

A Study of Word Meaning Acquisition of Polysemous Words for English Majors

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Abstract

This study investigates the word meaning acquisition of polysemous words for English majors by the way of questionnaire and two word meaning tests. The conclusions are drawn as follows: providing primary meaning to students can help them guess the extended meaning of unfamiliar polysemous words than providing the other extended meanings; the English majors at different language proficiency level show similar acquisition effects in primary meaning but different acquisition effects in the extended meanings. Therefore, in vocabulary instruction, if the word meaning acquisition sequence can be followed and the connections of word meanings can be cherished, the word meaning instruction outcome will be more efficient.

Keywords

Word Meaning Acquisition, Polysemous Words, English Majors

1. Introduction

The meaning of language is the center of human communication, and the study of it has a long history in the philosophy of language, linguistics, psychology, and literature. Polysemy is an ordinary linguistic phenomenon, which is the result of word meanings extension (Cuyckens, 1997). With the development of the society, old words die out, new words are added, and existing words change their meanings. Actually, adding new meanings to the already-existing words is the most economical way to satisfy people's needs of expression, which is simpler and more convenient than creating new words or borrowing words from other languages. With the passage of time, the primary meaning and extended meanings coexist in the language.

To study polysemous words, it is very necessary to know the relation between the primary meaning and extended meanings, how the extended meanings derive from the primary meaning and what the core meaning is.

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As to primary meaning, Hatch & Brown (2001) claim that primary meanings are those which are most central for a set of polysemes (words with the same form but slightly different meanings). For example, the primary meaning of “break” is that of breaking an object such as a cup, not the breaking of waves on the shore. Durkin & Manning (1989) use the dominant meaning instead of the primary meaning. They think that the dominant meaning of a polysemous word is taken to be that comes most readily to mind for a majority of native speakers when the word is resented without biasing context.

Word meaning is prevalent in language. It is one of the most difficult parts in vocabulary learning, especially for the English learners (Zhou, 2003). According to the statistics, in English, over 40% of words have more than one meaning (McCarthy, 1997; Durkin & Manning, 1989). For example, if English majors look up a word in a dictionary, they usually don’t know which meaning is the appropriate one. In reading, the English majors who are familiar with one of the meanings of the word do not abandon the meaning even though it does not make any meaning in the context (Laufer, 1996). With regard to meaning discrimination, words with multiple meanings induced the largest number of errors in comprehension of words and learners performed far more badly on guessing the meanings of the words than on guessing the meanings of other words. In addition, even the advanced learners seldom knew all the meanings of a polysemous word and that learning them was a slow and patchy process (Hulstijn, 1998, 2001).

Since the late 1980s, researchers have begun to show great interest in lexical acquisition. A variety of theoretical and empirical studies have been conducted, for example, the investigation of the effects of learning strategies on lexical acquisition, the study on the relationship between active vocabulary and passive vocabulary, and the research into the relationship between the breadth and depth of the vocabulary knowledge in reading.

However, over the past few decades, the studies of vocabulary acquisition mainly focused on measuring the volume of vocabulary, vocabulary learning strategies as well as the relationship between vocabulary learning strategies and language proficiency (Durkin & Manning, 1989). Little empirical work has been undertaken toward characterizing the properties of word meanings and gauging language users’ perceptions of the relative status of the different word meanings. In an experimental study of polysemous words in Dutch students, providing students with core meaning resulted in better guessing and long-term retention of figurative meanings of polysemous words (Verspoor & Lowie, 2001). In China, there are a few studies of word meaning acquisition but these studies are mostly descriptive and the experimental studies into the acquisition of certain word meaning by non-English majors. Therefore, it is necessary to explore the meanings acquisition of polysemous words for English majors in China.

The study aims to explore the acquisition of word meanings for English majors in the following three aspects: 1) Whether the English majors at same language proficiency provided with a primary meaning gain better guessing of extended meanings of words than those provided with other extended meanings? 2) Whether the English majors have significant difference in primary meaning of a word? 3) Whether the English majors have significant difference in direct meaning of a word? The study explores the acquisition of word meanings for English majors in China and may add something to previous researches and some implications to language teaching, textbooks writing and dictionary compiling.

2. Research Methodology

2.1. Participants

The participants for this study were 40 full-time registered third-year undergraduate English majors having passed TEM-4, 40 full-time registered postgraduate English majors having passed TEM-8. The reasons for choosing the above English majors of different language proficiency is the fact that they had received enough amount of English training so that they were competent to notice the problem of various word meanings. As English majors, they need to enlarge their vocabulary enormously and efficiently, especially word meaning.

2.2. Instruments

A number of field procedures have been used for collecting information for language learning research, such as questionnaires, interviews, tests and observations. Guided by the theoretical consideration of fieldwork methodology, the instruments used in this study are the questionnaire for the English majors and the two word meaning tests. The tests can also be used to help place students in the proper class level (placement test). Word

meaning test is believed to be a useful element in a well-run language teaching program, providing teacher and learner with useful information that can serve each as a basis for improvement.

2.2.1. The English Majors' Questionnaire

At the beginning of the class, a brief introduction about the questionnaire was made, including the purpose, the content and the time arrangement as well as some related requirements. Particularly, it was stressed that the results of the students' questionnaire would be only used for the research and had no connection with their academic performance. In this way, the students felt relaxed about this study and the questionnaire papers were collected within 20 minutes.

The questionnaire mainly concerned about the three aspects: the present situation of polysemy acquisition, especially word meanings in English classes (Questions 1 - 6), the situation of word meaning acquisition after class (Questions 7 - 10) and their attitudes and suggestions toward word meaning acquisition (Questions 11 - 16).

2.2.2. The Two Word Meanings Tests

The first test, word meaning inference, was to infer the contextual meanings of the target words based on the input information in the sentences in which the target words were embedded. Different groups of the participants performed this task under different experimental conditions. During the guessing, the students in each condition have to guess the meanings of the 10 target words. The participants were provided with worksheets containing 10 pairs of sentences and they were instructed to guess and give a precise Chinese translation of extended meanings of 10 underlined polysemous English words in the sentences. The sentences containing the word to be guessed were identical for the two groups, but the cue sentences were different. Primary meaning-cued group was given a sentence with a primary meaning of the word and its literal translation into Chinese as cue while non-primary meaning group was given a sentence with another extended meaning of the word and its Chinese equivalent as cue. For example, for the primary meaning-cued group, the study provided them with the following sentences:

1) Down by the river, an owl bannowed among the trees.

2) The driver bannowed at the dog in the road.

But for the non-primary meaning cued group, we provided them with the following sentences:

3) The crowd bannowed and jeered at the speaker.

4) The driver bannowed at the dog in the road.

The second sentences for both groups were identical, and the only difference existed in the cue sentences, one with a primary meaning and the other with an extended meaning. The English majors were asked to give a precise Chinese translation to the underlined words in the second sentences. They were encouraged to give their answers as accurately as possible.

The choice of testing words in the test one was made on the basis of two criteria. First, each of the polysemous words has at least three different meanings, a primary meaning, an extended meaning, and another extended meaning. Second, these polysemous words are unknown to all the participants. The words were chosen by the author's reference to Collins COBUILD English Dictionary and Oxford English Dictionary. All the words were presented to participants in a sentence context. Some of the sentences including the target words were selected from the dictionaries and some of them made up by the author. Although a text context should be preferred to a sentence context in teaching situation, a sentence context was used in the experiment to control for any extra elaboration opportunities a text context would provide. All the 10 words chosen were low frequency words (i.e., the frequency of encountering is very low during their normal readings), which ensured that the words to be tested were unknown to students so that their guessing ability of these words could be tested.

To ensure that the students were not familiar with the experimental words, all the words were identified by the teachers at the two classes from which participants were taken and the teachers were asked to check whether any of the testing words had been taught or whether they were considered familiar to the students. And then a pilot test with 10 items was carried out with a different group of 34 participants who were not included in the subjects. The result of pilot testing was that all the words were little known by them. Then the following testing could be conducted.

After the tests, SPSS Statistic Software (17.0) was used to compute descriptive statistics of the test scores. Paired sample t-test was carried out to see whether there was a significant difference between two groups of students in the guessing word meaning.

The second word meaning test was to test the word meanings in the contexts. The test includes 20 sentences containing four common words—"print", "head", "high" and "like" and requires the English majors to write down the exact meaning of the word in each sentence. For example, what is the Chinese meaning of the word "high" used in the following five sentences?

- 1) The building is very high. _____
- 2) He is a high official in the government. _____.
- 3) It was high summer at that moment. _____
- 4) Washington is a man of high character. _____.
- 5) The beef is a bit high. _____

In the sentence 1), the meaning of "high" is "having a top that is some distance above the ground. It is the primary meaning and the English majors may have no difficulty in understanding. However, in sentence 5), the meaning of "high" is "not fresh, spoilt by age". It is the indirect extended meaning and the English majors may have great difficulty in understanding.

After the collection of the data, the data elicited from questionnaires and the test score were input into the computer. Both quantitative and qualitative analysis were adopted in this study. The quantitative analysis was conducted with the help of SPSS 17.0 as in pilot study. For the data elicited from the questionnaire, descriptive analysis was also done first to find out the general tendency of the subjects' positions on the 20 statements, which includes the means and S.D. A detailed qualitative analysis was conducted afterwards to investigate the present situation of vocabulary instruction and word meaning acquisition in English classes and the English majors' self-assessment of their awareness in word meaning acquisition. As to the answers to the open-ended questions intended to get some advice or suggestions from the students on the awareness strengthening and word meaning acquisition, they were grouped and summarized carefully.

3. Data Analysis and Discussion

According to the statistics of the questionnaire, it can be summarized into the following aspects. As the students do not have much semantic knowledge, it will impede them from understanding some word meaning correctly. Word meaning involves in a complicated connection.

Consequently, it is a heavy task for students to acquire. The contexts vary all the time, so does the word meaning. They lack guidance to learn word meaning by themselves, and moreover, the teachers do not give an accurate and systematic introduction in this respect. Since the students are non-native speakers of English, rote learning has low efficiency.

For the data elicited from the word meaning tests, descriptive analysis was done first to find the general situation of the subjects' answering to the word meaning test items, which means the mean score, Standard deviation (S.D.), the maximum and minimum score of the test papers were presented. Afterwards, the word meaning test items themselves were carefully analyzed and a detailed qualitative analysis was conducted to each test item too.

From **Table 1**, S.D = 0.50, $t = 0.374$, $P = 0.182 > 0.05$, it shows that the two groups of English majors (undergraduates and postgraduates have no significant difference in terms of word primary meaning test (scores in the word meaning test one) under different cues.

From **Table 2**, S.D. = 0.43, $t = -1.19$, $P = 0.021 < 0.05$, it shows that the two groups of English majors (undergraduates and postgraduates have significant difference in terms of word derived meaning.

From **Table 3**, $t = -2.132$, $df = 39$, $P = 0.039 < 0.05$, it shows that the undergraduates of English major have significant difference in terms of word derived test (scores in the word meaning test two).

From **Table 4**, $t = -3.422$, $df = 39$, $P = 0.001 < 0.05$, it shows that the postgraduates of English majors have significant difference in terms of word derived test (scores in the word meaning test two).

We get the answers to the questions: First, primary meaning cues can enhance word meaning guessing. Primary meaning cues provide adequate indications for the L2 learners to understand the contextual meanings of polysemous words. Second, the English majors at different language proficiency show no statistically significant difference in primary meaning and direct extended meaning. Third, the English majors at different levels have significant difference in terms of indirect extended meaning.

Table 1. Independent sample t-test of undergraduates and postgraduates in word extended meanings.

Word Meaning	Undergraduates (N = 40)		Postgraduates (N = 40)		t	P
	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.		
Guessing	2.21	0.42	2.19	0.50	0.374	0.182

Table 2. Independent sample t-test of undergraduates and postgraduates in word extended meanings.

Word Meaning	Undergraduates (N = 40)		Postgraduates (N = 40)		t	P
	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.		
Writing	2.24	0.43	2.35	0.48	-1.19	0.021

Table 3. Paired sample t-test statistics of two word meaning tests of undergraduates and postgraduates.

	Paired Difference				t	df	Sig (2-tailed)	
	Mean	Std Deviation	Std Error Mean	95% confidence Interval of the Difference				
				Lower				Upper
Pair U1-U2	-3.23	9.56888	1.513	-6.285	-0.165	-2.132	39	0.039

Table 4. Paired sample t-test statistics of two word meaning tests of postgraduates.

	Paired Difference				t	df	Sig (2-tailed)	
	Mean	Std Deviation	Std Error Mean	95% confidence Interval of the Difference				
				Lower				Upper
Pair P1-P2	-5.63	10.39647	1.644	-8.950	-2.30	-3.422	39	0.001

4. Conclusion

There were a number of potentially important findings from the experiment presented here. This study revealed three associated findings: first, the subjects receiving primary-meaning-cued sentences, in contrast to non-primary meaning-cued sentences, scored significantly higher in inferring the meanings of unfamiliar polysemous words in context. The presence of cues means “bridging information” grammatical and/or semantic, conceptual as well as perceptual. Without adequate bridging information, it would seem next to impossible to infer and recall the contextual meaning of any unfamiliar word. In the present experiment, primary meaning cues provided the subjects with relatively adequate, so that the meanings of the target words could be easily figured out. In contrast, it was difficult for the subjects receiving non-primary meaning cues to unfamiliar polysemous word while the “bridging information” was too abstract. Second, for the primary meaning and direct meaning of common words, all the subjects of different language proficiency have acquired, which means there is no significant hierarchies between the English majors. However, for indirect meaning of a common word, the scores of postgraduate English majors’ are higher than undergraduate English majors’ which indicates the significant hierarchies between the English majors in the aspect.

Although this study was designed carefully, there were still some limitations; conclusions from the present research must be drawn in view of the fact that this study was not free of limitations.

Firstly, although the method of random sampling was used, the present research was not based on a truly random sampling procedure to some extent. The subjects investigated, instead of being completely randomly selected from the English majors, were assumed to be randomly divided in terms of language proficiency.

Secondly, when compared with the large population of ESL learners in China, the 120 participants of English majors in Yangtze University might not present all English learners in China. Conducting the experiment in some more universities and comparing the findings with those, the present study may be a solution to our problem, but it may be a task in terms of scale and complexity.

Thirdly, the words in this experiment are limited to the polysemous words with primary meaning that is concrete and can easily be visualized, which can help students create semantic association and precise elaboration.

Considering the experimental results, the author proposes that the experimental findings should in principle shed some light upon the word meaning teaching and learning, textbooks writers and dictionary compiling. The most important thing is that it can make students become independent and effective learners who can make decisions about how to memorize several meanings of one word and how to choose the appropriate meaning from more meanings when they look up the dictionaries. Furthermore, the awareness of polysemous words in the contexts could make students utilize a more flexible method to deal with the words encountered in reading and improve their guessing ability because polysemous words could develop their meanings from the primary meaning. The acquisition of different word meanings is a lifelong education process for all the polysemous words learners.

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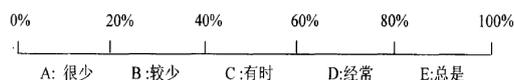
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Appendix I Questionnaire for English Majors (In Chinese)

此问卷参考大连理工大学岳展翼(2005)从文化融入的角度谈第二语言词汇意义习得的调查问卷。

亲爱的同学:

你们好!此问卷的目的是调查英语专业学生词汇意义学习情况。本问卷调查所获得的信息仅供教学研究使用,不涉及你们的任何利益.请根据你的实际情况和体会选择放心回答。谢谢您的合作!



1. 在词汇教学中,教师会涉及到词汇的音、形、义等多个方面,具体涉及到哪些方面呢?(可多选)。
A. 读音和拼写(包括构词) B. 语法形式(词性, 时态等) C. 搭配 D. 意义(本义、引申意义等) E. 其他
2. 在词汇教学中,教师的重点是什么?(选择两项)
A. 读音和拼写(包括构词) B. 语法形式(词性, 时态等) C. 搭配 D. 意义(本义、引申) E. 其他
3. 英语课堂上,教师在教词汇时,把意义作为一个重点
A. 很少 B. 较少 C. 有时 D. 经常 E. 总是
4. 教师不仅在精读课,也在泛读、听力、口语等其他课上进行词汇意义教学
A. 很少 B. 较少 C. 有时 D. 经常 E. 总是
5. 教师善于利用语境知识,引导学生猜测语篇中词汇的引申意义
A. 很少 B. 较少 C. 有时 D. 经常 E. 总是
6. 教师会有意识地指导学生发掘英语词汇各种意义联系,促进词汇意义的学习
A. 很少 B. 较少 C. 有时 D. 经常 E. 总是
7. 你认为您所用教材中的词汇内容设计考虑到了词汇引申意义因素的程度
A. 很少 B. 较少 C. 有时 D. 经常 E. 总是
8. 你认为在英语词汇学习中,最重要的一个方面是
A. 读音和拼写(包括构词) B. 语法形式(词性, 时态等) C. 搭配 D. 意义(本义、引申意义等) E. 其他
9. 你在词汇习得中对词义的习得予以足够的重视。
A. 很少 B. 较少 C. 有时 D. 经常 E. 总是
10. 你平时会自觉的积累词汇意义知识
A. 很少 B. 较少 C. 有时 D. 经常 E. 总是
11. 你学习词汇意义时,常用的方法是
A. 机械重复记忆 B. 联想情景记忆 C. 联系上下文记忆 D. 根据词义联系记忆 E. 其他
12. 你在课堂外主要是通过什么方式增加自己的词汇知识,从而促进词汇意义习得(可以多选)
A. 背诵词汇手册 B. 阅读报刊杂志 C. 查阅字典或者相关资料 D. 上网 G. 其他
13. 在词汇学习中,学习词汇的引申意义时,你会同时注重词汇的基本意义
A. 很少 B. 较少 C. 有时 D. 经常 E. 总是
14. 你对英语词汇意义理论知识了解
A. 很少 B. 较少 C. 一般 D. 较多 E. 很多
15. 你对自己英语词汇意义学习满意度如何
A. 不满意 B. 较满意 C. 一般 D. 满意 E. 非常满意
16. 您希望开设更多与意义相关的课程,在课堂上学到更多词汇的引申意义
A. 很少 B. 较少 C. 有时 D. 经常 E. 总是
17. 你意识到对词词汇意义的学习,对整个英语的学习都有很大的帮助
A. 很少 B. 较少 C. 有时 D. 经常 E. 总是
18. 你会意识到词汇意义的习得除了要靠自身的积累,也要靠教师的引导
A. 很少 B. 较少 C. 有时 D. 经常 E. 总是
19. 你认为词汇意义学习的难点是什么?
20. 促进词汇意义学习提出宝贵的建议是什么

Appendix II English Word Meaning Test One (In Chinese and English)

此词义测试卷参考了陕西师范大学 2005 年硕士论文吴雅萍《中国大学生英语词义习得》和解放军外国语学院 2005 年硕士论文马蕾《不同提示在词义习得中的效果》研究测试卷。

I. Test paper for Group A 1, Group B1 and Group C1 (primary meaning-cued)

下面句子中画线的单词都是多义词。每组第一个句子中的多义词已经给出中文释义，请据此推断出该词在第二个句子中的意思，并把你猜测出的词义用中文尽可能精确地写在句末的横线上。

- 1-a. Down by the river an owl (猫头鹰) bannowed among the trees. (猫头鹰)鸣叫
1-b. The driver bannowed at the dog in the road. _____
- 2-a. One night she took a pillow (枕头) and thiculted him. 使窒息，闷死
2-b. The Mayor thiculted a strike (罢工) successfully. _____
- 3-a. Her mother glitowed her and pointed to the seven helicopters flying overhead. 用肘轻推
3-b. British tour companies are glitowing clients (顾客) to travel further afield (远处). _____
- 4-a. Woogal the soil, press the seed into it, and then cover it lightly. 用耙子耙
4-b. The firm (公司) is very successful—they're woogaling in the money. money. _____
- 5-a. My mother hates perlitting a fish. 取出...的内脏
5-b. Over the weekend, a firebomb (火焰炸弹) perlitted a building where 60 people lived. _____
- 6-a. Wind (转动) it round the screw until the wire is taut. 拉紧的，不松弛的
6-b. Eyes blinking (眨眼), showing no signs of being emotionally taut, her husband looked like an ordinary man defending the ordinary lies he had made up to hide an ordinary affair. _____
- 7-a. Explosions scorch (烧焦) floors and shatter windows. 震碎，粉碎
7-b. The failure in the examination of entering the college shattered all his hopes. _____
- 8-a. They demolished the slum district (贫民窟). 拆除
8-b. We were all marveled her article brilliantly demolished his argument. _____
- 9-a. Blood was still oozing from the wound. 慢慢流出
9-b. The enemy's courage was oozing away under the great pressure of Red Army. _____
- 10-a. The gardener set fire to the piles of weeds he had raked up. 用耙子把某物耙在一起
10-b. Relief foundations (救济基金会) raked in \$13 million last year. _____

II. Test paper for Group A 2, Group B2 and Group C2 (non-primary meaning-cued)

下面句子中画线的单词都是多义词。每组第一个句子中的多义词已经给出中文释义，请据此推断出该词在第二个句子中的意思，并把你猜测出的词义用中文尽可能精确地写在句末的横线上。

- 1-a. The crowd bannowed and jeered (嘲笑) at the speaker. (表示反对或藐视等而)喊叫，嘘叫
1-b. The driver bannowed at the dog in the road. _____
- 2-a. Some parents thiculted their children with love. 过多地给予，溺爱
2-b. The Mayor thiculted a strike (罢工) successfully. _____
- 3-a. The temperature when we were there was glitowing 80°F. 接近
3-b. British tour companies are glitowing clients (顾客) to travel further afield (远处). _____
- 4-a. I've been woogaling through drawers looking for those tickets. (仔细地)搜索，搜寻
4-b. The firm (公司) is very successful money.—they're woogaling in the money. _____
- 5-a. The government planned to perlit the system from the inside so as to restructure (重建) it completely. 抽去...的精华或主要部分
5-b. Over the weekend, a firebomb (火焰炸弹) perlitted a building where 60 people lived. _____
- 6-a. The taut and interesting film "Red Kaoliang" was made by Chinese famous Director Zhang Yimou. 好的，优秀的
6-b. Eyes blinking (眨眼), showing no signs of being emotionally taut, her husband looked like an ordinary man defending the ordinary lies he had made up to hide an ordinary affair. _____
- 7-a. In New York you can hear a concert of ambulances (救护车), fire engines (消防车) and police cars that shatter the air with their noise. 爆裂
7-b. The failure in the examination of entering the college shattered all his hopes. _____
- 8-a. He looked very hungry as he demolished two hot-dog noodles. 贪婪地吃
8-b. We were all marveled (惊叹) that her article brilliantly demolished his argument. _____
- 9-a. He was completely oozing with charm so that the pedestrians (行人) shoot a glance at her when they passed by her. 洋溢着，充满(特质、气质等)

- 9-b. The enemy's courage was oozing away under the great pressure of the Red Army. _____
- 10-a. We have been raking through all her papers. 搜寻,搜索
- 10-b. Relief foundations (救济基金会) raked in \$13 million last year. _____

Appendix III English Word Meaning Test Two

Write down the meaning of following words in Chinese.

1) Print

- Press this key to print a copy of the text. _____
- The first cookey book is to be printed in America. _____
- An error message is printed and the program ends. _____
- The pictures have to be developed and printed. _____
- Please print your name. _____

2) Head

- The young man walked at the head of the parade. _____
- Steve has a good head for mathematics. _____
- It costs about \$12 a head to eat here. _____
- He is the head of a firm. _____
- He arranged his speech under five heads _____

3) High

- The train is going at a high speed. _____
- He is a high official in the government. _____
- It was high summer at that moment. _____
- Washington is a man of high character. _____
- The beef is a bit high. _____

4) Like

- I do not **like** it when she tells me how to do things. _____
- He cried **like** a baby when they told him the news. _____
- Will you ever see the **like** of Mozart again? _____
- We have are of **like** mind. _____
- Do you make bread **like** you make cakes? _____