each step represents something learners must do, at least at some basic level in order to achieve full productive knowledge of words.

This section discusses an application of the semantic field theory in vocabulary instruction. It presents a synthetically pedagogical procedure of teaching new words as: pre-reading brainstorming of the words in the same field; getting the pronunciation, spelling and meaning of the new words; constructing semantic fields based on various semantic relations; consolidation during passage analysis; and revision of the word knowledge. The topic of this unit is Romance. In the first step of vocabulary instruction, learners are asked to do the brainstorming concerning romance. The result of this pre-reading activity is as follows.

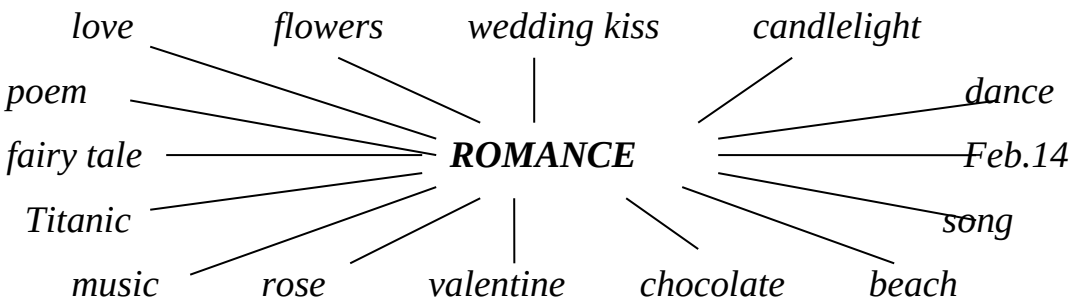

Figure 1. Brainstorming of "romance" [2:87]

Learners take an active part in this task and get a better understanding of the topic, thus becoming more interested in reading the passage. This helps to improve the reading efficiency. In this step, learners also form a basic semantic field related to romance.

Meanwhile, the encounter with words in context helps increase learners' knowledge about those words and

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their meanings. Learners may need various encounters with the same word in multiple contexts rather than in just one context, so this is just the beginning of vocabulary instruction of this unit. Learners first encounter words in this simple way before they learn them in the passage. [3:149].

In getting the pronunciation, spelling and meaning of the new words, learners read the passage and guess the meaning of new words from the context in which they are used. Then they underline or copy the words that are new or difficult for them and mark out the pronunciation, spelling and meaning of the new words. Learners are asked to get familiar with the pronunciation and spelling of the new words because many errors seem to come from confusing words similar in pronunciation and form. For the meaning of the new words, in this step, learners largely learn these words respectively. They will study them in relation to other words in the next step.

The essential step of the application of the semantic field theory in vocabulary instruction is the construction of semantic fields. In order for learning to occur, new information must be integrated with and be built upon what learners already know. In other words, instruction should guide learners to use words and ideas they already know to help them associate meaning with words they do not know. Therefore, words in the same semantic field can be taught together. In this step, the teacher should find appropriate words to set up semantic fields of the new items, and at the same time make the presentation procedure an interesting learning process for the learners.

Semantic field construction uses features to identify the relationship of lexical items within a field, with the goal of discovering how terms within the field or domain are similar to each other. In semantic feature analysis, by contrast, the primary goal is to find those features that are distinctive, that have consequences for the grammar of the language, and that help to clarify the various meanings of a single word. Teachers may first check the glossary and pick out words belonging to the same semantic field, because the words or phrases of the same semantic field usually share part of the meaning or the same structure which will be easier to learn as a group than as separate items. [4:68] Teaching vocabulary in this way saves time and energy and achieves better results at the same time.

When the phrase make one's way is being taught, other phrases of the same semantic field can also be discussed, such as force one's way, feel one's way, shoulder one's way, elbow one's way, worm one's way, which share the same component one's way and same semantic feature go. This is a type of hyponymy, in which make one's way is a co-hyponym of the other phrases mentioned above. While teaching them, teachers can point out the pattern of these phrases, that is, verb + one's way. Thus, applying the semantic field theory to teaching can not only stimulate learners' interest and creativity but also help them bridge the newly acquired knowledge with previously acquired knowledge.

Semantic feature analysis is used to analyze the pair of synonyms policeman and cop in this unit.

Policeman = [man] - [slang] + [member of a police force]

Cop = [man] + [slang] + [member of a police force]

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The semantic feature [+ SLANG] distinguishes this pair of synonyms. Also when teachers are discussing the word slim, they may compare it with its synonyms such as thin, slender, slight, skinny and bony.

As for polysemy, teachers can start with the word's core meaning or a best example.

Take pursue as an example. The core meaning of pursue is to follow somebody, usually in order to catch them, and the prototypic pursue can be found in phrases like pursue a fox, or pursue a thief. Based on the core meaning or prototypic examples, teachers can continue with extended meanings and more examples of pursue, such as pursue one's own interest, pursue economic reform and democracy, pursue a topic, etc. In this way, word meanings will be demonstrated and learners may find it comfortable to learn and understand these items one after another. Another polysemous word, delicate in this unit can be explained by finding out different synonyms or antonyms of its different meanings.

Words are basic units of a passage, and the formation of a passage is a process of putting words into sentences, sentences into paragraphs and paragraphs into a passage. However, this process is not a simple one of gathering words, but a process of semantic choice of paradigmatic and syntagmatic relations between different words. Through making this kind of choice, a coherent chain of words is established through the passage. By analyzing the paradigmatic and syntagmatic relations between words in the passage, the semantic fields constructed previously can be consolidated. Consider the following example:

"A young woman was coming toward me, her figure long and slim. Her golden hair lay back in curls from her delicate ears; her eyes were blue as flowers. Her lips and chin had a gentle firmness, and in her pale green suit she was like springtime come alive."[4:44]

In this paragraph, words and expressions like slim, golden, delicate, as flowers, gentle, like springtime and alive belong to one semantic field. They are chosen to show readers the attractiveness of the hostess Hollis Maynell to the host John Blanchard. These words strengthen the coherence of the passage not by any systematic semantic relations but by their co-occurrence in the same passage. They shape a semantic chain in the passage. The following paragraph provide another example:

"Suppose I'm beautiful. I'd always be haunted by the feeling that you had been taking a chance on just that, and that kind of love would disgust me.

Suppose I'm plain. Then I'd fear that you were going on writing to me only because you were lonely and had no one else."[5:62]

In this paragraph, beautiful and plain are a pair of direct antonyms that show a contrast, which gives a vivid description of the lady's thought.

Learners should be provided chances to sort out their learned vocabulary in their own ways, using semantic maps or categorizations. The exercise can be used to consolidate learners' command of the newly learnt words. These words serve as stimulus words; below each stimulus word there is a box containing four words. Among the four words in the box on the left, one to three words can be a synonym, an antonym, a co-hyponym or a superordinate, whereas among the four words in the box on the right, there can be one to three words that collocate with the stimulus word.

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1. beneficial

profitable, fruitless, favorable, slim	result, book, hoop, emotion

2. intricate

elaborate, simple, complicated, splendid	plot, stove, jaw, jerk

3. irritated

vexed, calm, outer, angry	thief, mower, hush, kneel

4. joyful

glad, sorrowful, portable, happy	swim, lawn, concern, crash

5. observant

alert, slow, diligent, polish	porch, plug, precise, assistant

We must now determine what mechanisms a semantic theory employs in reconstructing the speaker's ability to interpret sentences. We have seen that this ability is systematic in that it enables the speaker to understand sentences he has never heard before and to produce novel sentences that other speakers understand in the way that he understands them. To account for this ability a semantic theory must be so formulated that its output matches the interpretive performance of a fluent speaker. In this section, we describe the form of semantic theories. It is widely acknowledged and certainly true that one component of a semantic theory of a natural language is a dictionary of that language. The reason for including a dictionary as a component of a semantic theory is based on two limitations of a grammatical description. First, a grammar cannot account for the fact that some sentences which differ only morphemically are interpreted as different in meaning (e.g. The tiger bit me and The mouse bit me) while other sentences which differ only morphemically are interpreted as identical in meaning (e.g. The oculist examined me and The eye doctor examined me). Second, a grammar cannot account for the fact that some sentences of radically different syntactic structure are synonymous (e.g. Two chairs are in the room and There are at least two things in the room and each is a chair) while other syntactically different sentences are not. In each case, the interpretation of the sentences is deter- mined in part by the meanings of their morphemes and by semantic relations among the morphemes[7:54]. The reason for including a dictionary as a component of a semantic theory is precisely to provide a representation of the semantic characteristics of morphemes necessary to account for the facts about sentences and their interrelations that the grammar leaves unexplained. What has always been unclear about a semantic theory is what components it

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contains besides a dictionary, and how the components of a semantic theory relate to one another and to the grammar. We can find this out by asking in what respects a dictionary and grammar alone are not sufficient to match the fluent speaker's interpretations of sentences. Let us imagine a fluent speaker of English presented with the infinite list of sentences and their structural descriptions generated by a grammar of English. Given an accurate dictionary of English which he applies by using his linguistic ability, the fluent speaker can semantically interpret any sentence on the list under any of its grammatical derivations. He can determine the number and content of the readings of a sentence, tell whether or not a sentence is semantically anomalous, and decide which sentences on the list are paraphrases of each other.

Now contrast the fluent speaker's performance with the performance of a machine which mechanically applies an English dictionary to a sentence in the list by associating with each morpheme of the sentence its dictionary entry. It is clear that the dictionary usually supplies more senses for a lexical item than it bears in almost any of its occurrences in sentences. But the machine will not be able to select the senses which the morpheme actually bears in a given sentence context, except so far as the selection is already determined by the grammatical markers assigned to the morpheme in the derivation of the sentence. Thus the machine will be able to choose the correct sense of seal in Seal the letter so far as the choice is determined by the fact that in this sentence seal is marked as a verb, and the correct sense of seal in The seal is on the letter so far as the choice is determined by the fact that in this sentence seal is marked as a noun. But the machine will not be able to distinguish the correct sense of seal in one of the oil seals in my car is leaking from such incorrect senses as a device bearing a design so made that it can impart an impression or an impression made by such a device or the material upon which the impression is made or an ornamental or commemorative stamp' and so forth, since all of these senses can apply to nominal occurrences of seal.

What the machine is failing to do is to take account of or utilize the semantic relations between morphemes in a sentence. Hence it cannot determine the correct number and content of readings of a sentence. Nor can it distinguish semantically anomalous sentences from semantically regular ones. Since the machine will associate a dictionary entry with each morpheme in a sentence, it does not distinguish cases in which the sense of a morpheme or string of morphemes in a sentence precludes other morphemes in the sentence from bearing any of the senses that the dictionary supplies for them. (E.g. the machine cannot distinguish The wall is covered with silent paint from, The wall is covered with fresh paint.)[6:98]

Finally, the machine cannot tell which sentences in the list are paraphrases of each other in any case except the one in which the sentences are of exactly the same syntactic structure and the corresponding words are either identical or synonymous. The comparison between a fluent speaker and a machine reveals the respects in which a grammar and dictionary by themselves do not suffice to interpret sentences like a speaker of the language. What the fluent speaker has at his disposal that a machine has not are rules for applying the information in the dictionary rules which take account of semantic relations between morphemes and of the interaction between meaning and syntactic structure in determining the correct semantic interpretation for any of the infinitely many sentences which the grammar generates. Thus, a

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semantic theory of a natural language must have such rules (which we shall call projection rules) as one of its components if it is to match the speaker's interpretations of sentences. The central problem for such a theory is that a dictionary usually supplies more senses for a lexical item than it bears in an occurrence in a given sentence, for a dictionary entry is a characterization of every sense that a lexical item can bear in any sentence. Thus, the effect of the projection rules must be to select the appropriate sense of each lexical item in a sentence in order to provide the correct readings for each distinct grammatical structure of that sentence.

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