

WORD ORIGIN HELPS EXPAND LEARNERS' VOCABULARY A VOCABULARY TEACHING APPROACH

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Abstract: Word origin (motivation) deals with the connection between name and sense, explaining how a word originated. With the knowledge of how words are originated, learners can grasp a word easier and thus expand their vocabulary more quickly. The introduction to word origin (motivation) by teachers can also help the learners gain interest in the process of learning and learn more about the cultural and historical background of the English-speaking countries. This paper tries to clarify this method of teaching from four aspects: onomatopoeia, word formation, cultural and historical background and cognitive linguistics.

Keywords: *word origin (motivation), vocabulary, word formation, onomatopoeia, cognitive linguistics.*

INTRODUCTION

According to Lu (1981) in his lexicology textbook *Modern English Lexicology*, motivation which can also be defined as *word origin* deals with the connection between name and sense. Since the word *motivation* may be confused with other senses of the term in Applied Linguistics, this paper will use *word origin* instead of *motivation* for clarity. In fact, word origin is not an isolated concept in lexicology. It has connections with word formation, change of meaning, cultural and historical background. In short, word origin explains how a word originated.

New words and expressions which evolve in civilized society are not arbitrary, and do not develop randomly. Even for a folk adage, linguists can find its origin (Xu, 1992). Therefore, there is practical significance in studying word origin.

Word origin deals with a word's origination, so with the connection

between the meaning and the word itself, learners can grasp a word more easily and thus they can expand their vocabulary more quickly.

ONOMATOPOEIA

Onomatopoeia is one kind of word origins, which means defining the principle of origin by sound (Lu, 1999). Many words of this kind simply imitate natural sounds, so people find it easy to spell them. However, with the development of language, these onomatopoeic words or their derivation, do not merely refer to the sounds they imitate. They can express a lot of meanings that are related to the sounds which are not difficult for learners to grasp. On the contrary, students can double or redouble their vocabulary in no time, so long as they spend some time in understanding the word origin.

A large number of onomatopoeic words have been changed into nouns, some by means of word formation.

Firstly, an onomatopoeic word might denote the object that gives out the sound. This is a kind of association by contiguity. The words "cuckoo", and "cricket", for example, at first, referred to the sounds cuckoos and crickets make, whereas now they've become the names of the bird and the insect which make the sounds.

Secondly, by adding the suffix "-er", the original onomatopoeic word, if it is a verb, can be used as a noun to denote the object giving out the certain sound. The words "cracker" and "splashier" can be regarded as examples of this kind.

Thirdly, an onomatopoeic word is also designed to show the result of making sound or the place where sound is made. For instance, "bubble" as a noun now means the result of bubbling; "dump" as a noun now indicates the place where rubbish is thrown out.

Fourthly, an onomatopoeic word sometimes assumes a metaphorical character. For example, "crash" now has a meaning of failure; "crack" refers to a defect and sometimes a mental or physical breakdown, which are both extension of the original meaning (Li, 2000).

From an analysis of word origin along these lines, learners can easily grasp the key point of a word; thus it takes them less time to expand their vocabulary. However, there are still a lot of other kinds of word origin involved in the development of onomatopoeic words, which this paper does not include.

WORD FORMATION

Another kind of word origins is called morphological origin, where a direct connection can be observed between the morphemic structure of a word and its

meaning (Zhang, 1986). Both English learners and teachers should attach importance to word formation for it can help to double or redouble vocabulary with half or even less effort. When morphological origin is used to help expand vocabulary, derivatives and compound words should be given special attention.

A derivative is created by adding a prefix, or suffix, or both, to the base (Zhang, 1986). An affix may have a certain feature called *polysemy*, which means the same affix does not have the exactly same meaning (Huang 2001). For example, the Latin prefix "sub-" has different meanings in "submarine" and "suborn". The former one means "under, beneath", while the latter one is extended with a metaphorical character meaning "secretly". There are also examples of two or more different affixes having the same meaning, which can be shown in the suffixes "-er" and "-or" in words "teacher" and "visitor". Both suffixes indicate the person who does a certain thing.

When using morphological origin to help expand vocabulary, learners need to identify pseudo-prefixed words and pseudo-suffixed words. Some words may happen to contain letters that seem to be an affix, while in fact, they have no relation to the usual meaning of that particular affix. The letters "-er" in "daughter" and the letters "re-" in "result", for instance, are not suffixes or prefixes (Huang, 2001).

Compound words are easier to identify and their origin is very clear. Two words, for example, "girl" and "friend" being combined together, form a new word that is semantically transparent. However, there are also quite a few compound words which are semantically opaque or difficult to

understand. A word such as “eggplant”, for instance, seems to have no relationship to what it denotes. However, it still has its origin: the shape of an *aubergine* is like an egg, so “eggplant” is used to denote *aubergine* (Huang, 2001).

As an English learner, when coming across a new word which may be a derivative or a compound word, or neither of the two kinds, one should not take the words at their face value. Adequate understanding of a word is a presupposition of using word origin to grasp it.

Many students of English are quite familiar with the traditional methods of word formation, however, nowadays, with the development of modern English, some new methods of word formation have emerged and they play an increasingly more important role in the development of English. The first one is analogy, which uses the root of an original word to create a new word that relates to the original one in meaning. For example, “heliport”, which means a certain area for helicopters to land, derives from “airport”. “Cold line” is created from “hot line”, which was a popular expression during the Cold War.

Another important method of word formation is aphaeresis, which means getting rid of the first several letters of the original word, usually an unstressed syllable, to create a new one. “Vantage”, coming from “advantage”, is a typical example of this kind. Besides, in order to adapt to a rapidly developing society, people have already simplified a lot of words, usually with two methods: retaining initial letters, and abbreviating. By retaining the initial letters of the phrase “water closet”, people get “WC” instead. When abbreviating the word “university”, people get “Uni(v).” for

short (Hong, 1997).

Briefly, getting to know the new methods of word formation is another effective way to expand vocabulary, especially when learners try to learn English through newspapers, magazines, the Internet and other media where new words frequently appear.

CULTURAL AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Quite a lot of new words and expressions came into English from cultural and historical backgrounds. Knowing the related culture and history, learners will not only find it easy to grasp the word, but also to gain interest in the process of learning.

In modern American English, there are many popular words with “Mc-” as their initial letters. “Mc-” appeared in names of ancient times, originating in Scotland and Ireland. Since the two peoples were famous for their diligence, thrift and stinginess at that time, the compound word with “Mc-” means something that is economical, or something that can save money. In early times, it was only used as a name of a trading company to attract customers.

However, since the birth of McDonald’s and the popularity of hamburgers, “Mc-” has become active in making new words. Most of the new words are closely related to McDonald’s, so the typical meaning of “Mc-” is efficiency and convenience. “McAmerica” is to suggest that America is a country that pays great attention to efficiency. In recent years, people have said they do not like McDonald’s any more and they call it “junk food” as the food is mass-produced without any speciality. As a result, “Mc-” now is used to denote something that is mass produced for general consumption and

thus appealing to the lowest common denominator of the masses, such as "McNews", "McCinema", "McMovie" (Zou 1996).

After Watergate in 1972, a new suffix "-gate" emerged to denote any scandal. Former U.S. President Bill Clinton's scandal was called "Monicagate", "Lewinskygate", "Internagate", and so on (Zhou 2001). Many words have changed their meanings with the passing of time and the effect of cross-cultural communication and social movements. This kind of word origin is widely used in the development of Modern English. More than 100 years ago, the word "Black" was humiliating. However, in later years, Black people used "Black Power" to struggle for their rights and now "Black" is a very honorable term (Wang and Li, 1983).

As a result of cross-cultural communication, quite a few words were borrowed from China. The words of this origin are much easier for learners whose mother tongue is Chinese. Some of them are transliterated; others are free translation. For example, the word of "Pipa", a Chinese traditional musical instrument, "weichi", a Chinese traditional chess, and "typhoon (台风)", just sound like Chinese.

After the Revolution of 1911, especially after the P.R.C. was founded, many new words from China came into English with free translation such as "paper tiger" and "special economic zone" (Tao and Gu, 2001). An introduction to the cultural and historical background of words can open up new horizons for the learners and it may seem an enjoyable way for them to grasp the English words.

COGNITIVE LINGUISTICS

Liang (2002) confirms that cognitive linguistics is a recently developed branch of linguistics, contributes to vocabulary teaching by laying special emphasis upon semantic development. It is based on experientialism, holding a view that meaning has an indissoluble bond with cognitive experience.

According to this point of view, semantic evolution is concerned with vocabulary acquisition. Many words, especially words denoting the position of body parts, have been greatly extended into a large range of meanings based on human cognition. The word "head" initially denoted a certain part of the human body. Then it evolved to denote an animal's head such as "head of a tiger". That was not the end, for "head" in "head of a river" has been developed to indicate a spatial relationship. The word "head" has also been used as an abstract noun denoting "a leader" such as "head of state" (Liang 2002). This kind of semantic evolution is not difficult to grasp, and sometimes it is interesting to discover the evolution. In this way, vocabulary learning can be more effective.

CONCLUSION

New things and new thoughts are developing day by day, which is a basic reason for the emergence of new words. Not one of these new words has been formed randomly. Most of them find their origin from old words (Ge, 1981). This paper has only discussed a small part of word origin and how understanding the origin of words can help students expand their vocabulary. Teaching or learning word origin is really an effective way to promote efficiency in vocabulary expansion.

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