The Implications of Semantic Prosody and Synonym for Second Language Vocabulary Teaching and Learning

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Abstract

Vocabulary learning is an essential part of second language acquisition. However, the rich meanings behind vocabulary deserve attention. This article draws on two core concepts, semantic prosody and synonymy, to illustrate the difficulties of vocabulary learning in the second language classes and to explore the importance of semantic relations for vocabulary teaching and learning.

Keywords

Semantic prosody; Synonym; Vocabulary; Second language teaching.

1. Introduction

According to Hu (2015), for second language learners, they not only need to know the literal meaning of words, but also need to distinguish the semantic prosody which is not interchangeable in different contexts, which becomes a big difficulty in learning vocabulary, especially synonyms. This study summarizes the concepts of semantic prosody and synonyms, and tries to apply them to second language vocabulary teaching and learning.

2. Semantic Prosody

For non-native speakers, when learning a second language, it is very important not only to know the meaning of the word itself, but also to understand the semantic prosody behind the word. Research on semantic prosody is still lacking, especially in empirical research on its application to academic work and lack of corresponding corpus (Omidian & Siyanova, 2020). In recent years, more and more attention has been paid to the study of semantic prosody.

2.1. Definition and Literature Review of Semantic Prosody

Semantic prosody has become a very important concept in the corpus language field. For Sinclair (1991), the language choice to create a language meaning is not based on the independent choice of words. On the contrary, language users will consider the semantic relationship between words to create larger meaning units, which can serve some communication and practical functions. In other words, the core element of meaning lies in its pragmatic function in discourse. On this basis, Sinclair puts forward the concept of semantic prosody. Sinclair first noticed that the use of many word phrases showed a trend: they always appeared in a specific context, such as the verb phrase 'set in', which usually expressed negative things, and verb 'happen' was mainly associated with unpleasant incidents such as 'accidents' (Sinclair, 1991). In essence, the semantic prosody of lexical items is the pragmatic aspect of its meaning, which is produced by the simultaneous occurrence of certain items.

Louw used the term "semantic prosody" in his works for the first time, and claimed that the semantic prosody is the matching atmosphere inspired by the collocations (Louw, 1993). Stubbs puts forward his own opinion on semantic prosody, which is called 'discourse prosody', and divides it into three categories: negative, positive and neutral, recognizing the semantic

relationship between nodes and collocations (Stubbs, 2002). According to Hoey (2005), semantic prosody is the combination of words and a specific meaning, which is a phenomenon beyond lexical collocation. Hoey further divides semantic prosody into two concepts: one is 'semantic associations' of connotative and evaluative meanings, the other one is 'pragmatic associations' of discourse function. Lee (2011) reported that Korean college students are not fully aware of semantic prosody, which may indicate that textbooks and English dictionaries do not fully explain this problem.

From the above definition, semantic prosody is not only a kind of collocation, but also a kind of relationship between words and their collocations. It can go beyond the meaning of a single word and spread to the whole sentence or even the context. Its main function is to express the attitude and evaluation of language users. Semantic prosody is a kind of subconscious semantic association between words and collocations. It is difficult to find out only by linguistic intuition. Corpus can be used to describe the semantic prosody of lexical entry.

2.2.   Importance of Semantic Prosody in L2 Vocabulary Acquisition

For second language vocabulary class, mastering the pragmatic function of words is an important sign of successful vocabulary acquisition (Zhang, 2008). Interlanguage studies show that second language learners are more likely to make errors about semantic prosody (Zhang, 2009). Taking my familiar teaching environment as an example, English is not only my second language, but also the main carrier of academic texts. It is a challenge for me to choose the proper words in specific texts. For instance, to me, both 'result' and 'aftermath' mean the outcome of an event, but in fact, 'aftermath' usually tends to describe a negative event. If dictionaries and textbooks do not clearly indicate the semantic prosody, then even if learners can understand the meaning of the word, they may choose the inappropriate words when communicating with others, resulting in the low efficiency of communication. Xiao and McEnery (2006) believe that it is far from enough and unreliable to rely on second language learners' intuition of the target language, because L2 learners' intuition of the target language is different from that of native speakers, so it cannot help them to detect the rationality of vocabulary use from the perspective of semantic prosody. Therefore, improving the awareness of semantic prosody is very important for L2 vocabulary teaching, because it not only helps to explain the hidden attitude behind the text, but also helps learners to understand how to use vocabulary properly.

As a matter of fact, the influence of cross language and the incompleteness of dictionary information in semantic prosody cause learners' difficulties in vocabulary acquisition. It is found that there are differences in semantic prosody between different languages. A research shows that English learners whose native language is German are prone to make pragmatic errors because they do not understand the semantic prosody of words (Siepmann, 2005).

In addition, dictionaries need to provide readers with accurate usage information, including the semantic prosody features of words. Sinclair criticized the traditional dictionary as early as the mid-1980s. He believes that the description of the meaning of an entry in traditional dictionaries is neither comprehensive nor perfect. Most dictionaries only help readers to read, but little help in writing (Sinclair, 1987). Louw (1993) claimed that lexicographers could not solve the problem of semantic prosody satisfactorily before, because semantic prosody was invisible to the naked eye. However, with the large corpus, it is possible to draw the semantic prosody outline of vocabulary. Therefore, he called on lexicographers to pay due attention to the semantic prosody of words. In order to verify his claim, Partington (1998) compares the explanations and examples of two entries 'set in' and 'peddle' in three general dictionaries and seven student dictionaries, and finds that the semantic prosody information in student dictionaries is indeed enriched due to the use of corpus, but the general dictionary seems to be indifferent to the relevant information provided by corpus. Most dictionaries just list the

inherent meaning of the word itself, but ignore the meaning of the entry and its habitual collocation or co-occurrence. As a result, users only find the semantic characteristics of the word when they look up it. However, if semantic prosody information is added to the dictionary, learners will know how to use the word and understand what kind of language context the word occurs in, which will bring great benefit to foreign language learners. The research and development of semantic prosody can provide new ideas and methods for lexicography. For second language learners, dictionaries are one of the most important instructional tools. It is obvious that dictionaries without semantic prosody information can mislead their learning and lead to pragmatic failure.

2.3. The Application of Semantic Prosody in Vocabulary Teaching

First of all, the explicit teaching of semantic prosody is necessary. Both learners and teachers need to improve their awareness of semantic prosody. According to Wei(2006), in second language vocabulary class, one of the reasons why learners pay little attention to semantic prosody is that their teachers may focus more on the denotational meaning of words at the very beginning of teaching, but ignore the pragmatic level of semantic prosody. Therefore, the first step should be to integrate the teaching of semantic prosody into the second language vocabulary class. Teachers should be trained to understand semantic prosody, so that they can provide explicit teaching of semantic prosody for students when teaching vocabulary. On the other hand, learners themselves should also enhance their awareness of semantic prosody in their daily vocabulary learning. They should go beyond the understanding of vocabulary spelling, pronunciation, awareness, grammar and other aspects, and be able to apply the new words properly in communication.

Secondly, textbook compilers and lexicographers should also give some space to semantic prosody. According to Lee(2006), textbooks are one of the most significant ways to learn new words, especially for the second language learners who lack the target language environment. Therefore, appropriate lexical semantic prosody should be presented in the glossaries of teaching materials. Similarly, many bilingual dictionaries explain the words from single semantic aspect, often supplemented by synonyms or antonyms. However, in practical application, those words are often not interchangeable due to different semantic prosody. As one of the best guiding tools in the L2 language learning, the lack of semantic prosody information in dictionaries will obviously lead to misleading and pragmatic mistakes in vocabulary learning. Therefore, lexicographers can compile semantic prosody into dictionaries with the help of corpora, so as to facilitate learners' application of vocabulary.

3. Synonymy

3.1. Definition and Literature Review of Synonymy

The definition of synonymy is 'A sense relation in which more than one linguistic form can be said to have the same conceptual or propositional meaning' (Carter, 2012, p34). Near-synonyms 'are not fully inter-substitutable, but vary in their shades of denotation or connotation, or in the components of meaning they emphasize; they may also vary in grammatical or collocational constraints' (Inkpen and Hirst, 2006, p1). Cruse defines synonyms as 'items whose senses are identical in respect of central semantic traits, but differ in 'minor or peripheral traits' (Cruse, 1986, p267), Cruse also highlight that 'synonyms must not only manifest a high degree of semantic overlap, they must also have a low degree of implicit contrastiveness' (Cruse, 1986, p266). In other words, in most cases, synonyms are not interchangeable, even if there are overlapping parts between them.

In recent years, some scholars have discussed the reasons for the difficulties that learners encounter in learning synonyms. For example, he proposed that it is not easy to choose more

suitable synonyms in a specific context, especially when these synonyms have the same meaning in the mother tongue (Morley & Partington, 2009). However, the existing bilingual dictionaries usually pay more attention to denotation than usage, which brings disadvantages for learners to look up words (Xiao and McEnery, 2006). Martin conducted a study, examining the challenges advanced second language learners face in using synonyms in their second language. According to the cases of advanced second language learners' mistakes, he divides the sources of errors in the use of synonyms into four categories: 'stylistic, syntactic, collocational, and semantic' (Martin, 1984, p130). Kim (2007) investigated their ability to use semantic prosody and synonyms. The research of Yeh (2007) tests the effectiveness of corpora in enhancing learners' understanding of synonyms. The results show that the use of corpora can effectively help learners understand the collocation patterns of the studied synonyms, thus enhancing the learning of synonyms.

3.2. Importance of Synonymy in L2 Vocabulary Acquisition

The proper choice of synonyms is one of the main signs of success in second language acquisition. 'Word choices reflect the writer's views, attitudes, beliefs, and intentions in choosing a particular word rather than any of the other available options'(Kim, 2020, p26). For second language learners, the choice of vocabulary is a big challenge. Only knowing the basic meaning of vocabulary is not enough. Choosing more appropriate vocabulary in the appropriate context may lead to more effective communication. In the research of Liu and Zhong (2016), they compare the use of four sets of synonyms by intermediate/advanced Chinese EFL/ESL learners and native English speakers. They come to the following conclusions: not only 'intermediate nonnative group's responses differed significantly from those of the native speakers on all of the 20 items', but also 'the advanced nonnative group's differed significantly from the native speakers' on only 10 of them, a reduction by half'. According to Liu and Zhong, the result indicates 'a closer approximation' of the advanced group's response patterns to those of the native speakers. Moreover, with the increase of language proficiency of L2 language learners, their mastery of synonyms is also improving (Liu and Zhong, 2016, p245).

Webb put forward a thought-provoking point of view when testing whether synonym learning has an impact on second language vocabulary acquisition, 'The reason for this was not to advocate the teaching of synonyms but rather to improve our understanding of the vocabulary acquisition process' (Webb, 2007, p121). In other words, to a certain extent, the importance of synonyms reflects the influence of prior knowledge and enlarging vocabulary on vocabulary learning, which shows the benefits of accumulating knowledge and expanding vocabulary.

Webb's thinking makes us pay attention to the issue of learning burden. Nation (2001) describes learning burden by saying that, the general principle of learning burden is that the more a word represents patterns and knowledge that the learners are already familiar with, the lighter its learning burden. These patterns and knowledge can be from the first language, from knowledge of other languages, and from previous knowledge of the second language. So, if a word uses sounds that are in the first language, follows regular spelling patterns, is a loan word in the first language with roughly the same meaning, fits into roughly similar grammatical patterns as in the first language with similar collocations and constraints, then the learning burden will be very light' (Nation, 2001, p23–24). 'The lowering of nervous tension often associated with language learning must be seen as essentially humane and beneficial in any educational setting' (Harmer, 1984, p14). Webb also points out that 'the learning burden for synonyms of known words is less than for non-synonyms because synonyms represent knowledge of syntagmatic association that has already been acquired' (Webb, 2007, p121). When learners know the synonyms of a word, they can grasp the meaning of the word more quickly. Although synonyms are used differently in specific contexts, they still reveal different levels of meaning from their respective perspectives. Therefore, synonym is still an important

way in second language vocabulary acquisition. Introduction of synonyms allows students to transfer knowledge and make teachers adjust the distribution of class time and improve the efficiency of class. However, the use of synonyms is a double-edged sword, which should not be used excessively without making distinguish. After all, they are usually not interchangeable, and it is a temporary process for students to acquire.

3.3.   The Application of Synonymy in Vocabulary Teaching

First of all, as Liu and Zhong point out, 'the typical collocates of a synonym constitute the key information for understanding and learning the use of synonyms' (Liu and Zhong, 2016, p252). They give a lot of examples, for instance, native English speakers usually say 'individual right' rather than 'individual authority', but they say 'regulatory authority/power' rather than 'regulatory right'. Another example is 'actually', which usually appears at the beginning of a sentence as a discourse marker to correct previous claims. For instance, 'Actually, I'm 23 years old.' Learners who are familiar with synonyms and typical collocation information know more about how to choose synonyms correctly. Therefore, this type of knowledge should be paid special attention to in synonym learning and teaching.

Secondly, explicit instruction is necessary. When each word appears for the first time, it is necessary to teach students the meaning and usage of the word accurately and explicitly, which is a prerequisite to help students improve their ability to understand and use the language and reduce the difficulties caused by synonyms. Cruse gives an example of the idiom 'kick the bucket' (Cruse, 1986, p266). Different from the verb 'die', its idiom semantic meaning can be completely normal only when its subject is human, which is called 'collocational restrictions'. If the teacher only tells the students the meaning of this idiom, but does not explain clearly that it ought to be matched with the subject of human beings, then students may fail to apply the new word because they do not pay enough attention to it. Moreover, it is unrealistic for students to explore its pragmatic usage only by themselves. What's worse, they may collocate it with animals or other inappropriate words, which sounds strange to native English speakers and may lead to poor communication in other situations. In terms of the teaching context I am familiar with, taking the words 'common' and 'ordinary' as examples, both of them have the meaning of "not special" in Chinese, but the meaning of 'common' lies in 'used by many people', for example, 'pine trees are common in many parts of the world', while the meaning of 'ordinary' lies in 'not outstanding', for example, 'there was nothing ordinary in his music or his character'. If the explanation of these two words is taught to students more clearly at the beginning, instead of giving students a simple explanation of 'not special', students will more naturally understand and use these two words correctly. Language output is also an important aspect of second language acquisition. The explicit teaching of synonym difference can effectively facilitate students to acquire better pragmatic competence, making their language production more authentic and communication more fluent.

Thirdly, corpus should be used efficiently. Textbooks may be out of date and narrow in knowledge. On the contrary, abundant and up-to-date data can be obtained through corpus. Additionally, according to the usage-based language acquisition theory proposed by Tomasello (2003), synonym acquisition is usage/exemplar-based. Since corpus has obvious advantages over textbook vocabulary in providing examples, teachers should not be limited by the teaching content of textbooks. They should be good at using corpus and similar teaching software tools to introduce synonym collocations with higher frequency and more authentic usage to students.

Fourth, from the perspective of learners, synonymy learning must proceed step by step in the proper order. At the beginning of learning, learners can focus on the most frequent/dominant synonyms. With the continuous learning, the expansion of the second language vocabulary and the improvement of language proficiency, learners should not be satisfied with these high frequency synonyms, but should continue to make efforts to increase the use of synonyms with

lower frequency. 'Grasping the dominant member first should enable learners to communicate their basic thoughts without a large vocabulary' (Liu and Zhong, 2016, p252). In other words, learning major synonym collocations in the early stages of learning can more quickly establish a useful vocabulary framework of communicative usage. After having a certain second language foundation, learners should pay more attention to understanding and distinguishing the subtle differences between synonyms of different frequencies, so as to make greater use of less frequent synonyms and improve their language level.

Then, Cruse found a feature about synonyms in the text, that is 'synonyms also characteristically occur together in certain types of expression' (Cruse, 1986, p267). On the one hand, a synonym is usually used to clarify or explain another word with a similar meaning, and the two words are usually connected by 'that is to say' or 'or'. For example, 'He was cashiered, that is to say, dismissed.' On the other hand, when a pair of synonyms appear together with such expressions as 'or rather' or 'more exactly', it is generally intended to make a distinction or highlight a certain meaning. For example, 'We got home late last night, or rather early this morning.' From this point of view, synonyms provide a new method for both learners and tutors to get vocabulary acquisition. Because of the existence of these signal words such as 'that is to say', even if learners do not know the word, they at least know that it is a synonym of the new word. Through the relationship between synonyms, learners can guess the general direction of the word meaning and improve the efficiency of language understanding. More importantly, this process deepens students' impression and reflection on the pair of synonyms with similar meanings and helps learners better understand vocabulary from different angles. Therefore, learning and memorizing vocabularies from the perspective of lexical relations is feasible and effective. Teaching students the strategies of analyzing lexical relations in various contexts will be of great advantage.

In addition, since we do not normally have totally substitutable synonyms, teachers can design various exercises or activities to discriminate synonyms. For example, fill in the blanks, multiple-choice questions, crossword puzzles and other means, to raise learners' awareness to the differences between synonyms, so that they can choose the words carefully in the future output.

4. Conclusion

This article demonstrates the concept and importance of semantic prosody and synonyms, as well as their implications for L2 vocabulary teaching or learning. It not only provides an alternative for teachers to explain vocabulary or for learners to understand the words, but also contains the powerful pragmatic function of words, which has stronger practical significance than the vocabulary glossary in textbooks.

The study of semantic prosody is an effective way to differentiate and analyse synonyms. Corpora can provide a large number of authentic collocations in real life. Through the collocation analysis of words with the corpora, we can reveal the subtle semantic prosody characteristics of words can be revealed, which makes it possible to distinguish synonyms.

The popularity and richness of English synonyms increase the difficulty of learning, and the main problem for students is that they are not familiar with many synonyms, unable to actively establish associations and feelings, and generally passively accept them. Deeply memorizing synonyms and flexibly using them is an issue worth discussing. Therefore, teachers should not only distinguish synonyms in essence, but also use many methods in teaching. In this way, students' language senses can be activated, so that students can have a multi-dimensional and vivid feeling of synonyms and better grasp them.

In conclusion, it is not difficult to see that both semantic prosody and synonyms reflect the relationship between words and provide us with a perspective that the content and form of

language are inseparable. If we can effectively integrate semantic prosody and synonym teaching into second language vocabulary class, then students' experience of language output can be enriched and their communicative competence can be enhanced.

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