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## A Cognitive Perspective on Teaching English Vocabulary for Language Learners in Iran

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*Keywords:* cognitive linguistics, English vocabulary learning, categorization, prototype, polysemy.

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# A Cognitive Perspective on Teaching English Vocabulary for Language Learners in Iran

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**Abstract-** The present study is going to investigate cognitive perspective on teaching English vocabulary as a foreign language in Iran. The discussion about vocabulary and its teaching and learning is one of the main issues in EFL / ESL teaching and learning research. The present study is going to survey some different ways for teaching English vocabularies. This paper refers to cognitive linguistic approaches to linguistic categories as research methodology. Thus, the aim of this study is to see if cognitive concepts played any significant role in word guessing. In recent years, the concept of linguistic categories has been used to account for the polysemous nature of individual words, morphemes, parts of speech, and even intonation patterns (Littlemore, 2009, P. 41). Based on cognitive linguistics (henceforth CL) various concepts of a word activate within a radial category, and those concepts are related through processes like categorization, prototype, metonymy, metaphor.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Cognitive linguistics is a modern school of linguistic thought that originally emerged in the early 1970s out of dissatisfaction with formal approaches to language. Cognitive linguistics is also firmly rooted in the emergence of modern cognitive science in the 1960s and 1970s, particularly in work relating to human categorization, and in earlier traditions such as Gestalt psychology. Early research was dominated in the 1970s and 1980s by a relatively small number of scholars. By the early 1990s, there was a growing proliferation of research in this area, and of researchers who identified themselves as cognitive linguists. In 1989/90, the International Cognitive Linguistics Society was established, together with the journal *Cognitive Linguistics*. The present study represents a general introduction to the area of theoretical linguistics known as cognitive linguistics. In particular, as we have begun to see, cognitive linguists view language as a system that directly reflects conceptual organization. (Evans & Green, 2006, p: 16). Generally, language teachers are using from different vocabulary teaching methods to teach English

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vocabularies to language learners. The present study evaluates its analysis within the framework of Cognitive Linguistics (henceforth CL). The knowledge of different concepts that a vocabulary can have is so important with which to evaluate the depth of a vocabulary and it is vital in language learning. Language learners should be aware of arbitrary methods in which the meanings of a word are developed in the target language. For example, when Iranian learners face to the word 'RUN', they realize that it has different meanings in different contexts, and also according to Littlemore (2009) the word 'hand' at the first sight refers to a part of the body but later we can see that, in other context, it refers to hands of a clock or of a compass or "metonymically when someone might ask them to hand them a pen, or give them a hand. (p. 41). Here I refer to the special concept, the so-called 'prototype' which CL states.

CL was born in 1989, when the first conference and the first journal were announced. It is the family of theories associated with authors like; Ronald Langacker, George Lakoff, Leonard Talmy and Giles Fauconnier. CL is a perspective that is "based on our experience of the world and the way we perceive and conceptualize it. (Ungere and Schmid, 2001, p. 36).

## II. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The present paper is going to state that language helps us categorize our experiences of the world. Therefore, the answer to the question like .What is in a word. is relatively simple: "The whole world" or at least all the experiences we have of our world that have somehow been categorized linguistically. In this paper I build on insights developed in CL in order to develop the approach taken to word meaning in cognitive semantics. This is known as cognitive lexical semantics. This approach to word meaning also incorporated ideas from Conceptual Metaphor Theory. Cognitive lexical semantics takes the position that lexical items (words) are conceptual categories: a word represents a category of distinct yet related meanings that exhibit typicality effects. This study is an interdisciplinary study which connects different fields such as second language learning, language assessment, and cognitive sciences. Linguistics is therefore one of the cognitive sciences, alongside philosophy, psychology, neuroscience and artificial intelligence. Each of these disciplines seeks to explain different (and frequently overlapping) aspects of human cognition (Evans &



Green, 2006, p.16). The study into the selected cognitive concepts of EFL learners' vocabulary performance has a number of implications which contribute methodologically and pedagogically to the relevant fields of applied linguistics. It is for many years that EFL / ESL learners and teachers have directed their attention towards vocabulary and their meaning to go forward learning and teaching English language, particularly in Iran.

### III. THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

CL has emerged in the last twenty-five years as a powerful approach to the study of language, conceptual systems, human cognition, and general meaning construction. The present paper has applied the framework in which Dirven and Verspoor (2004) have written their books on the frame of CL. These two cognitive linguists have considered two main concepts about the meanings of the words:

- a) Semasiology,
- b) Onomasiology,

CL is the study of language that is based on our experience of the world and the way we perceive and conceptualize it. It has so wide a scope that the paper can only survey its seven major areas: categorization and prototype theory, conceptual metaphor, imagery and its dimensions, frame and script theories, iconicity, grammaticalization, and cognitive pragmatic inference, by which we can learn the present state of cognitive linguistics abroad. CL is an approach to the analysis of natural language that focuses on language as an instrument for organizing, processing, and conveying information. This implies that the analysis of meaning is of primary importance for linguistic description: in CL, the formal structures of language are studied not as if they were autonomous, but as reflections of general conceptual organization, categorization principles, processing mechanisms, and experiential and cultural influences. CL originated with a number of Californian linguists in the late 1970s and early 1980s, basically as an attempt to carry further the interest in meaning phenomena that was typical of the so-called generative semantics movement within generative linguistics. In contrast with generative semantics, however, CL is situated entirely outside the generative tradition. Leading figures within CL are George Lakoff, Ronald W. Langacker, Len Talmy, Charles Fillmore, and Gilles Fauconnier.

In cognitive linguistic circles the topic of polysemy is one of controversy. Critics claim cognitive linguists view everything as polysemy. With a convincing application of prototype theory to lexicography (Tuggy 1993; Geeraerts 1991, 1997; Geeraerts, Grondroerts and Bakema 1994; Tylor 1989) polysemy has found substantial theoretical support for its existence.

Vyvan Evans and Andrea Tyler have represented a theory as a theory of principled polysemy which provides a methodology for constraining the number of distinct senses associated with an individual word.

We will come back to explain these two concepts totally in the next section.

In general, Semasiology is thus an approach to the lexicon describing the polysemy of a word form and the relationship between these various senses (Dirven & Verspoor, 2004). Also, sometimes this approach to the lexicon describes the homonymy of a word form standing for two different words, as in *bank*, used for an institution or place and for the beach of the river or sea. This is called homonymy, which means that two different words have the same form.

The selection of a name for a referent is simultaneously determined by both semasiological and onomasiological salience. As we argued earlier, semasiological salience is determined by the degree to which a sense or a referent is considered prototypical for the category, and onomasiological salience is determined by the degree to which the name for a category is entrenched.

### IV. DATA ANALYSIS

In the present paper the meanings and the structure of words are studied. This is lexicology, i.e., the systematic study of the meanings (or senses) of words. In this approach we can go from the form of a word to the various senses. Semantics is the systematic study of the meanings of linguistic items as they are concerned with one another and with entities in our conception of the world (Dirven & Verspoor, 2004). Also, semantics deals with lexicology, morphology and syntax.

#### a) *The Prototypicality Effect On Polysemy*

Geeraerts (1985) pointed out that cognition should have a tendency towards structural stability; the categorical system can only work efficiently if it does not change drastically any time new data crop up. But at the same time, it should be flexible enough to adapt itself to change circumstances. It is well-known that many words in English have different meanings overlapping each other.

Take *keep*, for instance. It is a good example of a polysemous word:

Jane hasn't got enough money to *keep* his family.

The guilt man was *kept* overnight in a cell.

Marxists *keep* that people are all naturally creative.

Jim has *kept* Jack's secret for 6 years.

Police are *keeping* three men because of the jewel robbery.

The theatre itself can *keep* only a limited number of people.

Lexicographers classify words like *keep* as being polysemous. that is, of having multiple but related

meanings, each of which is called a polyseme. If the polysemous nature of English provides a challenge to dictionary compilers, it is a complete headache for learners. It is difficult to decide at what point when we know the different shades of meaning represented by all its polysemes.

The studies on polysemy have verified that most semantic categories are extricable networks formed by a series of interdependent values fixed on prototypes. More and more research findings have revealed that those networks are not arbitrarily formed, but developed from prototypes by specific mechanisms of semantic extensions (e.g. metaphor, formulation and transferring of semantic scope, etc.) (Shen, 1991).

Brugman and Lakoff (2003) believe that "The theoretical claim being made is that a polysemous lexical item is a radial category of senses. What is important for our purpose is that the kind of network structure found here is not made up ad hoc to characterize this set of facts. Instead, this is a common category structure that occurs in domains other than the lexicon. There is an important consequence of using the general theory of radial categories to characterize

polysemy. In the general theory, the links between members of the network are not arbitrary. The theory of radial categories comes with a characterization of possible link types. In the case of polysemy, the link types are the types of relations linking the senses of the word. In general, some of the links may involve shared information, some may involve relation between a general and a specific case, and some may be metaphoric.. But, overall, there is only a small number of types of relations between senses of words..." (Brugman and Lakoff, 2003).

b) *Polysemy And Homonymy*

I describe this concept by contrasting with homonymy. Although both of these concepts give rise to lexical ambiguity (two or more meanings associated with a word), the nature of the ambiguity is different in each case. Polysemy is the phenomenon whereby a lexical item is commonly associated with two or more meanings that appear to be related in some way (Evans & Green, 2005, p. 329).

Consider the examples below containing the English preposition *out*.

a. You should run <i>out</i> into the yard.	"away from the inside of a place"
b. I phoned John but he was <i>out</i> .	"away from home"
c. She is working <i>out</i> in England.	"away from one's country or town"
d. It was a clear night and the stars were <i>out</i> .	"visible from the earth"
e. Her new book is <i>out</i> .	"published or issued"
f. The secret is <i>out</i> . / The need to speak <i>out</i> about injustice.	"revealed or known"
g. dockers are <i>out</i> .	"on strike"
h. Miniskirts are <i>out</i> this year.	"not fashionable"
i. He will have spent all that money, before the month is <i>out</i> .	"finished"

Each of these instances of *out* is associated with a slightly different meaning or sense (listed on the right), but these senses are nevertheless relatively closely related. This shows that *out* exhibits polysemy. Polysemy contrasts with homonymy, which relates to two different words that occur to share the same form in sound (homophones) and/or in writing (homographs). For example, the form *bank* relates to two different words with unrelated meanings, .financial institution. and .bank of a river. These two senses are not only synchronically unrelated (unrelated in current usage) but also historically unrelated. The word *bank* meaning .side of river. has been in the English language for much longer, and is related to the Old Icelandic word for .hill., while the word *bank* meaning. financial institution. was borrowed from Italian *banca*, meaning .money changers

- a. *bank* was flooded yesterday. "building"
- b. The *bank* was very nice and understanding. "personnel"
- c. The *bank* was founded in 1990. "institution"
- d. I am the *bank*. "when playing Monopoly"
- e. A blood *bank*, a memory bank. "a place where something is stored"
- f. A river *bank*. "the rising ground bordering a river"
- g. We were protected by a *bank* of about two feet high. "a small flat mound"
- h. Also a ridge, an undersea elevation, etc.

table. (*Collins English Dictionary*) (Evans & Green, 2005, p. 329). Thus, homonymy and polysemy are two wellknown semantic problems. *Bank* in *river bank* and *Bank of England* are homonymous. The problems posed by homonymy and polysemy are probably at the very heart of semantics.

One way of analyzing the meaning of *out* in the above examples would be to treat them as a distinct sense of *out* from the spatial senses and the non-spatial senses. This would amount to the claim that *out* in some above examples, like; (d), (e), (f), (g), (h), and (i) are homonym: a distinct word.

In this case, let's take further examples to show that the words do possess literal meaning with all peripheral meanings which are merely derived or metonymic and metaphoric.



The above examples of bank are associated with slightly different meanings. Bank for example can be considered as a cue which conjures up a complex object, of which one aspect in particular is retained (either the building, personnel or institution meaning) without suppressing the others. Since all meanings are linked by the object they refer to, this sort of polysemy may be called referential polysemy.

D. A. Cruse's (1996) explains the difference between the examples f, g and h among the above examples in terms of facets. Bank refers to an object with at least three facets: the premises, the personnel, and the institution. The advantage is that an intermediary semantic level has been introduced between the object and the contextual meanings, which allows for a distinction between real polysemy (the facets) and contextual variations (the usages of each facet). Problems with this theory include the number of facets (can it be precisely stated?) and their discreteness (to what extent do they overlap?). For example, in I hate this bank, which facet is concerned? Is it the personnel or the institution, or even the building?

## V. CONCLUSION

To sum up, amongst the various senses of words, some are always more central or prototypical and other senses range over a continuum from less central to peripheral. The sense with the greatest saliency is the one that comes to mind first when we think of the meanings of a word. All the senses of a word are linked to each other in a radial network and based on cognitive processes such as metonymy, metaphor, generalization and specialization. In metonymy the link between two senses of a word is based on contiguity, in metaphor the link is based on similarity between two elements or situations belonging to different domains, i.e. a source domain, e.g. the human body, and the target domain, e.g. the lay-out of a mountain. Amongst the various words that we can use to name the same thing, we always find a prototypical name in the form of a basic level term such as tree, trousers, car, apple, fish, etc. Instead of a basic level term such as trousers or skirt we can also use superordinate terms such as garment or subordinate terms such as jeans or miniskirt, but such nonbasic terms differ in that they are less "entrenched" in the speaker's mind.

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