

English Vocabulary Teaching in Higher Education: Insights from Geoffery Leech's Seven Types of Meaning

Zhanyu Cui, Guizhi Zhang

School of Foreign Languages, Henan University of Technology, Zhengzhou, Henan, China

Abstract: In the context of the new English curriculum standards, vocabulary plays an indispensable role in enhancing students' overall English language proficiency in higher education. Vocabulary instruction should not be limited to memorizing words; rather, it should be integrated into rich themes and contexts, deepening learning through comprehensive language practice. This paper illustrates the seven types of meaning proposed by linguist Leech: conceptual meaning, connotative meaning, social meaning, affective meaning, reflective meaning, collocative meaning, and thematic meaning. Through this exploration of meaning types, the paper further discusses their implications for vocabulary teaching in higher education.

Keywords: Seven Types of Meaning; Higher Education; English Vocabulary Teaching

1. Introduction

With the implementation of the new English curriculum standards, the goals of English teaching in China have become clear: to cultivate students' foreign language learning strategies, enhance their overall quality, and focus on developing their language abilities and critical thinking skills, thereby laying a solid foundation for lifelong learning.

Vocabulary serves as the cornerstone of English proficiency and plays a crucial role in language knowledge. A rich vocabulary reserve ensures clear and precise expression of thoughts and effective integration of foreign language learning with other subjects. The extent of students' vocabulary mastery serves as a key indicator of English teaching quality in higher education and is vital for accurate understanding and appropriate usage of vocabulary. Vocabulary teaching holds significant importance, forming the foundation of English course content and linking closely to discourse, language

knowledge, and language skills.

Given this importance, this paper offers an overview of Leech's classification of meaning and explores its implications for vocabulary instruction in higher education [1]. By analyzing vocabulary meanings, this study aims to identify effective teaching methods that promote students' development in language knowledge, cultural understanding, and communicative competence.

2. The Seven Types of Meaning

Geoffrey Leech proposed seven different types of meaning [1]. The following is an overview of these seven types of meaning.

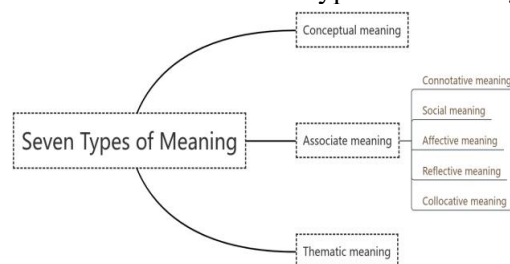


Figure 1. The Seven Types of Meaning

2.1 Conceptual Meaning

Conceptual meaning refers to the basic meaning expressed by a word in language communication. It focuses on the relationship between words and the entities they refer to.

Conceptual meaning is the most critical element of vocabulary meaning and, therefore, remains relatively stable. It is also the most basic and core part of word meaning, which refers to the meanings provided in dictionaries [2]. For example, the conceptual meaning of the word "lake" is "a large area of water surrounded by land," and the conceptual meaning of "forest" is "a large area covered chiefly with trees and undergrowth." The conceptual meaning of a word is equivalent to its dictionary

definition.

2.2 Connotative Meaning

Connotative meaning is the additional meaning that goes beyond conceptual meaning. It refers to the experiential associations that people have when using or hearing a word, which creates social values [3].

Connotative meanings shift with socio-cultural contexts, impacting English vocabulary instruction. Socio-cultural background knowledge must be integrated into word teaching. For example, in ancient times, yellow symbolized imperial power in China. The emperor wore yellow dragon robes, and “yellow proclamations” referred to imperial edicts. However, the English translations related to yellow in Chinese culture do not have direct equivalents. For instance, “huang liang mei meng” is translated as “a fond dream,” and “huang jin shi dai” is translated as “the golden times.” In English culture, they use “blue” and “purple” to express similar notions of supreme status, such as “blue blood” representing royal lineage.

Unlike conceptual meaning, connotative meaning is not a fundamental component of language but an additional aspect. For example, the word “man” is composed of three basic lexical units: “human,” “male,” and “adult.” However, due to different eras and societies, individuals with different cultural background knowledge and experiences associate additional connotative meanings with the word. For example, “man” not only refer to a male but also be used to describe someone as handsome, having masculinity, responsibility, and manliness, and so on.

2.3 Social Meaning

Social meaning refers to the content of the social context in which language is used to express [4]. Leech asserts that language use occurs in various contexts—formal, general, poetic, literary, and dialectal—each imparting distinct social meanings [1]. Dialectal choices reveal the speaker’s geographical and social background. For example, “residence” has multiple expressions. Conceptually, these terms refer to a “place to live.” However, socially, they differ: “domicile” appears in legal contexts, “residence” in administrative

ones, “abode” in poetry, and “home” among friends and family.

This illustrates the need for teachers to distinguish between formal and informal English in vocabulary instruction. Educators must guide students in selecting appropriate language forms based on context, formality, and purpose, fostering effective communication.

In vocabulary teaching, educators highlight the emotional significance of words to deepen students’ understanding of conveyed attitudes and emotions. Comparative analysis allows exploration of emotional nuances, while role-playing and categorization exercises enhance sensitivity to emotional meaning.

2.4 Affective Meaning

Affective meaning refers to the expression of the speaker’s emotions, attitudes, or personal judgments through vocabulary [5]. Affective meaning is not an independent meaning but a dependent meaning that is manifested through factors such as conceptual meaning, connotative meaning, social meaning, or the speaker’s intonation. For example, the affective meaning of “He is a club manager” is different from “He is a respected manager.” The word “respected” in the latter sentence conveys the speaker’s positive support for the club manager, while the former sentence lacks this affective meaning. Similarly, in the sentence “German nationalism was the offspring of military ambition,” “ambition” should not be translated as “aspiration” but as the pejorative term “ye xin” (wild ambition). In vocabulary teaching, teachers use affective meaning to help students understand the speaker’s attitude and emotions implied in vocabulary, thereby improving students’ skills in word usage.

2.5 Reflective Meaning

Reflective meaning refers to the emotional, associative, or implicit meanings that a word evokes beyond its direct conceptual meaning, also known as denotation.

This type of meaning is subjective and varies among individuals, influenced by

personal experiences, cultural backgrounds, and societal contexts. For instance, words like “freedom” and “peace” convey literal meanings while evoking positive associations and idealistic connotations. In contrast, terms like “war” and “disease” trigger negative imagery and associations. Teaching these nuances is essential for students to grasp the full spectrum of a word’s meaning and use language with greater precision and sensitivity.

The use of taboo words and euphemisms relates closely to associative meaning. For example, the term “negro” carries racial discrimination and should be avoided, while more neutral terms are preferred. Similarly, instead of saying “lose one’s job,” using “between jobs” proves more appropriate. When teaching taboo words, educators should help students understand and master euphemisms for sensitive language use.

2.6 Collocative Meaning

Collocative meaning refers to the specific meanings that emerge when vocabulary combines with other words in particular contexts. Influenced by linguistic habits, a word exhibits varying collocative meanings when combined with different terms.

Collocative meaning arises from words’ interaction in context, influenced by linguistic and cultural factors. “Book” in “many books” refers to publications, while in “book rooms,” it means reserving spaces. “Yellow” in “The Yellow River” indicates a geographical feature, “light yellow” describes a color, and “yellow dog” denotes a disliked person in some contexts. Cultural differences affect collocations; “Black tea” in English is a tea type, but “hong cha” (red tea) in Chinese signifies different varieties. Grammatical structures also dictate collocations; “take” in “take a break” means to rest, while in “take a picture,” it means to photograph.

Context, culture, and grammar shape collocative meaning. Learners need to understand these factors for vocabulary acquisition. Educators should highlight these aspects in teaching to improve students’ language skills and cultural competence. Analyzing vocabulary meanings leads to effective teaching strategies that address linguistic nuances. (Figure 2)

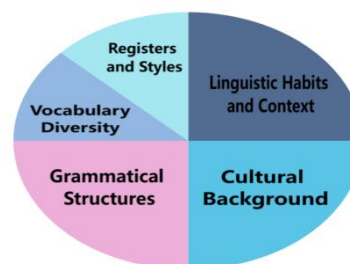


Figure 2. Factors Influencing Collocative Meaning

2.7 Thematic Meaning

Thematic meaning refers to the speaker’s intention expressed through adjustments in word order and grammatical structures when organizing language.

Thematic meaning is achieved through vocabulary, stress, and intonation to emphasize specific parts of a sentence. For example, in the sentences “Bell invented the telephone in 1876” and “The telephone was invented by Bell in 1876,” the former emphasizes what Bell invented, specifically the telephone, while the latter emphasizes who invented the telephone, highlighting Bell as the person. This contrast is achieved through vocabulary choices.

In practical teaching, educators guide students in exploring thematic meaning through various approaches. During the design of teaching activities, educators should encourage students to delve into the thematic meaning of texts. This exploration will help them gain insight into the author’s intentions and emotional inclinations, while also promoting their development in language skills, cultural awareness, critical thinking, and learning strategies. Teachers pose questions to stimulate discussion and reflection; design activities that allow students to experience and investigate concepts hands-on; or encourage critical thinking by inviting students to express their own viewpoints and insights. Through these teaching strategies, students achieve a deeper understanding of the thematic meaning of texts, thereby enhancing their language proficiency and cultural understanding.

Thematic meaning is at the core of text comprehension, requiring students not only to grasp language knowledge but also to explore and understand the deeper

implications of the text. Teachers should emphasize the investigation of thematic meaning in their instruction, utilizing a variety of teaching activities and strategies to help students develop a comprehensive linguistic ability and cultural literacy.

3. Implications for Vocabulary Teaching in Higher Education:

3.1 Acquiring Vocabulary in Discourse Contexts

Discourse-based teaching focuses on vocabulary and sentence structures, including dialogues and monologues, both in written and spoken forms. A complete text usually contains multiple contexts, allowing students to acquire vocabulary in different contexts, which helps deepen their understanding of vocabulary. Vocabulary is not isolated; it exists in specific language environments, such as daily communication or formal texts. The meaning of vocabulary is not constant but dynamically influenced by individuals' interpretations and the context in which it is used. Let's compare the italicized words in the following two sentences:

(1) An event that will change your route in both the literal and figurative sense. (referring to metaphorical meaning)

(2) His career spanned some 50 years and encompassed both abstract and figurative painting. (referring to representational style)

The above examples show that placing vocabulary in specific contexts and providing authentic language environments allows students to accurately grasp the meanings of sentences and vocabulary. Vocabulary is not isolated but an integral part of discourse [6]. Therefore, teaching vocabulary in specific morphological, derivational, pragmatic, and cultural contexts helps develop students' overall awareness and better acquire vocabulary within discourse.

The new curriculum standards set higher requirements for English teachers. Teachers need to actively transform traditional teaching concepts and focus on the quality and integrity of vocabulary teaching, constructing a comprehensive discourse-based teaching framework [7]. College students should learn vocabulary through exposure to a variety of text materials, including news articles, literary

works, and academic papers. Instructors design task-based activities that allow students to use new vocabulary in simulated real-life communication scenarios, thereby deepening their memory and understanding [8]. For instance, by analyzing articles in their specific fields, students learn the precise usage and collocations of specialized terminology. Teachers should encourage students to explore how vocabulary varies across different contexts, helping them recognize the diversity and context-dependence of words, which in turn enhances their linguistic flexibility and adaptability. Applying discourse-based teaching in English classrooms and integrating it into English vocabulary teaching assist students in mastering various English vocabulary and enhancing their vocabulary application skills.

3.2 Enhancing Students' Intercultural Awareness

Language is an essential component of culture, and culture encompasses language. Language itself is a form of culture and the most important tool for communication between people. "A nation's culture is reflected in various aspects of its language, with vocabulary being the most prominent and extensive. Conceptual meanings, connotative meanings, emotional meanings, and social meanings of words are all related to culture and are reflected in the vocabulary's semantic system"[9]. For example, there are considerations and controversies in English regarding how to refer to "lao nian ren" (elderly people) in Chinese. In Western culture, directly calling someone "old people" is considered very impolite because the word "old" in English carries negative connotations of being outdated and lacking vitality, evoking negative associations. If one wants to express the concept of "lao nian ren" in English, they use "senior" or "young at heart" instead. Some seemingly equivalent English and Chinese vocabulary have different cultural connotations. For example, Chinese people like things with homophonic

meanings, and “ji” (chicken) is one such example. Because “ji” and “ji” (good luck) have similar sounds, “ji” is used as an auspicious animal for various festive occasions. However, in English, “chicken” is not associated with auspiciousness. In certain contexts, “chicken” is considered a term for someone who is cowardly, and many English words related to chickens have negative connotations.

Cultural differences drive language diversity. Grasping these differences, especially between Chinese and Western cultures, strengthens English skills. In higher education, developing intercultural awareness is crucial for improving English proficiency. Traditional teaching often misses cultural nuances in vocabulary. A new method compares Chinese and Western cultural contexts, enhancing learning interest and cultural understanding. It helps students use vocabulary correctly, avoiding miscommunications and improving cross-cultural communication.

In college, vocabulary learning should focus on cultural insights. Teachers compare cultural expressions to highlight vocabulary's cultural aspects. This approach helps students understand cultural influences on vocabulary and use it appropriately in diverse settings, boosting their confidence in global interactions.

3.3 Strengthening Vocabulary Collocations

The same word has different collocational meanings when paired with different words or used in different contexts. Some words have similar conceptual meanings and are often synonymous, but their collocational meanings differ. For example, to describe hot weather, we use phrases like “sultry weather,” “sweltering weather,” “boiling weather,” “roasting weather,” or “torrid weather.” Although they all express hot weather, they convey different degrees of heat. Taking the word “regret” as another example, its conceptual meaning signifies a feeling of sorrow or disappointment, but when paired with different words, it has different meanings. Let's analyze the following two different sentences:

- (1) I regret to have to do this, but I have no choice.
- (2) I do not regret telling her what I thought.

In sentence (1), “regret to do” expresses a strong feeling of regret about having to do something, indicating an action that has not yet been done. In sentence (2), “regret doing” conveys a sense of regret and remorse about something that has already been done. Although both sentences involve the concept of regret, the collocations of the words differ, and they are not interchanged. Students should pay special attention to the collocational use of vocabulary during their learning. Teachers illustrate the differences in usage of the same word in various collocations to help students master the correct applications. For instance, by analyzing the contextual differences between “regret to do” and “regret doing,” students learn how to select appropriate collocations based on the tense and structure of a sentence. In addition, teachers provide a variety of collocation examples, allowing students to practice using them in writing and speaking exercises, thereby enhancing their language expression skills.

There are also words that have similar conceptual meanings in Chinese but different collocations in English. For example, “xue xi zhi shi” (to learn knowledge) is rarely expressed as “learn knowledge” in English; instead, we use “gain knowledge.” Similarly, “kan bao zhi” (to read newspapers) is not expressed as “see newspaper” but rather as “read newspaper.”

In the process of vocabulary teaching, teachers should appropriately introduce various collocation patterns. This not only expands students' vocabulary repertoire but also deepens their understanding of word meanings. Furthermore, the phenomenon of fixed collocations is present in every language, particularly when dealing with collocations that differ significantly from one's native language. When teaching collocations, it is important to place the words back into their contextual framework and carefully consider the usage context to facilitate students' memorization [10].

4. Conclusion

Leech's seven-fold classification of

meanings has provided a better understanding of word meanings and serves as a strong theoretical basis for English vocabulary teaching. Teachers should apply Leech's theory of seven meanings to vocabulary teaching by promoting vocabulary acquisition in discourse contexts, fostering students' intercultural awareness by integrating cultural teaching into vocabulary instruction, and strengthening the learning of vocabulary collocations by providing typical collocations and introducing them in context. This approach not only enriches vocabulary teaching methods and enhances students' learning efficiency but also improves teachers' instructional capabilities.

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