

The Influence of Saussure's Language Theory on English Vocabulary Teaching

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Abstract: Many famous scholars have put forward their opinions on the nature of language. Among them, the most famous are Saussure's dichotomy and Pierce's trichotomy. Vocabulary learning plays a very important role in foreign language learning. Therefore, many scholars continue to carry out research and experiments on vocabulary learning and they try to find more effective and practical ways to help English learners remember words better and faster. Saussure put forward the viewpoint of arbitrariness of language signs. He believed that the first characteristic of language signs was their arbitrariness, that is, there was no natural and necessary essential relationship between the sound and meaning of language signs. Saussure's discussion on the principle of arbitrariness points out two main points of the principle of arbitrariness. First, it refers to the relationship between the signifier and the signified. He points out that the connection between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary. Beyond this scope, the principle will not apply. Saussure regards language as a purely psychological phenomenon. He believes that the signifier of language symbols is the sound image, and the signifier is the concept. Second, it refers to the "natural connection" between the two, that is, it cannot be seen from the physiological or physical properties of a certain language that it should be combined with a certain conceptual meaning into a language symbol. On the contrary, we can not see the reason that a certain concept combines with a certain voice to form a language symbol from its meaning characteristics. This paper attempts to apply Saussure's language theory to daily English vocabulary teaching in order to find a simple, feasible and effective way to remember English words and phrases.

Keywords: Saussure; Arbitrariness; English Vocabulary Teaching.

1. Introduction

The human concern for arbitrariness of language signs can be traced back to Aristotle in ancient Greece. Aristotle believed that there was no natural connection between the sound of any language and the thing it referred to. Linguist Whitney also believes that language signs are arbitrary. Saussure affirmed the principle of arbitrariness of signs proposed by Whitney. He believes that the arbitrariness of language signs is the most important principle, which dominates the whole language. This principle has exerted a great influence on linguistic research in the 20th century, and has triggered more than half a century of debate. This debate focuses on whether languages are arbitrary or similar. Many linguists have expounded the arbitrariness principle of linguistic signs. Hockett (1960) regarded arbitrariness as one of the characteristics of human information transmission and one of the basic attributes of language, and pointed out that human language is almost completely arbitrary in terms of its semantic conventions. Chomsky believes that the language representation system comes from the structure of the mind. From the initial stage of its production, language has a lot of arbitrary factors. In the process of English learning, people feel the arbitrariness of language and the complexity of language learning process. Based on Saussure's view of language signs - arbitrariness, this paper discusses its implications for English learning.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Literature Review Abroad

On the study of language theory. About language and speech. Maruyama Keizaburo believes that from Saussure's

theory, we can see that there are two essential differences between human beings and animals. The first is human's ability to segment the body, and the second is the ability to segment the language. French linguist Hai Ranre opposed Saussure's theory of separating language from speech. He believed that Saussure attached too much importance to language. On the study of symbol theory. Harris believed that the principle of arbitrariness of signs was contradictory. Saussure only paid attention to the internal causes, but ignored the influence of external factors such as society. Paul J. Thibault opposed Harris' view in *Re reading Saussure: the Dynamics of Signs in Social Life*, Routledge, 1996. He believed that Saussure not only paid attention to internality, but also saw the influence of external factors. Maruyama Kuisaro studied the arbitrariness of symbols from the perspective of culture, society and history, and found out their inheritance relationship in modern times. Research on system theory. Budakov of the Soviet Union, translated by Larin and Feng Jiafang, refuted others' criticism of Saussure's structuralism in our view of structuralism (linguistic materials, 1963 (3)).

2.2. Literature Review at Home

The study of language theory. First, the study of language and speech. Gao Mingkai (1960) once put forward the class nature of speech, while Fang Guangtao believed that the two were just general and individual differences, and neither of them had class nature. Nie Zhiping believes that there is confusion in the use of speech in the Course of General Linguistics, because people's understanding of this book is biased, but he affirmed the relationship and distinction between the two. In *Language, Speech and Discourse* (Chinese Learning, 1994 (2)), Fan Xiao believed that speech

is an act, sentences that can be said or written are discourse, and language is the form of discourse. Secondly, the study of synchrony and diachrony. Xu Siyi understood the distinction between synchrony and diachrony in combination with Chinese. Nie Zhiping (1990) believed that the internal adjustment of the system was the root of phonetic evolution, and the law was only a condition, not a cause. Thirdly, research on system theory. Gao Mingkai believes that Saussure's system theory is idealistic. Suo Zhenyu (1994) wrote an article to criticize and correct the scholars' previous misreading, emphasizing that synchronic language is used to express ideas, and relationship is the basis for analysis at the synchronic level. Finally, the research on symbol theory. The research results are very rich, represented by Le Meiyun, Li Baojia, etc. In addition, Shi Anshi (1989) proposed that arbitrariness and argumentation are not a plane. Li Baojia (1994) believed that Saussure ignored argumentation, resulting in the mistake of arbitrariness. In response to these views, Suo Zhenyu (1995) believed that in the synchronic system, although the demonstrable symbols accounted for the majority, the internal components were not demonstrable, so arbitrariness could not be denied. Although the number of arbitrary symbols is small, it determines the nature of language symbols and word formation. Wang Yongxiang (2008) proposed that argumentation is a supplement to arbitrariness. Duan Lian combines the theory of signifier and signified with Chinese landscape painting to analyze the implication in the painting. Xu Guozhang (1988) discussed that symbols are subject to the dual constraints of system and society from the perspective of philosophy. Tu Youxiang also interpreted the understanding of symbols from the perspective of philosophy and aesthetics.

Suo Zhenyu (1994), Cen Qixiang (2011), Gui Cankun (1962) and Zhao Ronghui (2005) were representatives of the review. Xu Zhimin (1983), Zhang Shaojie (1999) and Shen Xiaolong (2007) also introduced the research of Saussure theory in China, and made an objective review. In addition, Du Daoliu's *History of Western Linguistics*, Zhao Shikai's *Brief History of Western Linguistics*, Feng Zhiwei's *Schools of Modern Linguistics* and other books have similar views.

Comparative study. Zhang Shaojie (2003) made a comparative analysis of Saussure and Halliday, and believed that there was a source relationship between their theories. Ye Qichang (2013) proposed that Saussure's language essence is based on social norms through the comparison between Saussure and Heidegger. Liu Hui (2009) compared Saussure and Wickenstein from the perspective of epistemology. He believed that their views on language were consistent, and Wickenstein's theory inherited and developed from Saussure. Feng Wenjing's *From Saussure's Speech to Habermas's Language Communication: Language Is and Is* (*Journal of Foreign Languages*, 2012 (5)) holds that Saussure's theory is the binary opposition between language and speech through comparison.

3. Saussure's View of Language Signs

3.1. Combination of Signifier and Signified

Saussure believes that language symbols do not connect things and names, but concepts and sound images. That is to say, the combination of concepts and sound images is called a symbol system. He uses signifier to refer to sound image and concept respectively. Language is a combination of sound and meaning, that is, the combination of form and meaning.

In language, the signifier and the signified are indispensable. The absence of any part will inevitably lead to the absence of language. The combination of the signifier and the signified is an abstract relationship. That is to say, language is just a form, and language does not have substance. Sound image in Saussure's view is the psychological imprint of sound, and sound has been integrated by people's hearts. When people use language to think in their hearts, they don't really make a sound, but they use the syllables of words to achieve their goals psychologically. Therefore, the sound image is abstract in nature. Concepts are feelings in the human brain. Feelings are invisible, intangible and abstract. Therefore, the language formed by the combination of the two is naturally not the essence.

In Saussure's view, language, like words, rituals and gestures, is the way people express themselves, but language is the most crucial one. In principle, any means of expression accepted by a society is based on collective habits, or in the same way, on conventions. Language is a system for expression, and of course there is no exception. Therefore, he believes that the study of symbols should be carried out from the social level. There is no essential connection between language and things. People can use any word to represent a thing at will. For example, when people express the word apple, they can choose to use any word such as pineapple, goat, table, beautiful, etc. When it becomes a universal expression, the combination of symbols and things is fixed in a certain period of time. In addition, the *Course of General Linguistics* believes that before the generation of language, thinking and voice are chaotic, and cannot be said, let alone the generation of so-called concepts and forms. That is to say, thinking is fuzzy without the support of words. Language, as a medium of thought and sound, is also a combination of the two, which makes it possible for them to play their respective roles. Therefore, thinking and language are unique to humans, while animals have no thinking and language. When language has no actual communicative function, people are still in the process of thinking, and the operation of thinking is an implicit mode; When people really communicate with language, their thinking is in an explicit state. The above content actually contains his dialectical view on language and thinking: the operation of thinking depends on the use of language; The existence of language depends on the cooperation of thought and voice. Therefore, the realization of language also depends on the existence of thinking. Without either sound or thinking, the direction of language research will be deflected. Language and thinking are interdependent beings.

3.2. Arbitrariness Principle

Saussure believes that linguistic signs are the combination of signifier and signified, which just proves his arbitrariness. For example, when people see a sheep, Chinese native speakers will say the word "sheep", while English speakers will say "sheep", French speakers will say "Ovins", Dutch speakers will say "schapen", and so on. People in different languages have the same cognition of the same thing, but people will make different voices, which is just like Saussure said, The differences between languages and the existence of different languages are proof. In fact, the concept of things has no inherent and inevitable connection with the voice we emit. A concept can be expressed by thousands of different voices, as long as human beings are willing to. But in the long-term social development, people have gradually settled

down their habitual pronunciation of a thing under the influence of others or the social environment. In other words, this method has been adopted by the whole society. When it becomes a collective agreement, this arbitrariness becomes untenable. Any expression commonly used in society is in principle based on collective customs, or in the same way, based on agreed customs". The combination of what concept and what voice is restricted by the language habits of the society, including social customs, religion, culture and other aspects.

The theory of the relationship between signifier and signified is not only embodied in arbitrariness, but also in the fact that language is a dual entity combining the two. Once they form a collocation, their arbitrariness should conform to the stability of language entities. Otherwise, language itself cannot exist without any part. In the Course of General Linguistics, it was written that a material unit can exist only by its meaning and function. Saussure used paper as a metaphor to vividly illustrate the interdependence between the two. Language can be regarded as a piece of paper, sound and thought are its positive and negative sides. It is impossible to separate the positive and negative sides of the paper at the same time and keep the original appearance of the paper unchanged. In the same way, the two parts of a language cannot be separated from each other.

Although there is no inevitable connection between a concept and the voice people make, and a concept can be expressed by different voices, it also emphasizes that such arbitrariness can only be recognized through the whole society. That is to say, language sign has variability, and when it becomes an expression recognized by the whole society, it becomes a relatively fixed system, and the arbitrariness of language sign cannot be demonstrated. Therefore, in a certain period of time, the common way of expression in society, that is, language habits, is fixed and established by all the people. It is impossible for individuals to change it. We can only adapt, learn and use it to live, otherwise it will be difficult to communicate with others. After seeing the apple, Chinese native speakers will say the word "apple" after long-term learning and environmental influence, while Portuguese speakers will say the word "alma", and Americans will say the word "apple", which is the result of social language habits. The combination of the sound and meaning of symbols in a society is established by convention, and it will not be changed by someone's touch. Because a person casually points to an apple and says "banana" or "bench", the name "apple" cannot be replaced by "banana" or "bench" to refer to the apple. Only when this change is accepted and implemented by the vast majority of people in the society, will this factor that develops to the social collective level change some fixed use of language in the long run.

In a word, according to Saussure's view of language signs, the relationship between form (sound) and meaning of language is arbitrary, and the relationship between signifier and signified is also arbitrary. Therefore, to a certain extent, we can use the arbitrariness of language signs to promote English vocabulary teaching.

4. Enlightenment of Saussure's View of Language Signs on English Learning

It is precisely because of this arbitrariness that language signs can refer to the endless things in the world. Only by recognizing the arbitrariness of language signs can we

understand the diversity of world languages and the invariance and variability of languages. The author believes that Saussure's view of language signs is of great guiding significance to English vocabulary teaching.

4.1. How to Deal with Polysemy

In the process of vocabulary learning, students first encounter a big puzzle is the polysemy of vocabulary. Polysemy means that a word has more than one meaning, which is related to history in concept. In view of the fact that the basic amount of comprehending vocabulary in college English is 4000~5000, and the polysemy phenomenon, the word meaning information of the vocabulary learned by students will reach tens of thousands of units, which will undoubtedly greatly increase the learning burden and memory burden of students. Therefore, if the teacher does not handle vocabulary teaching well, it is easy for students to have negative emotional filtering. In the process of college English vocabulary teaching, teachers should focus on explaining the basic meaning of each word. As for other relevant meanings and extended meanings of words, teachers should guide students to understand and grasp them from the context.

In addition, polysemy in English may also be caused by historical reasons, so semantic broadening, semantic narrowing and semantic shift have emerged. The understanding and grasp of this phenomenon can also be found from the perspective of language signs. As mentioned above, language signs have a dialectical relationship between invariance and variability. That is, in a historical period, the corresponding relationship between the signifier and the signified of language signs is agreed and compulsory. However, with the passage of time and historical evolution, the corresponding relationship between signifier and signified will also change, which can well explain the causes of semantic generalization, narrowing and semantic migration. In specific teaching practice, teachers can still guide students to understand and grasp through the method of context.

4.2. How to Remember Vocabulary

In the process of second language acquisition, language learners can try to understand the language signs in the second language from the perspective of their mother tongue. Saussure's theory of linguistic sign arbitrariness makes it easy for us to understand why different languages use different signifiers to express the same signified. Take Chinese and English for example. For the same thing or concept, Chinese has a Chinese version, while English has an English version. The two versions are different. Text A: The Freedom Givers, Volume 3, Unit 2 of the Comprehensive Course of College English (New Edition) published by Shanghai Foreign Education Press, contains a sentence: courageous men and women who together forged the Underground Railroad, in which the word forge means create in this text, which is an extended meaning, and its original meaning is forge. This shows that for the concept of forging, forge is used in English and forge is used in Chinese. Why Chinese uses the sound image of duan zao to express the concept of forging need not be explored, because we have successfully solved this problem in the process of acquiring the first language.

5. Conclusion

Based on the introduction of Saussure's view of language signs, this paper discusses the implications of the arbitrariness

of language signs for English vocabulary teaching. Of course, this paper does not mean that Saussure's arbitrary theory is perfect. In the research, we are more and more aware of its important defect, that is, Saussure only discusses the relationship between signifier and signified within the language structure, and he ignores the connection with the outside world. His arbitrary conclusion like this is difficult to have universal significance. Therefore, when discussing arbitrariness, we should also discuss the problem of similarity.

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