# Polysemy

First of all, a word rarely has just one meaning. Most words in English are polysemous, that is, they have multiple meanings. Some have relatively few meanings. For example, *shovel* can be the instrument or the action. (This may not seem like two things to you, but note how we shovel with a shovel, mop with a mop, and mow with a mower, but we sweep with a broom, paint with a brush, and charge with a card.)

With a relatively small number of meanings, *shovel* is clearly in the minority in English. *Table* can be the piece of furniture, a set of numbers or figures, the action of not talking about something in a meeting, or a descriptive word (as in table scraps or tablecloth). Other words have multiple meanings: *put, put on, put down, put off, put away, put up with, put back*, etc.

An example that the students like to confront us with is *get*, so it behooves teachers to become very familiar with this verb. Consider how the meaning of *get* changes so dramatically in these examples: *get mail* (receive without trying), *get the mail* (go to a place to retrieve it), get the measles (contract a sickness), get angry (become), *get to the airport* (arrive), *get in a car* (enter), *get washed*

(passive voice), and many others.

# Connotation

All words have a denotation and a connotation. The denotation refers to the most basic or specific meaning of a word. In contrast, a connotation is an idea that is suggested by or associated with a word. For example, the word *scum* is just the name of a layer that forms on the surface of a body of water, but the word has connotations of impurity, badness, and ugliness.

Table 2 illustrates denotation and connotation of five words that express a similar concept.

While denotation is fairly straightforward, connotation can vary. The connotation of a word can change from negative to positive or vice-versa over time. The connotation of a word can also vary from culture to culture (even with two cultures or groups that speak the same language) as well as from individual to individual. The connotations listed in Table 2, for example, are the connotations that I, based on my life experiences, would assign to these words. To me, *thin* is a neutral word. To some, hearing “You look so thin!” would be a positive statement, while to others it would be a negative statement. To me, *skinny* has a neutral to negative connotation. *Slim* seems to be more positive when it deals with weight. (In contrast, in the phrase slim chance, it has a negative connotation, but that is a different meaning.) *Lean and slender* have positive connotations, which explains why weight loss or nutrition companies have chosen these words for their brand names (e.g., Lean Cuisine ®).

Connotation can also impact a nonnative speaker’s ability to learn a new vocabulary item since the positive or negative value assigned to a word by the learner also plays a role in how difficult a word is to learn. Positive words are easier to remember than negative words (Ludwig, 1984). In two empirical studies (Yavuz, 1963; Yavuz & Bousfield, 1959), English-speaking individuals learned translations of 18 Turkish words equally divided into positive, neutral, and negative words. In both

Table 2 Denotation vs. Connotation

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Word | Denotation | Connotation |
| Thin | Not overweight | Neutral image |
| Skinny | Not overweight | Negative image |
| Slim | Not overweight | Positive image |
| Lean | Not overweight | Positive image |
| Slender | Not overweight | Positive image |

experiments, recall was significantly better for the positively loaded words than for the neutral or negative words. The teaching principle here is that words that have (or seem to have—to the learner at least) a negative connotation may be more difficult to commit to memory.

# Spelling and Pronunciation

English is a language that has a relatively low letter-to-sound correlation, thus making many English words difficult to spell and/or pronounce (from the written letters). This is especially true when English is compared with languages such as Japanese or Spanish where pronunciation is consistent with the way words are spelled. Knowing the spelling of a word is in itself quite an accomplishment for a nonnative speaker. Consider the sound /i/ (ee in some dictionaries). This one sound can be written in at least eight different ways: eat, need, retrieve, people, key, receive, be, lazy. Likewise, knowing the correct pronunciation can be problematic. The letter a can be pronounced in at least five ways: *cat* /ae/, *father* /a/, *lawn* /[ƒ]/, *cake* /eI/, *interval* /́[schwa]/.

# Part of Speech

Knowing the part of speech of a word is important. It is important when learners know two or more forms for one word: *wise* (adj.), *wisely* (adv.), *wisdom* (n.). It is also important when similar words confound the situation: *lend* (v.) vs. *loan* (n.) or *affect* (v.) vs. *effect* (n.).

The part of speech of a word can make a word harder to master. “Psychological research shows differential performance on tasks involving nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs, indicating that the form class of a word is a reasonably potent variable in verbal tasks” (Ludwig, 1984, p. 554). While the exact ranking of the parts of speech in terms of difficulty is not clear, Laufer (1990) sums it up best: “It is sometimes argued that certain grammatical categories are more difficult to learn than others. Nouns seem to be the easiest; adverbs—the most difficult; verbs and adjectives—somewhere in between” (p. 298). In follow-up interviews of learners using the keyword method, Atkinson (1975) found similar results. Learners reported that the key word method worked best for nouns, less well for verbs, and least well for adjectives. Phillips (in Laufer, 1990) noted an interaction between the effect that part of speech has on word difficulty and the proficiency level that a learner has: nouns were easier to learn than verbs or adjectives, an effect that decreased as the learner’s proficiency increased.

Abstract words seem to be more difficult than concrete words. According to Mackey (1965), the reason that nouns are easier to remember than verbs or adjectives is probably a function of concreteness and of frequency. Laufer (1990) cautions, however, that “if all the other features of two words were identical, the concrete one would probably be easier. In the real learning situation, however, many concrete words present a problem since they may contain other factors of difficulty” (p. 300).

Some teachers may assume that once a learner knows one of the basic four forms of a word (i.e., noun, verb, adjective, adverb), the learner either knows or easily learns all four forms. This is not the case. In a study of 106 undergraduate and graduate nonnative English–speaking students, Schmitt and Zimmerman (2002) found that it was rare for a student to know all four forms or no form of a word. In other words, partial knowledge of at least one form was the norm. Results also showed that learners tended to have a better understanding of the noun and/or verb forms rather than the adjective and/or adverb forms. The authors conclude that teachers cannot assume that learners will absorb the derivative forms of a word family automatically from exposure and suggest explicit instruction in this area of vocabulary.

# Frequency

Knowing a word can also mean that the learner knows the frequency of occurrence of that word. Though this aspect of a word may seem almost trivial, the frequency of a word is often cited as a major factor in a given word’s difficulty. In fact, Haynes (1993) claims that word frequency is probably *the* major component in word difficulty.

A given word may well express the concept that the person wants to express; however, that concept may have several possible names, some of which may be more useful to a nonnative learner because that particular word is more frequent. The rarer forms, though most certainly semantically appropriate, would make the speaker sound strange.

Complete this sentence with a word that means that you are extremely hungry: “I’m \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.” Many people would complete the sentence with the word *starving*, but words such as *ravenous* and *famished* are certainly possible. However, *ravenous* and *famished* are not nearly as common as *starving*. Likewise, while *violet* and *purple* may refer to the same color, the latter is used much more frequently, so a nonnative learner should also use *purple* more often than *violet*. Using the word *violet* when the vast majority of native speakers would say *purple* would “mark” the learner’s English as non-native.

# Usage

Knowing a word also means knowing when it is appropriate to use that word instead of a synonym or similar word. This information about usage can include both syntactic information (e.g., we hardly ever use this verb in passive voice) and pragmatic information (e.g., we do not use this word when speaking to people of higher status). For example, the words *thing* and *stuff* are similar in meaning, but one is considered a standard word while the other is considered slang or informal language. The first word would be considered acceptable to use in, say, a job interview, but the second one would probably not.

Let us consider the concept of “not continue to live.” The basic vocabulary item to express this concept is the word *die.* At the same time, let us consider differences in usage of three other vocabulary items that express the same denotation.

We can say, “I’m sorry to hear that your mother died,” but it might be more common, especially when talking with a known person and wishing to convey our sympathy, to say, “I’m sorry to hear that your mother passed away.” Thus, the usage of pass away may be restricted to a speaker who knows the listener and who wishes to express sincere regret or sympathy. That same person could not say, “I’m sorry to hear that your mother kicked the bucket” or “I’m sorry to hear that your mother is pushing up daisies.”

The vocabulary item *kick the bucket* is often used for a deceased person that we did not know or did not care for much. Thus, there is a pragmatic/sociolinguistic usage issue with this vocabulary item. In addition, there is a syntactic issue with *kick the bucket*. In the example of SUBJECT + *kick* + *the bucket*, the subject must be a person or living thing, *kick* would be a transitive verb, and *the bucket* would be the object of the verb. Thus, *kick* is in the active voice. Any verb in the active voice can also be used in the passive voice. Consider, however, the usage problems associated with this particular vocabulary item in these two examples:

1. The old man kicked the bucket last week. (active voice)

2. The bucket was kicked by the old man last week.

(passive voice)

In Sentence 1, active voice, the meaning could be literal (the old man really did use his foot to kick the bucket) or it could be figurative/idiomatic (the old man died). In Sentence 2, passive voice, the meaning can only be the literal meaning that the old man actually kicked the bucket. Therefore, in terms of usage, this particular idiom cannot be used in passive voice. This is a special usage issue for this vocabulary item since all active voice verbs should be able to be transformed to a passive voice form as well.

Similarly, the vocabulary item *push up daisies* has several special usage issues. Syntactically, *push up daisies* would appear to be a simple V + O construction. Given that *push* is a verb, we could in theory use this verb in any of the 12 different verb tenses. However, the verb in this vocabulary item is rarely used in any tense except a future progressive construction with going to or with will: He**’s going to be** **pushing** up daisies. He**’ll be pushing** up daisies. This expression does not occur in simple past tense even though *die* is frequently used in the past tense: He **pushed** up daisies vs. He **died**. Another syntactic usage issue is that this expression, similar to what we saw with *kick the bucket*, occurs only in active voice, never in passive voice. We cannot say even in future progressive tense, “Daisies will be being pushed up by him.”

This vocabulary item also has a pragmatic/sociolinguistic usage limitation. At a register level, we could say that *kick the bucket* and *push up daisies* are slang or informal language while die and pass away are standard words. A nonnative learner could easily assume—albeit incorrectly—that the two slang expressions could be used interchangeably, as could the two standard vocabulary items. Natural usage of *push up daisies* is in situations involving a warning of an impending death for a certain reason. Consider this example: *He’ll be pushing up daisies if he testifies against us.*

# Collocation

Perhaps the single most important aspect of knowing a word for non-native learners—besides or in addition to the obviously requisite synonym or denotation meaning—is the collocation(s) of a new vocabulary item. The meaning of collocation is apparent in its constituent parts: co (together) + **location** (place). A **collocation** is a word or phrase that naturally and frequently occurs before, after, or very near the target vocabulary item.

Make a sentence in your head with the word *squander*, which means to waste or use unwisely. (Do not go on without coming up with an example!) In theory, any noun could follow the word *squander*, but the most common collocations for squander in English are *money* or *resources* (salary, $1,000, or inheritance), *time* (the morning, her vacation, a life-time), or *opportunity* (opportunity, chance, prospect). Thus, common collocations for the verb *squander* are money, time, and opportunity.

Consider the vocabulary item *commit*. *Commit* has three different meanings: (1) make or do, (2) dedicate resources, or (3) be dedicated to, always used in the passive voice. One could argue that these are three different words, so we will work with the first meaning only, which is “to make or do.” Complete this sentence:

He *committed* \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_. What are some examples that pop into your head right away?

The most common collocations for commit as a verb are all types of crimes: *commit murder, commit suicide, commit grand larceny, commit adultery*. Thus, *commit* does not mean just “do or make” but “do or make something negative.” An ESL student who learns that *commit* in *commit a murder* means “to do or perform an action” might attempt to make the following seemingly logical combinations: *commit a joke on someone, commit the housework, commit a lie*. The problem—a huge problem for nonnative learners—is that *commit* does not collocate with *joke, housework, or lie*.

The most common vocabulary items collocate with all sorts of words. The rarer the vocabulary word is (i.e., more likely to be an “advanced” word for a second language learner), the fewer the collocations will be. The verb *take* can collocate with *a taxi, a shower, medicine, a test, a person from one place to another, someone’s temperature, a credit card*, and on and on. In fact, the verb *take* derives its meaning from its object collocation. On the other hand, a rarer word such as *exempt* has more specific collocations. In the active voice, the word following *exempt* will almost always be a person. The next collocation slot will be the word *from*. The third collocation slot will be some sort of requirement. The collocation patterns for the word *exempt* are illustrated here:

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Collocations for *EXEMPT* | | | | |
| (subject) | Exempt (all verb tenses possible) | (someone) | *From* | A requirement  A test  Taking the test  Having to get a passport |

Certain target vocabulary can have rather complex collocations, and knowing which words can be used with the new word can make that word (even) more difficult for L2 learners. Collocations may vary greatly from language to language and may therefore not be transferred from L1 to L2. Because of both the difficulty and the importance of collocations (Nattinger & DeCarrico, 1992), McCarthy (1994) advocates direct instruction and practice in this area.

What obviously then follows from this is, how can teachers know which words collocate with a certain vocabulary item? The first answer is to trust your intuition as a native speaker. What would you say in this particular example? Make up a sentence in your head, but remove yourself from any classroom or ESL setting. How do you think a native speaker would *naturally* use that word? If you are a nonnative speaker, trust your knowledge of English. You have attained a certain level of knowledge of English, and you most likely know what combines with what.

A second solution is to use data from corpus linguistics. A corpus is a set or body of language examples such as actual newspapers, books, transcripts of conversations or interviews, or movie scripts. All of the corpus becomes the source or databank from which collocation software is used to identify collocations. For example, if we did a search for the word convey, we might find these examples:

|  |
| --- |
| . . . he said. I think he wanted to *convey* the message that there is hope that . . .  . . . do you think is the best way to *convey* this information? Is it that we are . . .  . . . Wilson had failed to accurately *convey* what the Prime Minister said. An . . .  . . . say they rely on Mr. Sims to *convey* messages that they do not want . . .  . . .public demonstrations does not *convey* a message independently of the . . . |

This is but a small example, but we can see that *convey* frequently collocates with the word *message*. Other collocations for convey are *information* and *what (someone) say/says/said*. This information is important so that teachers do not tell students that *convey* means “send” but rather that *convey a message* means to *send a message*. From this students can then understand that *convey information* means to *send information*. The teaching point here is to teach the collocation, not just the meaning of one of the words in isolation when in fact that word does not usually occur alone? (When is the last time you said, “Yes, I’ll convey that to you tomorrow”? Never!)