

The Application of Iconicity in Teaching Vocabulary in College English*

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Abstract—Vocabulary is the cornerstone of language teaching and learning. At present, a majority of college English teachers invest a lot of time in vocabulary teaching; however, they haven't achieved the goal of college English vocabulary teaching as they desired. Iconicity is an important notion in semiotics, which mainly refers to the resemblance between the form of a sign and what it refers to, namely, the object or concept. Consequently, to some extent, the form of vocabulary is closely connected with what it refers to. Based on the relations between the form of vocabulary and what it refers to, this paper mainly explores the application of lexical iconicity in teaching vocabulary in college English with the purpose of formulating more effective vocabulary teaching approaches.

Index Terms—Morpheme Iconicity, Metaphor Iconicity, Etymology Iconicity, Vocabulary Teaching

I. INTRODUCTION

In English learning, nothing is more important than vocabulary acquisition. Vocabulary acquisition is the precondition of the basic language skills, such as listening, speaking, reading, writing and translation or interpretation. Wilkins(1978) argued without grammar very little can be conveyed and without vocabulary noting can be conveyed¹.The size of vocabulary determines the degree of foreign language comprehension. There is no exaggeration to say that vocabulary is the most important factor that restricts the efficiency of foreign language learning, and at the same time, vocabulary is the basic material of any given language. Consequently, vocabulary acquisition runs through the whole process of English learning. In college English teaching, effective vocabulary teaching approaches are in need, considering the present efficiency in vocabulary acquisition, for the reason that the teachers have not correlated the form of vocabulary with what it refers to in college English vocabulary teaching. Iconicity as a semiotic notion refers to a natural resemblance or analogy between the form of a sign (“the signifier” be it a letter or sound, a word, a structure of words, or even the absence of a sign) and the object or concept (“the signified”) it refers to in the world or rather in our perception of the world. Zhou Xiang & Shen Qian (2015) analyzed the dialectical complementation between arbitrariness and iconicity in language. Contrary to arbitrariness, in terms of iconicity, the exploration of the application of iconicity, namely, the similarity between sign and object in vocabulary teaching facilitates vocabulary teaching. Jacobson (1965) believed that there is a relationship between the form and the content. Pierce (1931-1958) maintained “the sign stands for something, its object...” Newmeyer, Frederick J. (1992) held the view that most functionalist literary theme contains iconicity. Rosenstock, Rachel (2008) conducted a study of the four characteristics of iconicity in the process of learning.

II. METHODOLOGY

This paper mainly utilizes the methodology of theory construction with an attempt to find or describe principles that explain how Iconicity functions in teaching English Vocabulary.

A. *The Application of Morpheme Iconicity in Teaching English Vocabulary*

The word morpheme derived from Morpheus, which is the name for the god of dreams with the meaning of “form, shape, or figure”. According to the definition in the merriam-webster dictionary online, morphemes are the indivisible basic units of language, much like the atoms which physicists once assumed were the indivisible units of matter and English speakers borrowed morpheme from French morphème, which was itself created from the Greek root morphē, meaning “form”, and at the same time the French borrowed -ème from their word phonème, which, like English phoneme, means “the smallest unit of speech that can be used to make one word different from another word.” Liu Yang argued (2018) that morpheme iconicity refers to the relationship between the internal structure of words and their meanings and morpheme is the smallest and meaningful unit in the form of the language. Now that there exist relationship between the internal structure of words and their meanings, that is to say, to some degree, the English word has its own definite meaning by the combination of morphemes, prefixes or suffixes. For instance, the English morpheme “port” means “take”, or “carry” so these words, portable, import, reimport, importation, export, reexport,

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exportation, transport, transportation, porter, portage, report, reporter, support, supporter, deport, portfolio, and so on, have the common morpheme “port” meaning “take”. At the same time, the meanings of these words are self-evident. “Portable” means “port(take)” plus “able” meaning the quality of something which can be carried from one place to another, while “import” means “port(take)” plus “in” with the meaning of bring something into another country. For another example, these words, pressing, pressure, compress, compressible, compression, depress, depressed, depression, express, expression, impress, impression, impressive, oppress, oppression, repress, suppress, suppression and so on, have the common morpheme “press”. Compress means “press” plus “com(together)” and therefore the meaning of “compress” is obvious with the meaning of “pressing something together”. Accordingly, teachers should put emphasis on the common morpheme of some English words with the same morpheme. On the one hand, the common morpheme facilitates the memorizing of English words for the students, and on the other hand, putting emphasis on the common morpheme of some English words with the same morpheme can grasp the meanings of them.

The core meaning of a word is its root, a component of the morpheme. Accordingly, if an English learner know the meaning of a root, he or she can grasp a group of words. The root is the fundamental part and the core of a word. It represents the basic meaning of a word. The meaning of a word is produced by the meaning of the root. According to the meaning of the root, the meaning of a given word can be deduced and understood. The meaning of the root represents the central meaning of a word, and it plays a dominant role in the meaning of the given word, the meaning of the root combines the meaning of the affix (including prefix and suffix), the other kind of the morpheme, which produces the meaning of a word. Therefore, as long as we remember the meaning of the root, and as long as we can identify the form of the root from the word, we can understand and remember the meaning of the word. And if we can remember the meaning of the words in the way of combining the roots and the affixes of morphemes, we can not easily forget them. In this way, once the English learners are acquainted with the morpheme iconicity, that is to say, the relationship between the internal structure of words and their meanings, he can take advantage of the morphemes in English vocabulary to understand how words are formed and how meanings are produced. Consequently, once the reader has mastered the ability to analyze words, he can have a good mastery of a large number of words.

B. The Application of Metaphor Iconicity in Teaching English Vocabulary

To some extent, a metaphor is a kind of comparison without using the word “like” or “as” to evidently express the similarity of two objects. Accordingly, with the development of society, a growing number of words used as metaphor have become the daily-used words we take for granted today. Lackoff & Johnson (1980) maintained language abounds with metaphors. According to merriam-webster dictionary online, a metaphor is a figure of speech in which a word or phrase denoting one kind of object or action is used in place of another to suggest a likeness or analogy between them: the person being addressed in “you’re a peach” is being equated with a peach, with the suggestion being that the person is pleasing or delightful in the way that a peach is pleasing and delightful. For example, the professor delivered a crystal speech, in which “crystal” means “as transparent as crystal” but here is also metaphorical, with the meaning of “clear and understandable” being identified with “crystal”.

With the development of society and languages, the words with common meaning have gradually become metaphorical, with common meaning being identified with metaphorical meaning used in the form of metaphors, as shown in Table 1 below. For examples, “abroad” initially refers to “in a foreign country”; however, there is often a long distance between countries, so “abroad” is used metaphorically to refer to “spreading far and wide”. “Bread” initially refers to “food made from flour dough” with the meaning of things used to keep a living, and gradually it is used to money metaphorically and becomes the informal terms for money, for the reason that “bread” and “money” have the resemblance in the aspect of keeping a living, and a case in point is the word “bread-winner” meaning “wage-earner”. “Branch” initially refers to a division of a stem, and gradually it is used to refer to an administrative division in the form of metaphor, on the ground that “a division of a stem” and “an administrative division” have the similarity with the meaning of a division of an object. “Avenue” originally means “a wide street to some place”. It is used metaphorically to refer to “a line of approach”. We all know that “bread” originally refers to the food that we depend upon, but, with the development of society, it possesses the meaning of “money” metaphorically.

TABLE 1
COMMON WORDS WITH METAPHORICAL MEANING

words	common meaning	metaphorical meaning
abroad	in a foreign country	spread far and wide
avenue	a wide street	a line of approach
invade	march into another territory	penetrate in a harmful way
backward	directed toward the back	retarded in intellectual development
balance	a state of equilibrium	weigh against
branch	a division of a stem	an administrative division
bread	food made from flour dough	informal terms for money
chapter	a subdivision of a written work	a period in a person’s life
coin	strike coins	make up words
conceive	become pregnant	have the idea for
discount	give a reduction in price	disregard
old	not young	skilled through long experience

C. The Application of Etymology Iconicity in Teaching English Vocabulary

Broadly speaking, culture has both material connotation and spiritual aspects, and strictly speaking, it is the unity of matter and spirit. We humans know the world and communicate with each other by using languages. Vocabulary is the core of language, and in turn, culture also exerts great influence on vocabulary. Ancient Greek mythology came from the spiritual product of the primitive clan society. It was created collectively by the ancient Greeks and was also the earliest literary form in the Western world, and was fully reflected in the works of Homer, Hesiod and others. Its unique geographical location in the Greek Peninsula is responsible for the polytheism popular among the ancient Greeks. Greek mythology is a vast and complicated system with complex branches numerous legends. However, it was exhibited in a systematic way of God's story and hero's legend.

To some extent, ancient Greek mythology derived from ancient Greek imagination of the prehistoric culture and, at the same time, this kind of imagination gave rise to their belief. The ancient Greek mythology mainly relates the life of the gods they created in their legend, consisting mainly of many stories and legends about God. Partly because of the ancient Greek separated geographic locations, they believed in polytheism and centered on nature. Roman mythology comes from ancient Greek mythology, but it also has its own story and tradition. The ancient Greek mythology is full of the issues which explore the human beings' nature and destiny. The ancient Greek and Roman myths and legends have brought tremendous treasures for the western societies for all ages, and English vocabulary or idioms are no exception. Therefore, ancient Greek mythology is closely connected with English vocabulary. The morpheme of English vocabulary mostly has a connection with ancient Greek and Roman myths. Ancient Greek mythology provides a great number of prototypes of God and rich English vocabulary related to them. The content of ancient Greek mythology and various mythological figures have a profound influence on the creation of English vocabulary. It is an important source of ancient literary materials and English vocabulary. Yan Dawei(2005) discussed the carriers used in memorizing vocabulary of classical literature. To some extent, the themes of ancient Greek poetry, tragedy, and comedy are all based on myths and legends. The Romans inherited almost all Greek myths and legends. On the whole, the ancient Greek mythology has exerted influence on the creation of literary creation, and the development of western culture and civilization and the vocabulary is no exception. To be more specific, there is etymological iconicity between the name of god or goddess and the meaning which bears. For instance, allegedly, in the ancient Greek mythology, Psyche was one of a matchless beauty, a princess of God. Consequently, at that time, a huge number of young people fell in love with her. This phenomenon aroused the jealousy of Aphrodite, the goddess of love and beauty, at the time. She ordered her son, Eros, to punish Psyche by letting her fall in love with the ugliest man in the world. However, Eros fell in love with Psyche at first sight. In the end, Eros and Psyche became inseparable. Out of jealousy, Aphrodite made Psyche suffer a lot to prevent them from loving each other, but she was unable to separate them. From then on, Psyche became the root of the word with the meaning of "soul", "spirit" or "mind". Accordingly, psychic, psychology, psychologist, psychopathy, psychopathic, psychopathology, psychobiology, psychotherapy, psychotic, psychometrics, psychoneurosis, psychoneurotic, psychophysics, psychophysiology, zoopsychology, panpsychism all derived from the name of princess of God "Psyche" with the meaning of "psych" "spirit" or "mind". Based on the legend above, in college English vocabulary teaching, teacher should attach the importance of iconicity between psyche and "soul", "spirit" or "mind", so these meaning of these words, psychic, psychology, psychologist, psychopathy, psychopathic, psychopathology, psychobiology, psychotherapy, psychotic, psychometrics, psychoneurosis, psychoneurotic, psychophysics, psychophysiology, zoopsychology, panpsychism can be easily associated with the root meaning of psyche with the meaning of "spirit" or "mind".

Another case in point is that Gaea is the name of the Earth Goddess in ancient Greece. According to ancient Greek legends, Gaea, the incarnation of the earth, was separated from the god of chaos. As soon as she was born, she fell into a deep sleep on a large bare rock on Olympus. A comfortable wind lingered beside her for a moment, and Gaea became pregnant and slept like mud. Later, Gaea gave birth to three children, including Pontus and Ourea. From then on, in Greek, there exist etymological iconicity between the name of Gaea and the meaning of "earth" or "ground" with the form of "ge-" or "geo-" standing for "earth" or "ground" and a large number of English words with the form of "ge-" or "geo-", such as, geography, geographer, geology, geometry, geologist, geophysics, geoscience, geopolitics, geomagnetic, geospace geostrategy, geocentric, and so on, come into being, and all of these words are closely connected with the meaning of "earth" or "ground" Accordingly, in the process of teaching college English vocabulary, teachers should pay much attention to etymological iconicity to improve the efficiency of vocabulary teaching and vocabulary learning. Muse, the total name of the nine ancient goddesses of art, is the god who is responsible for music and art, including, history, lyrics, comedy, tragedy, song and dance, love poems, carols, astronomy and Epic, in Greek mythology. Therefore, the word "music" derives from Muse, and consequently museum refer to the place where all kinds of art is collected. It is said that Muse often takes an active part in the assembly of the gods or heroes, and carries forward her talent to sing and dance for them, in order to bring a lot of joy and happiness to the party.

In ancient Greece, Greeks mainly worshiped a great number of gods. At the same time, the gods in the Greek mythology can be classified into several major groups. The earliest group was Titans, led by Cronus, including Rhea, Oceanus, Tethys, Crius, Lapetus, Phoebe, Coeus, Themis, Mnemosyne, Hyperion, and Thea. It was said that another group which has the strongest power was the Olympians. The Olympians are also a group consisting of 12 gods who came to power after the Titans' ruling was over. To some extent, the 12 gods have connections with each other and

their names derived from their living place which are called Mount Olympus. Accordingly, Titan has the meaning of greatness in English, and the words, such as Titan, Titaness, titanic and titanism, are all from the ancient Greek Titans. Meanwhile, in Greek mythology, the Olympians' third generation God Zeus and his brothers and sisters lived on Olympus, the highest mountain in Greece, so they were called "Olympus Protoss". There's a place at the foot of the mountain Olympus called Olympia. Ancient Greeks held a sports meeting here every four years to commemorate the Olympian gods. Later, this sport, called the Olympic Games is passed down from one generation to another until today. In the meantime, the words Olympus, Olympia, Olympian, and Olympic all come from the Olympian gods. Ancient Greek mythology is the source of the western culture, so there is no denying the fact that it is closely connected with English vocabulary. Language is an important form and carrier of culture, and accordingly, vocabulary is strongly influenced by all kinds of cultures which is closely connected with it. Caesar invaded Britain twice in 55 B.C. and 54 B.C., and Claudius I launched an invasion into Britain in AD 43. After the conquest of Britain, it became the territory of the Roman Empire. The Romans built avenues in all directions to connect them with other cities around London at the mouth of the Thames, making London the center of Roman ruling and external relations with other regions. Therefore, the Romans bring their ancient culture to Britain, and form then on the ancient Greek and Roman cultures have directly influenced Britain. In the process of the development of English language, ancient Greek and Roman culture has been constantly integrated into the English language, forming some unique vocabulary and idioms in the English language. This section mainly makes a study of etymology iconicity from ancient Greek and Roman myths and the vocabulary appears in English. These words originated from ancient Greek and Roman myths and later gradually became a word family with the common morpheme.

III. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

In the process of English learning, vocabulary is the basis of learning English. The larger the number of words, the faster the learner's various skills improve. The comprehension of words is directly related to the improvement of other abilities. Without a certain vocabulary, one cannot perform reading, writing, and other activities. Connection is the bridge of memory; accordingly, isolated things are hard to remember. Iconicity bridges the connection between vocabulary and the meaning it renders, and also the relations of a word family. Based on these words, we can judge the meaning of the unknown words deriving from iconicity, and find out the intrinsic connection with the unknown words. Accordingly, we should put much emphasis on the application of morpheme iconicity, metaphor iconicity and etymology iconicity in teaching English vocabulary, for the three kind of iconicity bridges the connection between the English vocabulary and it refers to.

IV. DISCUSSIONS

From what has been discussed above, this paper maintains that the application of lexical iconicity in teaching vocabulary in college English can be conducted from three aspects below.

Firstly, morpheme is the smallest unit with the definite meaning in term of expression and content. Consequently, Morpheme is can not be further divided into smaller unit without destroying its meaning or dramatically altering the meaning. But it has its own inherent laws. No matter how complex a word is, it is composed of morphemes including roots and affixes, and each morpheme has a definite meaning. Although the number of words is very large, the number of morphemes is very limited. If an English learner has a good command of morphemes and understand the basic method of word formation, he or she can easily break through the difficulty of memorizing and guessing words in the process of acquiring English.

Secondly, in English, metaphor is a rhetoric device which is different from simile and does not use "like" or "as" to express, but makes hidden comparisons. The expression of metaphor is: A is B, which implies a word or phrase literally denoting one kind of object or idea is used in place of another to suggest a likeness or analogy between them. Metaphor refers to the use of a word or phrase to indicate something different from the literal meaning, which is the psychological, linguistic and cultural behavior of perceiving, experiencing, imagining, understanding and talking about such things under the implication of the other kind of things. Poetry, especially modern poetry, has important features in collocation of words and sentences. It tends to break through the habitual relationship between words and sentences and connect some seemingly unrelated things together. Critics generally call it metaphor when they combine words and sentences that seem to be unrelated to each other.

Thirdly, the relationship between language and culture in a language is basically stable. This stable relationship reflects the close relationship between language and culture, and makes language the key to understanding culture. Language is the carrier of culture. At the same time, culture has greatly influenced language. Accordingly, to some extent, language and culture are closely interconnected. Under the influence of ancient Greek mythology on English language, a large number of ancient Greek and Roman cultural elements have been incorporated into the English language, forming some unique word family with the common sources. And it is of great theoretical and practical significance to understand and analyze vocabulary from the perspective of etymology iconicity.

V. CONCLUSION

In any given language, although there exists arbitrariness between the form of a sign (the signifier) and the object or concept (the signified), yet iconicity, namely, resemblance between the signifier and the signified is also obvious in the aspects of morpheme, metaphor and etymology. Understanding iconicity helps to strengthen the students' memorizing vocabulary in the teaching process. It is necessary to reasonably analyze iconicity the form of a word and the meaning it refer to in order to achieve good teaching and learning results, for the key to memory is to transform the abstract and disordered object or concept into an orderly, regular and systematical one. Iconicity bridges the relation between the signifier and the signified of a word. On the whole, vocabulary teaching is of great significance in college English teaching. In the process of English vocabulary teaching, teachers should make every effort to use the iconicity in the aspect of morpheme, metaphor and etymology effectively to explain and analyze vocabulary, and in doing so, the students can memorize the new words efficiently. Hopefully, iconicity can play an important role in teaching college English vocabulary. Attaching the importance of iconicity in teaching vocabulary in college English can enrich the knowledge of vocabulary formation and broaden the vision of vocabulary acquisition.

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