

## THE CONCEPT OF SEMANTIC FIELD AND ITS DEVELOPMENT IN MODERN LINGUISTICS

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**Annotation:** *This paper explores the application of the semantic field theory in English vocabulary learning. It first investigates classifications of various semantic relations, including hyponym, antonymy, synonymy, etc. Then it illustrates with abundant examples how to employ each sense relation in learning vocabulary with the application of the semantic field theory. The study is of non-neglectable significance in that it helps to enlarge learners' vocabulary by constructing sense relations of new words and to help learners' mastery of vocabulary, so that they can learn English vocabulary more efficiently and systematically.*

**Keywords:** *semantic field theory, hyponymy, antonymy, synonymy, English vocabulary learning*

### INTRODUCTION

Without doubt, English language plays a very important role in almost every field of modern world. It is a vital tool in communication. In the long history of English language, it has developed its individual uniqueness and has been widely used in most nations. Thus, it has become a true global language.

### MATERIALS AND METHODS

It is well known that vocabulary is of vital importance in language study because it is the essence of a language. Linguist D. A. Wilkins has the famous line "Without grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed. (p.111)" Truly, without vocabulary, there will be no sentence, no text and no language<sup>30</sup>. Vocabulary is central to language and of crucial importance to the common language learner. The prominent role of vocabulary mastery in foreign language learning has been widely accepted and increasingly recognized. If we compare English to a giant architecture, then the bricks and concrete that made up the building will be English vocabulary. Obviously it is a common sense to us that the more concrete and bricks we use, the more stout and durable the architecture will be. Hence, if we have a great mastery of English vocabulary, we can surely win the first campaign of conquering English.

Basically, the history of English language can be divided into three periods: Old English, Middle English and Modern English. Through its development, English has gathered a considerable glossary which contains over a million words. However, most of these words are not widely used; many of them are even forgotten or solely banished. The

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<sup>30</sup> Wilkins, D. A. (2012). *Linguistics in Language Teaching*. London: Edward Arnold.

English vocabulary that can be used in daily life is about twenty thousand, which to most English learners is still a large number to remember. In order to learn English more efficiently and gain a vocabulary that can meet the needs of normal communication, we should adopt an effective way to remember English words. Semantic field theory plays a surprisingly big part in learning English vocabulary effectively and systematically<sup>31</sup>.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In recent years, more and more linguistic researchers start to pay close attention to the importance of semantic field theory for developing the language abilities and efficiency. Students find it difficult to remember all the English words at the same time because some words look very alike, such as *considerate* and *considerable*, *temptation* and *temporary*, *geology* and *geometry*, etc. Since semantic field theory studies the relationship between a series of words in a certain group, appropriate use of semantic field theory will make English vocabulary learning much easier.

Before componential analysis emerged as a first concrete approach to describe word meaning, linguists distinguished and analyzed “semantic fields”, that is, groups of words of which meanings are closely interrelated. Originally, “field” is a concept applied in physics which describes the layout condition of a certain object, such as electric field, magnetic field and gravitational field, which separately shows the layout principles of electricity, magnetism and gravity in a certain space. This concept was later applied into linguistics to describe the inter-relationship between different words. Gradually, it turned into a new linguistic approach called semantic field theory.

The study of semantic field theory is traced back to the very first idea of the founder of common linguistics, known as the famous German linguist from the middle of 19<sup>th</sup> century, W. Humboldt. However, linguists who proposed the idea of semantic field theory on a real sense were some German and Swiss structuralism linguists from 1930s, such as Ipsen, Jolls, Porzig and J. Trier. Among all these brilliant linguists, J. Trier’s idea is accepted most widely<sup>32</sup>.

What is semantic field theory exactly? The core of semantic field theory is to analyze the relationship between genus and species of lexical study. (Mei, 1987) It suggests that the words of a language system are related with each other and they form a complete lexical system. In this system, certain words could form a semantic field under a common concept. For example, under the concept of *stationery*, *pen*, *eraser*, *pencil*, *ruler* and etc. could form a semantic field. In this semantic field, *stationery* represents the genus, or in other words, general concept; *pen*, *eraser*, *pencil*, and *ruler* represent species, or specific concept. In short, semantic field is a combination of a group of words that interact, dominate, distinguish and depend on with each other. The semantic range of the combination is called the field range of the semantic field.

<sup>31</sup> Lewis, M. (2013). *The Lexical Approach*. London: Language Teaching Publications.

<sup>32</sup> Martin, J. (2012). *The Five Clocks*. Bloomington: Indiana University Research Center in Anthropology, Folklore and Nation, P. (2011). *Learning Vocabulary in Another Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Semantic field can be also called lexical field or domain, which refers to the combination of a bunch of words with interrelated meanings and dominated under a same concept. (Zhou, 2001) It has two folds of meanings. Some words, from a language, which were dominated under one certain concept, combined together and formed a semantic field. This certain concept may be represented by a superordinate, while the semantic field is formed from either hyponyms or semantic features. For example, under the common concept of *furniture*, words like *table, closet, bed, bookshelf, couch, sofa, chairs*, etc., could be gathered as a semantic field. Another example, *burgundy, purple, pink, green, yellow, blue, orange, white* and *black*, these words go to a common concept of *color*. On the other hand, words that belong to the same semantic field are not only semantically related, but also interact with each other. That is to say, when checking the meaning of a word, the first step is to compare the semantic meaning of the other words under the same semantic field. Take the antonymous semantic field formed by the word “*fast*” and *slow/sober/loose/disloyal/faded/slowly/eat* as an example, before determining the meaning of the word “*fast*”, we will have to figure out the antonymous relations between *fast* and other words. For instance, *fast* means *quick* against *slow*, while it means *fadeless* against *faded*<sup>33</sup>.

The semantic field theory was brought into its puberty by German scholar J. Trier in the 1930s, whose version is seen as a new phase in the history of semantics. Wu (1988, p.94-95) summarized Trier’s semantic field theory as follows:

① The vocabulary in a language system is semantically related and builds up a complete lexical system. This system is unsteady and changing constantly. ② Since the vocabulary of a language is semantically related, we are not supposed to study the semantic change of individual words in isolation, but to study vocabulary as an integrated system. ③ Since lexemes are interrelated in sense, we can only determine the connotation of a word by analyzing and comparing its semantic relationship with other words. A word is meaningful only in its own semantic field.

Trier’s semantic field is generally considered paradigmatic. It deals with paradigmatic relations between words such as hyponymy, synonymy and antonymy. (Guo, p.51) This study follows this classification.

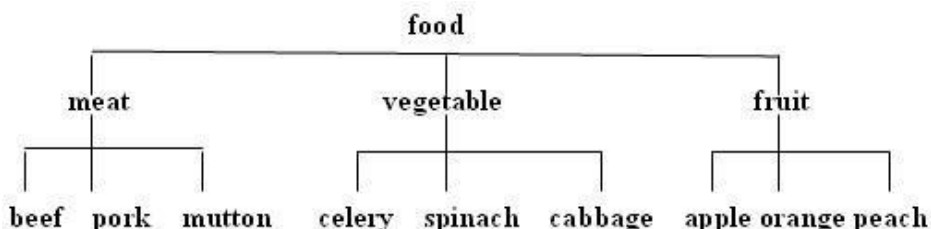
• *Hyponymy*

Hyponymy is the most common branch of semantic field theory. It contains all objects that belong to the same category. The most fundamental category is dualistic, for example, *paddy field* and *upland field*, *autorotation* and *revolution*, etc. Another category is diversified, for example, *navy, marine, air force*, etc. Hyponymy can be multileveled, which means the basic level could be divided into more specific levels, and even more specific ones. For instance, we could divide *animals* into *human being* and *birds* and *beasts*, yet *birds* and *beasts* could be further divided into *birds, fishes, insects* and *mammals*, etc.

<sup>33</sup> 2014. An Introduction to Modern English Lexicology. Beijing: Beijing Normal University Press.

Hyponymy is featured as being relative. The relativity of this semantic field has two-fold meanings. On the one hand, it means that the superordinate-hyponym relations are not relative instead of absolute or unchanged. Take an example as the Graph 2-1-1 shows below:

Graph 2-1-1



As the graph listed above, to *food*, *meat* is a hyponym and it locates at a lower level; while to *beef*, *pork* and *mutton*, *meat* is a superordinate and locates at a higher level. The same way works with *vegetable*, it is a superordinate towards *celery*, *spinach* and *cabbage*, yet it is a hyponym towards *vegetable*. On the other hand, when a semantic field was applied to describe different objects, the consulting standards are different and relative. For example, among the semantic field of *big* and *small*, the size is relative because sometimes the small ones are bigger than the big ones. For example, a small elephant is much bigger than a big mouse, and a small dog is bigger than a big butterfly.

- *Antonymy*

Antonymy is another branch of semantic field which is formed by words with the same roots and range.

- *Synonymy*

Synonymy refers to the semantic fields which are formed by the words with relatively same meanings so that they could be inter-changed in some degree yet irreplaceable in most cases. Synonymy could be further classified into absolute synonymy and relative synonymy. Absolute synonymy is relatively rare, and it mainly indicates the word groups with absolute same meaning and could be replaced with each other in any contexts. For instance, *mother tongue* and *native language*, *malnutrition* and *undernourishment*, *breathed consonant* and *voiceless consonant*, etc.

### CONCLUSION

Vocabulary is one of the important elements in a language. English language is no exception. The efficiency of vocabulary learning greatly determines the success of language learning. English words are over a million in number and they constitute the core of language learning. The size of one's vocabulary directly affects the development of his/her linguistic competence. Therefore, the first task of vocabulary instruction is to enlarge learners' vocabulary. (Guo, 2010) Thus lots of vocabulary learning strategies have been recommended. However, the most systematic and scientific strategy should be the one based on semantic field theory.

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