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英语多义词认知研究及对词汇教学的启示

--- 基于概念隐喻理论

A Cognitive Study of English Polysemy and Its Implication
for Vocabulary Teaching

---Based on Conceptual Metaphor Theory

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Abstract

Polysemy means literally a plurality of meaning, and it refers to a word which has two or more different meanings. In English as in any other language polysemy is the rule and monosemy is the exception. Most of the common words denoting familiar objects in our daily life have various meanings. Being a general and important phenomenon in language, polysemy has won attentions from philosophers, psychologists, and linguists. Especially linguists have shown their interest in searching for its cause of occurrence and direction of development. Traditional linguists, such as Aristotle and Breal, consider language literal, abstract and disembodied and hold that the extended meanings of polysemy are arbitrary and coincidental. Structured linguistics focuses their study of polysemy on the analysis of the internal structure of the word, neglecting the external factor-significance of human body. As a result, their study failed to grasp the essence of polysemy and to explain its motivation and working mechanism by a convincing approach. In recent decades, cognitive linguistics has provided more rational and systematic interpretation of polysemy from the external world to explore to the motivation and mechanism of multiple meanings of polysemy. Conceptual metaphor put forward by Lakoff points out that many polysemous words are actually the products of metaphor while much work remains to do by taking Conceptual Metaphor Theory to provide an effective and practicable way to polysemy teaching and learning at present.

This paper attempts to investigate the cognitive mechanism and cognitive motivation of meaning extension of polysemy from a relatively new perspective, namely, Conceptual Metaphor Theory, thus reaching out for implications for vocabulary teaching and learning. Besides the introduction and conclusion, the thesis consists of four chapters as follows:

Chapter One is the literature review of polysemy study. Firstly, an overview of polysemy acquisition is emphasized and the differences between polysemy and homonym are discussed since these two terms are the unavoidable concepts in this study. Chapter Two discusses the theoretical foundation of the present study --- Conceptual Metaphor Theory. The systematicity of metaphorical concepts and the cognitive mechanism of metaphor provide us a good perspective to explain the

evolution of word meanings, which play a vital important role in polysemy learning. Chapter Three interprets cognitive mechanism and motivations of the developing of polysemy's multiple meanings with case study. The polysemy analysis is followed by three case studies consisting of three categories: verb, noun and adjective. Hence the author proposes the teaching implication ---- cultivation of metaphorical awareness and metaphorical competence. Last but not least, in Chapter Four the author points out the necessity and acquirability of metaphorical awareness and competence in polysemy learning, especially for the intermediate and advanced English learners to expand their vocabulary and deepen word knowledge and ultimately improve their receptive and productive skills in both language processing and language production. In short, the study on polysemy will be of much benefit for EFL teaching and learning.

Key words: Polysemy; Conceptual Metaphor Theory; Implication; Metaphorical awareness; Metaphorical competence

摘要

多义词,即一词多义,在英语及任何其他语言中占据主导地位而单义词则为少数。我们日常生活中使用的用于表示熟悉事务的常用词大部分是多义词。作为一种常见的重要的语言现象,多义词已经引起了哲学家、心理学家和语言学家们的重视。尤其是语言学家们,他们对多义词的成因和发展路径产生了浓厚的兴趣。传统语言学家,如 Aristotle 和 Breal,认为语言是任意的、抽象的和不能体验的,多义词的多义项的发生是巧合的。结构主义语言学家们在研究多义词多项意义之间的联系时,过于关注于语言形式的内部结构,却忽略了影响多义形成的外部因素—使用语言的人,包括人类的认知手段、生活体验等。结果他们的研究没有把握多义词的实质,无法对一词多义这一语言现象做出令人满意的解释。而认知语言学家从人的认知与词语意义的关系角度入手,借助认知手段,以概念隐喻为工具,对多义词词义形成、词义的扩展做出了合理的、系统的解释,为我们提供了研究一词多义现象的新视角。

基于此,本论文以概念隐喻理论为理论基础,着重从认知的角度对英语多义词进行研究,论证多义词多个义项之间的认知机制和认知理据,并在此基础上阐述概念隐喻理论对词汇教学的启示,即培养隐喻意识和隐喻能力。全文除引言和结语外共分三章:

第一章简要论述多义词研究的擅变。首先区别多义词和同形异义的概念、含义和对多义词语义项形成的影响。接着,重点论述传统语言学和认知语言学对多义词习得的研究。第二章论述本研究的理论依据,即作为认知语言学基础的经验主义语言观下的概念隐喻理论。第三章探讨了认知隐喻理论与多义词的关系。结合实例阐释论证多义词的认知动机和认知理据,并论述由此带来的教学启示即隐喻意识和隐喻能力的重要意义。第四章结合教学实践提出培养学生的隐喻意识和提高隐喻能力的必要性、可学性和相对具体的教学建议,再次阐明培养学生的隐喻意识和隐喻能力对其扩展英语词汇的广度和深度以及提高英语词汇使用能力具有重要意义。简而言之,从隐喻视角来研究多义词习得对二语词汇习得具有重大意义。

关键词：多义词；概念隐喻理论；教学启示；隐喻意识；隐喻能力；

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Introduction

It is widely acknowledged that vocabulary is central to language and words are of vital importance to the language learners (Zimmerman 2001:5). If we view the structures of language as bones and skeletons, then vocabulary offers the important organs, blood and muscles (Harmer 1990:158). In recent decades, second language vocabulary acquisition, or L2 vocabulary acquisition, has won increasing attentions from the researchers, teachers, curriculum designers, theorists. The topics of their research ranges from broad (e.g., general teaching strategies, global measures of lexical competence) to fine-grained (e.g., morphology, orthography) (Coady & Huckin 2001:1). Admittedly, the relevant researches on vocabulary acquisition have seen considerable progress. Nevertheless, vocabulary acquisition still has proven to be one of the main obstacles in second language (hereafter L2) learning and teaching. Lexical plights in L2 listening, reading and writing are common among non-major college students due to their insufficient vocabulary. Even advanced students are aware of the fact that not knowing the right word hinders their mastery of L2 with accuracy and fluency. That is not to say they spend little work in acquiring vocabulary but they have difficulty in acquiring L2 vocabulary effectively, much less L2 polysemy.

Polysemy means literally a plurality of meaning, and it refers to a word which has two or more different meanings. In English as in any other language polysemy is the rule and monosemy is the exception (Yang Lianrui, 2010:73). Most of the common words denoting familiar objects in our daily life have various meanings. Being an important and complex phenomenon in language, polysemy, lies in different levels of human language, and possesses the prominent characteristic of human language. Polysemy is a necessary phase in the diachronic development of lexical meaning. With rapid development of the economy and culture, polysemization serves as a practical and efficient method to meet people's need of organizing the world. Its high frequency in communication results from the economic principle of language. According to Ravin and Claudia (2000), appropriate 60,000 entities, 21,488, (almost 40%) have two or more senses in Webster's New Century Dictionary.

The linguists have shown their interest in searching for the cause of occurrence and direction of development of polysemy. Traditional approach to polysemy can be

traced back to ancient Greece. In the 1930s structured linguistics focused their study of polysemy on the analysis of the internal structure of the word, neglecting the external factor-significance of human body. As a result, their study failed to grasp the essence of polysemy. In recent decades, cognitive linguists have provided more convincing and systematic interpretation of polysemy from the external world to explore to the mechanism and motivation of meaning developing of polysemy. Conceptual metaphor put forward by Lakoff points out many polysemy are actually the products of metaphor. However, much work remains to do by taking Conceptual Metaphor Theory to provide an effective and practicable approach to polysemy teaching and learning.

This dissertation first reviews the studies of polysemy by scholars at home and aboard in Chapter One since their findings of polysemy acquisition are rather informative, instructive and thought-provoking. In Chapter Two the paper goes further to interpret the theoretical foundation, Conceptual Metaphor Theory, which provides a relatively new and comprehensive understanding of the mechanism and motivation of the meaning extension of polysemous words with case study in Chapter Three. The polysemy analysis in case study consists of three categories: verb, noun and adjective. With conceptual metaphor becoming an important cognitive means, the reevaluation of the importance of polysemy acquisition and exploration of its acquirability among non-English major college students will be of great significance to English learning and teaching in China. Chinese English learners are not only obliged to master English polysemy, but also to learn the culture implication behind its extended meanings, that is metaphorical awareness and competence. Hence in Chapter Four the author reclaims the purpose of this dissertation which is to affirm the significance of polysemy acquisition and cultivate Chinese English learners' metaphorical awareness and competence in their English learning, especially for the intermediate and advanced English learners to expand their vocabulary and deepen word knowledge.

Chapter One Literature Review

1.1 An Overview of Polysemy

Saussure (1961) claims that absolute stability in language is never found. Baugh and Cable (1993) holds that nearly all aspects of English including sound, spelling and grammar keep changing from old English to modern English. Changes in a language take place over time. And vocabulary is the best manifest of the language changes. Old words die out; new words are entering; the changes in lexical meaning of existing word are taking place. Therefore, words belonging to the basic word stock often possess more than one meaning because most of them have undergone semantic changes in the course of use and finally become polysemous. Polysemy is a necessary phase in the diachronic development of lexical meaning (Sweetser, 1990). Generally speaking, polysemy, which reflects the flexibility and economical principles of language, is an advantage rather than a defect (Shu Dingfang, 2000). With rapid development of the economy and culture, polysemization serves as a discreet and efficient method to meet people's need of organizing the world.

The following sections will see the definition, the processes leading to polysemy and the distinction between polysemy and homonymy, aiming to obtain more understanding of the nature of polysemy.

1.1.1 The Definition of Polysemy

Polysemy is a term used in semantic and lexical analysis to describe a word with multiple meanings. It has already become an interesting and thought-provoking linguistic issue. Researches on the polysemy have become an important subject in the realm of vocabulary acquisition studies.

The notion of polysemy came from Neo-Latin *polysemia*, which derives from *polusemous* [poly-(many) + sema (sign)] in Greek, with a literal meaning of having more than one related meaning. The term "polysemy" first appears in 1897 in Michel Breal's fundamental *Essai de Semantique*. It is important to note that according to Breal polysemy arises as a consequence of semantic change (Blank, 2003:268). The new meaning of a word, whatever it may be, does not make an end of the old. They (new meaning and old meanings) exist alongside one other. Breal distinguishes various

kinds of polysemy, by virtue of the types of semantic relation between the old meaning and new ones as criteria. Usually, polysemy is defined in most handbooks as being based on the existence of a semantic relation between lexicalized senses of a word without further explanation of the nature of this nature (Blank, 1997:268).

Things change when linguists start to focus more on the understanding of polysemy. A lot of linguists propose their definitions of polysemy.

Brugman (1988:19) states that “polysemy is a shift of sense, and functional shift”, with an emphasis on the significance of the new sense of a polysemous word.

Yule (2000:121) argues that “Polysemy can be defined as one form (written or spoken) having multiple meanings which are all related by extension”.

Heine (1997:8) proposes the criteria to distinguish polysemy from the perspectives of structure, psychology and gene. The criteria are described in the following:

- (1) There are two or more different but related meanings.
- (2) These meanings are associated with one linguistic form only.
- (3) The linguistic form belongs to one and the same morph syntactic category in its uses.

By means of the above citations, polysemy can be briefly defined as words with two or more distinct but closely related senses or meanings. Take the preposition *in* for example. *In* is used with place, direction, time, inclusion, ratio, and also indicates state or condition, degree or extent and identity, etc. Consider the following *in*-phrases.

- ① *in* the living room ② *in* the east ③ *in* the sun ④ one *in* five
- ⑤ *in* the troubled state ⑥ *in* great number ⑦ a good friend *in* me

In *in*-phrases, *in* is followed by an object which belongs to the category of container or one which indicates a physical or mental state experienced by human being. Namely, the first four *in*-phrases are related to the denotation of *in* and the rest are about its connotation, and it is not troublesome to detect their meaning precisely due to their relatedness of meanings.

1.1.2 The Processes Leading to Polysemy

It is widely admitted that polysemy occurs through the two processes of radiation and concatenation (Yang Lianrui, 2010:73) in traditional approach to polysemy.

Radiation refers to a process of meaning development in which the original or primary meaning of word stands at the center in the form of a hub while secondary

meanings radiate from it like the spokes of a wheel.

Take the word *head* for example. *Head's* primary and central meaning is ① the part of the body which contains the eyes, ears, nose and mouth; (in man) the part of the head above and behind the eyes; ② the mind or brain; ③ a ruler or leader; ④ a measure of height or distance; ⑤ a person (in the phrase so much a/ per head); ⑥ the top or front, highest or furthest point; ⑦ a body of water at a certain height and so on. The primary meaning in ① stands at the center, and all the secondary meanings are derived from it in every direction like rays in the semantic network. Each of the secondary meanings might easily have developed from the primary meaning without regard to any of the others.

Concatenation (from Latin *Catena* “chain”) refers to a process of meaning development in which the meanings of a word move gradually away from the original meaning by successive shifts until there is no trace of connection between the sense that is finally developed and the original meaning.

A good example is the word *board*. Its original meaning is “a long thin piece of cut wood”, then it has acquired through different historical stages such additional meanings as “a flat piece of hard material used for putting a food on” and “meals” as in board and lodging. The successive shifts of senses from “a piece of cut wood” to “dining table” and then to “meals” illustrate the process of concatenation well.

Besides, we observe the fact that the two processes of radiation and concatenation may interact in the sense development of a word. For example, the word *board* develops its meanings from “a piece of cut wood” to “table” and then to “meals” by successive shifts, but meanwhile the sense “table” of board applies to such objects as dressing board and side board. This example shows both processes of radiation and concatenation are intertwined with each other.

1.1.3 Polysemy and Homonym

A well known problem in Semantics is how to determine whether we are dealing with a single polysemous word or with two or more homonyms. Both deal with multiple senses of the same phonological word. The confusion on the two concepts will arise if English learners fail to notice the difference between polysemy and homonym.

Homonyms literally refer to several words with the same form but different

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