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ABSTRACT

Dimensions of word meaning are examined, and a framework for describing and teaching Chinese words in the context of Chinese second language instruction is offered. It is argued that every word has limitations of usage that must be understood before it can be used appropriately. The limitations, or dimensions, include these: connotative (emotional and evaluative aspects of meaning); geographic (place-specific); grammatical (syntactic); historical (meaning change over time); age (use by individuals of a specific age); professional (registers or varieties defined by topic and context); stylistic; and collocation. It is proposed that: instructional materials be developed with these dimensions in mind; this information be used in training teachers in the nature of vocabulary learning; teachers use these dimensions as a checklist in teaching vocabulary; dictionary compilation reflect these factors, to reduce ambiguity; and the dimensions be used to develop tests that assess both breadth and depth of vocabulary knowledge. Contains nine references in English and two in Chinese. (MSE)

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Teaching Vocabulary: 8 faces of a Word

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Comments Welcome

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Teaching Vocabulary: 8 Faces of a Word

I. Introduction

Vocabulary knowledge is fundamental to language learning, but it has been neglected by linguistics, applied linguistics and language teachers (Carter and McCarthy, 1988). This observation also applies to the area of teaching Chinese as a foreign language. Students are often confused when they draw on the resources of the bilingual dictionaries which often fail to give precise definitions of words. The following are sentences from students' homework where the underlined words are used inappropriately:

- a) 他们消灭了很多无辜的学生。
- b) 今天一点冷。
- c) 汤太盐。
- d) 我不知道如果我喜不喜欢这本书
- e) 我喜欢吃有的中国饭。
- f) 白老师教都中文课。
- g) 我买了三本书，四个本子，也一本词典。

The errors above indicate that the students do not fully understand the words. This lack of understanding of word usage is partly due to the incomplete definition of the bilingual dictionaries. For instance, the definition of 消灭 in the dictionaries is to kill, which does not indicate the connotative meaning. It is essential for teachers to possess a good knowledge of the nature of vocabulary acquisition. Teachers should teach the

connotative, syntactic, semantic and pragmatic dimensions of word meanings.

This paper attempts to investigate the different dimensions of word meanings and to establish a framework that assists teachers to describe Chinese words.

II. What is a Word?

A word is often defined as the minimum meaningful unit of language. Since it is viewed as the minimum unit people tend to ignore what is in a word. The common practice in defining a foreign language word is to find an similar word in the native language. This often fails to provide the connotative dimensions of word meanings.

In fact, 'not only every language but every lexeme of a language is an entire world in itself (Mel'cuk, 1981).' If we consider that a word is an entire world in itself instead of the minimum unit, we will be attracted to go into this world and explore the different fantasies in there. There can be many ways to explore this entire world. One thing we can do is to look into this world and look for the different faces of a word. We can examine the different dimensions of word meanings.

Carroll (1965) pointed out the relationship between a concept and a word. '... concepts are nonlinguistic. They are classes of experiences. Because the experiences of individuals tend to be in many ways similar, their concepts are also similar and through various processes of learning and socialization these concepts come to be associated with words, which are linguistic.' According to this theory, we can consider words as representations

of concepts as a result of socialization. In many cases words are loaded with rich social and cultural connotations. We can seldom find exact equivalents in two languages because people from different cultures experience different processes of socialization. Therefore, instead of trying to find equivalents as many of the dictionaries do, foreign language teachers should poke into a word and find out the different dimensions of word meanings.

What does it mean to know a word? It involves knowing to use the different aspects of conceptual meanings, i.e. knowing the different limitations of use of a word. Hayakawa (1972) pointed out that 'to insist dogmatically what a word means in advance of its utterance is nonsense. All we can know is approximately what it will mean.' This statement indicates that word meanings are limited by pragmatic factors. In the next section, we will investigate the different aspects of word meanings.

III. Dimensions of a Word:

As the title of this paper suggests, we should know more than one face (limitation of use) of a word before we can say that we know the word. This section will deal with the different faces of a word.

Face 1: Connotative limitation. A word contains emotional and evaluative aspects of meaning. The following are some examples that contain positive connotations: 吉屋, 尊夫人, 令郎. The words below are examples that contain negative connotations: 老妈子,

庄稼佬, 煤黑子.

Another example in this regard is the character 家 as a suffix. In Li and Thompson (1981) it is said to be equivalent to the English suffix -ist. This explanation does not provide the evaluative meaning of the character. For instance, it is not appropriate for an anthropology professor to introduce himself as 我是人类学家, although he can introduce himself as "I am an anthropologist" in English. This is because the character 家 as in 语言学家, 人类学家 ... has the connotation of being authoritative in a certain field. We will be considered as arrogant if we introduce ourselves as 语言学家.

Face 2: Geographical limitation. Some words are place-specific. They are only used by people of specific geographical regions. The following are some examples:

- a) 不这麼奔(北京), 几儿(北京)能买上车?
- b) 扒搂(北京)了一晚饭就走了.
- c) 猫头鹰 = 哭鸟 (湖北)
- d) 信封 = 信壳 (上海)
- e) 冰棍儿 = 雪枝 (广州)
- f) 胸罩 (大陆) = 胸衣 (台湾)
- g) 邮政编码 (大陆) = 邮递区号 (台湾)
- h) 激光 (大陆) = 雷射 (台湾)
- i) 逃课 = 敲课 (台湾)
- j) 病 = 难活 (陕北)
- k) 干活喽 = 受苦喽 (陕北)
- l) According to Chen (1984) the suffix 子 is deleted from the following words in Singapore Mandarin: 裙子, 裤子,

鸭子, 袜子, 位子, ...

We tend to encounter many words of this nature when we use movies in our instruction. For instance, LUOTUO XIANGZI contains many words that are only used in local Beijing dialect.

Face 3: Grammatical limitation. Students often have difficulty learning the syntactic limitations of a word when it is defined as the equivalent in L1 which is not limited by the syntactic limitation as in L2. For instance, 有的 is defined as some in English. Because of this definition we often find students using the word like:

- *a) 我喜欢有的中国饭.
- *b) 我去过有的地方.

Our students will probably make fewer errors like the ones above if we can point out to the students that the word is always put in the topicalized position in a Chinese sentence such as:

- a) 有的中国饭我喜欢.
- b) 这里有很多中国饭店, 有的很好, 有的不太好.
- c) 有的人很会说话.

Sometimes a word have different meanings if they appear in different grammatical contexts. The following are examples to illustrate this point:

- a) 可村子都那麼热闹. (the whole)

- b) 可他不太喜欢... (but)
 c) 可著嗓子... (at top of ...)

The fact that words are limited to certain grammatical environment is supported by Ma (1983) who pointed out that 著 can occur with static verbs but cannot occur with dynamic verbs in imperatives:

- 拿著!
 记著!
 * 跑著!
 * 快著!

Face 4: Historical limitations. Word meaning changes with time. Some words such as 府上, 内人, 贱内 disappear from common use while new words such as 倒爷, 砍大山, 拳头产品 come into being.

Other words change their meanings. For example, 去 used to mean to leave as in 孟子去齐. According to Hong (1987), 太太 began as a term for referring to the grandmother of the Han Emperor, Ai Di, and, by the time of Ming, the word was used to refer to wives of higher officials. The meaning of 太太 was extended to include foreign merchants by Qing and later it began to be used as Mrs. 凶狠 is no longer derogatory when it is used to describe athletes. 脚 used to mean 小腿 which is still practiced in Shanghai dialect.

One of the definitions of 作 is to get up in 汉英词典. But it is not appropriate to use the word as

getting up in modern Chinese although we find such use as
日出而作.

Face 5: Age limitation. Some words are age-specific. They are used by people of a specific age. For instance, reduplication of nouns is often used to or by children. The following are some examples from a cross talk 相声(侯宝林) where one person is making fun of the other:

你穿上袜袜,戴上帽帽,我带你上街街,给你买糕糕.咱们去坐车车,回家来吃饺饺..

Face 6: Profession limitation. This is sometimes regarded as registers, varieties of language defined by their topics and contexts of use. For instance, the following words are only used by people in the area of educational psychology and testing experts:

- a) 常模参照考试 norm-referenced testing
- b) 标准参照考试 criterion-referenced testing
- c) 正态 normal distribution
- d) 信度 reliability
- e) 效度 validity
- f) 区分度 discrimination

Face 7: Style limitation. Martin Joos (1967) classifies language into five styles: frozen, formal, consultative, casual and intimate. In the case of Chinese, different classification can be found in the literature (章熊, 1983; 叶景烈, 1987). The following is 章熊's classification:

谈话语体

日常语体

讲演语体

书卷语体

科学语体

艺术语体

政论语体

事务语体

The difference between kouyu and shumianyu is a very basic one for language teaching. The following are some examples. The words in parenthesis are the corresponding words in kouyu:

抵达 (到) 乘飞机 (坐) 步入... (走进) 该 (这个)
 首次 (第一次) 如期 (按时) 已 (已经) 曾 (曾经)
 但 (但是) 另 (另外) 虽 (虽然) 于... (0) 为期... (0)
 ...一行 (0) 昨日 (昨天) 目前 (现在) 据悉 (听说)
 尚未 (还没有)

Face 8: Prefabricated chunks. There may be no apparent semantic connection between the meaning of the chunk and the meaning of its constituents. The following are some examples. They are restricted collocations that cannot be understood from the literal meanings of the words which make them up.

- a) 这人三个鼻窟窿眼儿.
- b) 拿了鸡毛当令箭.
- c) 远来的和尚会念经.

d) 胸有成竹

These collocations cannot be modified. For instance, we can not say:

a) 这人五个鼻梁窿眼儿.

b) 拿了火鸡毛当令箭.

V. Conclusion:

In this paper we have examined the nature of vocabulary learning by looking at the different kinds of limitations on the use of a word. The results will be useful for the following areas:

(1) Material development. When we explain word meanings in preparing our teaching materials, the checklist can remind us of the kinds of limitations on the use of a word that we should point out to our students.

(2) Teacher training. The findings can be utilized for training teaching assistants or teachers of Chinese. They can assist teachers to develop a better understanding of the nature of vocabulary learning.

(3) Teaching and learning. The most obvious application of the findings of this paper is for teaching and learning. It helps explain the different dimensions of a word. Specifically it provides teachers and students with a checklist in the teaching and learning of vocabulary. This will assist our students to communicate more effectively and precisely: speaking and writing more

effectively and listening and reading with greater understanding.

(4) Dictionary compiling. If we take into consideration the eight kinds of limitations (the eight faces) we may reduce the ambiguity on the use of words and therefore provide more useful information for the dictionary users, especially people who are learning Chinese as a foreign language.

(5) Test development. The findings of this paper are helpful for developing vocabulary test. By taking into consideration the different faces of a word, test developers can test the depth as well as the breadth of vocabulary knowledge. Breadth of vocabulary knowledge means the number of words students have learned to use and depth of vocabulary knowledge refers to how well they know the words. When depth of vocabulary knowledge is considered in test development, the test will provide information on whether students have acquired a full knowledge or partial knowledge of the words that have been taught.

Note

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