



Effect of Symbolism of English Letters on Vocabulary Learning

Yongjing Cao

School of Foreign Language, Qingdao University of Science and Technology

PO box 703, Songling Road 69, Qingdao 266061, China

E-mail: QUSTCYJ@163.com

Suzhen Ren

School of Foreign Language, Qingdao University of Science and Technology

PO box 703, Songling Road 69, Qingdao 266061, China

Abstract

Symbolism refers to the form function of each English letter, which symbolizes certain concrete or abstract things. Such symbolic meaning closely links the form and the meaning. It will get twice the result with half effect by adopting this symbolic meaning into vocabulary learning.

Keywords: Word form, Meaning, Symbolism, Prefix, Brainstorm

1. Introduction

For a long time, English letters are considered as phonetic writing, which can only express sound, rather than meaning. The representative supporter of the view is Saussure, who puts forward the “arbitrariness” of linguistic sign as the fundamental principle of structuralism. From the perspective of psychology, he considers the signifier and signified as two psychological entities and defines “arbitrariness” as “The link unifying signifier and signified is arbitrary or, even more, since we understand by the sign the total result of the association of a signifier with a signified, we can say more simply: the linguistic sign is arbitrary” (Saussure, 1959, pp.100).

There is no inter-relationship between signifier and signified via the above definition. However, some philosophers, semioticians and linguists have different views (Noth, 1990; Ogden & Richards, 1923; Benveniste, 1939; Levi-Strauss, 1991; Halliday, 1985; Guozhang Xu, 1991). They revise or deny the arbitrariness from the perspective of cognitive semiotics, structuralistic semiotics, functional linguistics and linguistic philosophy. In my opinion, there does exist certain relation between signifier and signified especially between the form and meaning of English letters. Implicit symbolic meaning links them in certain degree. Although debate on whether the linguistic sign is arbitrary or not is still lasting, the existence and exploitation of the symbolic meaning will facilitate language learning, especially vocabulary learning.

2. Interpretation of the symbolism of English letters

We have noticed that many English words in similar or related meaning also have similarities in letters. For example: i.sled, sleigh, slide, slip, slick, sleek, slide; ii.flare, flame, flint, flicker, flash, fleeting, florescent. In group i, these words with *sl-* have the meaning of slide; in group ii, the words with *fl-* have the meaning of light. There are many other letter combinations with such characteristic. We can interpret why words with *sl-* have the meaning of slide with etymology. *S* symbolizes snake for its twisted form as a snake, while *l* symbolizes the land. In group ii, the primitive symbolism of *f* is the torch and *l* is the stick. The torch will give out light and thus *fl-* gets the meaning of light and fire.

In fact, the basic cause for such phenomenon lies in that every English letter symbolizes certain concrete objects at the initial stage of its formation. Almost every letter can be connected with certain objects which bears the similar shape with the letter itself. *W* symbolizes wave just like what our sensory organs receive. So, many English words with the symbolic meaning of *w* can be found: water, wave, wake, and wallow (a ship moves through a rough sea), wash, well, wet, whirlpool etc.

Words of every language in the world evolve from the archaic picture writing without exception. After a long time of evolution and recreation of different ethnic groups, picture writings themselves finally become modern English letters. Certain traces of its primitively-symbolized objects can still be found in each letter.

It is not a purely speculative exercise for linguists to consider such form function of every English letter. The revealing of the relationship between the form and meaning of English letters can help English learners to remember vocabulary

quickly and effectively.

3. Practical significance for vocabulary learning

Symbolism and the form function of each English letter can be helpful for English learners in vocabulary learning and can be applied to two aspects: prefixes and brainstorm.

3.1 Application to learning prefixes

Vocabulary items, whether single-word or complex-word, can often be disrated into their component 'bits'. These 'bits' can also help learners guess the meanings of other words with the same bits in them. Affixes are crucial elements of 'bits'. Prefixes, as one form of affixes, are fundamental and can help learners get twice the result with half the effort in vocabulary learning.

Almost every English letter can form certain prefixes with other letters. For example, *a-*. The letter *a* gets the meaning of in, to, at, or on something, for it symbolized the 'head' primitively. The head is at the top of our body. It faces the direction to which our body faces. Thus by understanding its symbolism, learners could remember many words containing this prefix such as abroad (in or to a foreign country). Broad means wide or large area. Plus the prefix *a-*, the word abroad means towards the wide area. More such formations are: afield(far away from home); ahead(in front of someone or something by a short distant); ago(far back in the past happened); aloft(high up in the air); along(forward); ashore(on or toward the shore of a lake, river); away(to or at a distance from someone or something). The formation of the above words consists of the prefix *a-* and the nouns referring to the place or direction, which refers to the meaning of towards this place or direction. Knowing the symbolism of *a-*, learners can infer the meaning of many other resembling words. For example, aback can be regarded as formation of *a-* and back and understood as towards one's back according to the symbolism and form function of the prefix *a-*.

Another example: *un-*. Prefix *un-* shows a negative, a lack or an opposite because *u* symbolizes mountain valley while *n* indicates the shape of cave. They are from totally opposite direction. Correspondingly, the formation *un-* has the meaning of negation or opposition.

The meaning of prefixes can be suggested by symbolisms which are traced to a concrete object. The comparison between the letter and the concrete object would be quite vivid and facilitate the mastery of vocabulary.

3.2 Application to Brainstorming

Originally, each English letter only symbolizes one or two concrete objects attribute to the primitives' lower ability of understanding the world. However, with the developing of cognitive abilities, people are more capable of knowing the objective world. Therefore, one letter can symbolize more concrete objects, or even some abstract concepts. Many superficially unrelated words can be induced to the same symbol. This property of the symbolism of English letters can be applied to brainstorming for remembering words more efficiently. The symbolic meaning and its extended meaning of letter *c* can illustrate the statement.

The narrow symbolism of *c* is the moon, and two words closely related with the moon are: crescent (the curved shape of the moon) and calendar (the system for determining the beginning, length, and division of years). For the shape's sake, *c* curves like a new moon very much. In addition, the regular changes of the moon are the basis for ancient people to determine months and years.

Several other broad symbolisms in terms of the shape of *c* (or the moon) can be deduced, which can be used as a model for brainstorms.

3.2.1 *C* with the broad symbolism of the hand

Letter *c* with the curved shape symbolizes a curved hand holding something. According to this broad symbolic meaning, many words with *c* as initial letter representing some actions done by hands. For example: carve(to cut with knife); claw(the part of the body of some insects used for attacking and holding things); clutch(to hold something or someone tightly); crack(to break or make something break); craft(to make something using a special skill, especially with your hands); cut(to divide something using a sharp tool such as a knife).

3.2.2 *C* with the broad symbolism of the circle

The shape of letter *c* is just like a half circle, and its narrow symbolism moon can also represents a circle. Whether from the broad or narrow symbolism of *c*, it suggests the meaning of a circle. Then another group of words which have implied meaning of round can be found: circle; column; coin; cirlet(a narrow band of gold, silver, or jewels worn around someone's head or arms); circuit(a path that forms a circle around an area).

3.2.3 *C* with the broad symbolism of the cave

From visual perspective, letter *c* is also like a cave where people or things can live in or be put into. A group of words meaning a container or a place to live in can illustrate this symbolic meaning. For example, cabin(a small house built of wood in the forests or mountains); camp(a place where people stay in temporary shelters);case(a large box or container) castle; cavern; cavity(a hole, or space inside something).

The three above-mentioned groups of words are categorized on the basis of the concrete objects—hands, circles and caves. The extended and abstract symbolism of letter c can be further extended, namely outer covering, or encircle. Words with this implied meaning include carapace(a hard shell on the outside of some animals that protects them); carpet(heavy woven material for covering floors or stairs, or a piece of this material); casing(an outer layer of metal, rubber etc that covers and protects something such as a wine or tyre); crust(a thin hard dry layer on the surface of something); cover (something that is put over or onto something to protect is or keep dirt etc. out) and so on; We can still get the extended meaning of huddle or wrinkle from the symbolism of outer covering or encircle, such as cringe(to move back or away from something or someone); crouch (to beak apart into little pieces); crumple(to crush something so that it becomes smaller and bent); crush (to press something so hard that it breaks or is damaged); crimple(to press something); crinkle(to become covered with small folds).

Through careful analysis of the above mentioned development of symbolism, the developmental procedures can be concluded as: from a few primitive symbolic meaning of concrete objects, extend to several other similar concrete objects, before go to those broad sense groups according to the shapes, properties or usages of those concrete objects. A model of developmental procedures can be illustrated with the following figure of letter c.

From above figure, learners can see clearly which sense is much closer to the primitive symbolism of c, and words in one circle usually are synonymous. While providing synonyms is a common way to present new vocabulary. This vivid symbolism co-operating with form functions of English letters will surely speed up words memorizing.

4. Conclusion

The form of English letter can not only express sound, it can also express meaning. Every letter has its symbolic meaning—either abstract or concrete. In vocabulary learning, vivid images could help learners understand symbolized meaning of prefixes, and furthermore, the association between concrete and abstract meaning will benefit learners in remembering words by brainstorming. It is worthwhile for learners to apply symbolic meaning into vocabulary learning.

References

Della Summers. (1995). *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*. London: Addison Wesley Longman Limited. pp.191-301

Penny Ur. (1996). *A Course in Language Teaching: Practice and Theory*. London: Cambridge University Press. (Chapter 4).

Saussure Ferdinand De. (1959). *Course in General Linguistics*. (Charles Bailey & Alvert Sechehaye eds, Wode baskin trans.) Philosophical Library. pp100

Zerun Peng. & Jiabao Li. (2003). *Language Thoery*. Changsha: Zhongnan University Press. 55-58.

Youguang Zhou. (2001). *The Developmental History of the Words*. Shanghai: Shanghai Shiji Press. 69-93.

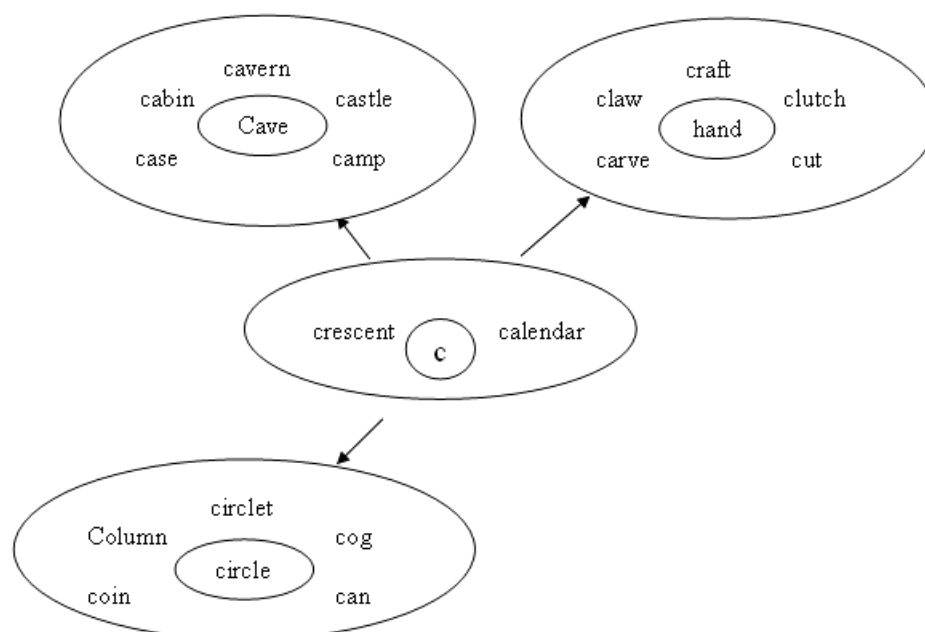


Figure 1. The Brainstorming of Letter c. (For the space sake, this figure will not include other two branches.)