

Memeplex Mechanism in Consummating English Vocabulary Teaching

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Abstract: The memeplex is a form of memetics, which is formed by the combination of memes and gets to a close mode of collection. Memes comes from *The Selfish Gene*, a famous work of the famous British scientist Richard Dawkins. Imitation is the main transmission of the meme. English vocabulary learning is essentially the process of imitation, reproduction and transmission. Through analyzing the formation of the Memeplex Mechanism to resolve the lexical memes, the thesis discusses the positive driving effects of Memeplex Mechanism in English Vocabulary Teaching. It mainly discusses the following questions: First, the deconstruction of the Memeplex Forming Process; Second, the construction of the new vocabulary meme in the Memeplex Mechanism; Third, the positive transfer of Memeplex Mechanism in developing English Vocabulary Teaching. The study shows that the Memeplex Mechanism is of great significance in in perfecting English Vocabulary Teaching, which can not only improve the English Vocabulary Teaching methods, but also provide more effective learning methods for English vocabulary acquisition.

Keywords: Memeplex Mechanism, English Vocabulary Teaching, Meme, The positive transfer.

1. Introduction

Under the traditional English vocabulary teaching situation, all students receive the undifferentiated instruction of the disordered glossary. Teachers leave a large amount of words for students to recite instead of teaching the strategies of enhancing their vocabulary acquisition. As a result, they are lack of the discernment of distinguishing the synonyms and the flexibility in the use of words. Confronted this, much of research in vocabulary acquisition and teaching has focused on improving the intake of active vocabulary so that methods could be found to consummate the English vocabulary teaching.

This thesis applies memeplex mechanism to that field. Naturally, the formation and operation of the memeplex mechanism should be taken into consideration to enhance Chinese teachers' ability effectively of teaching the English vocabulary. This study was undertaken to analyze the developments about Memeplex Mechanism and English Vocabulary Teaching at home and abroad. With the purpose of promoting English Vocabulary Teaching in high school, the author intends to find out the active effects of Memeplex Mechanism in English vocabulary acquisition. Therefore, the English teaching method can be improved with the inspiration of this thesis.

Corresponding to this, the main explanation of the following questions: What is the definition of new vocabulary memes. What is the formation mechanism of the new vocabulary memes. What is the relationship of the new vocabulary memes and the memeplex mechanism. After the analysis of memeplex mechanism, the thesis finds the factors of affecting English vocabulary teaching. All these questions are worthwhile to be discussed.

The thesis made a contrastive analysis of the memeplex mechanism and the vocabulary acquisition. And it demonstrated the positive effects of the memeplex mechanism on cultivating Chinese students ability of

achieving active English glossary and grasp their correct usage in specific context.

2. The Significance or The Necessity of This Study

2.1. The conclusion of the research achievements of predecessors

Nowadays, the memetics has sprung up in English vocabulary teaching because of its tremendous potential in providing learners with affluent and extended suggestions during the learning process. Richard Dawkins(2005) is the first one who puts forward and names "meme". In his opinion, a meme conveys the idea of a unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of imitation. Examples of memes are tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes fashions, ways of making pots or of building arches. Just as genes propagate themselves in the gene pool by leaping from body to body via sperms or eggs, so memes propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation.

Naturally, more and more scholars in China such as He Ziran, He Xuelin and Wang Bin, devote to the study of the memetics. Especially in 2008, Professor Wang Chunlei points out that language memes reveal the spread of words and the rule of communication. Furthermore, from the perspective of memetics, language itself is a kind of meme and a unit of transmitting culture. It can be seen in every word, phrase, sentence and article. If a word is regarded as a natural unit of English, every word is a potential meme and will develop into a cluster of memes, that's memeplex. These scholars suggest that the unsettled problems in lexical semantics and pragmatics should be based on the language memes theory so that an on-the-spot investigation can be made in the study of communication.

2.2. The new questions on the basis of the previous achievements

Few discussion has held in combining English vocabulary acquisition with the memeplex mechanism. At the micro-level, there are many categories which are still not explored. For instance, the association and shift of internalization on the basis of the memetics can be established to probe the approach of the replication and transmission of language memes. Accordingly, it can be also applied to verify the necessity of the replication in vocabulary acquisition. Moreover, the inspection of the memetics is inspirational in understanding the phraseology's change. As to the macro-level, the research of English vocabulary meme is deficient. The desire to analyze the formation and operation of the memeplex mechanism is required to fulfill the needs of a flexible approach of vocabulary acquisition. All these factors contribute to the author's idea and designing of this thesis.

3. Memeplex Mechanism

3.1. Meme and Memetics

3.1.1. The definition of meme and memetics

The word "meme" is created by Dawkins (1976) in his book *The Selfish Gene*. It stems from "gene" in biology, which actually refers to the cultural meme genes. Meme is translated to "模因" by professor He Ziran (2005), which is intended to associate it with imitation "模仿", a similar phenomena with gene. Like the breeding of a gene by inheritance, the meme, a basic unit of culture, is spread through imitation. The word "meme" is copied and widely accepted, and then spread and used by the scholars who stand by his viewpoints. Nowadays, it is even recorded in Oxford English Dictionary, means an element of culture that may be considered to be passed on by non-genetic means, esp. Imitation; and in Webster's, means an idea, behavior, style, or usage that spreads from person to person within a culture. In other words, any entity which is self-replicated by imitation can be called a meme.

While memetics is a new theory for interpreting cultural evolution on the basis of Darwinian. It refers to thoughts and ideas which are imitated, spread and generated by human beings. From the perspective of memetics, language as a meme brings to light the laws governing the spread of language. The three following aspects give expression to the language meme. They are the education and knowledge imparting, the utilization of the language itself and the exchange and communication of the information.

3.1.2. The origin and the development of the memetics

With the arising of meme, a seminar lasting for three days is held in Belgium for discussing the current situation and the possibility of the memetics as an independent discipline. The conference comes up to a consensus for proposing to set up a meme taxonomy. Generally, the formation of the definition of the meme experiences two stages. At the first stage, meme is considered as a cultural genetic unit like the ideas, tag lines, fashionable apparel and the apparatus manufacturing (Dawkins, 1976). But at the second stage, meme is the information unit or a replicator in the brain. Its phenotypes in reality are words, music, pictures, even gestures and facial expressions (Dawkins, 1976). Based on the Dawkins' understanding of meme, the memetics becomes a popular object of study for scholars and researchers from various fields such as the pedagogy, the social sciences, the

management and the theology. They all devote to applying the memetics to the real practice in different areas and have many discoveries of great value. However, the study in English vocabulary acquisition with the memetics is still in its infancy. This thesis takes it as a main research object.

3.1.3. The forming process of a meme

A meme comes from an idea and survives on imitation and transmission. Language is one of carriers. Therefore a vocabulary meme is circulated and inherited by language. There are two general patterns of language meme transmission. One is the genotype of the meme. A meme is reproduced in different forms by keeping its original contents. For example, the word "clone" is spread by people all over the world. We all know that "clone" means an animal or plant that has been produced artificially, for example, in a laboratory, from the cells of another animal or plant. A clone is exactly the same as the original animal. In those countries, speaking English, people call it "clone" while in China, we can translate it to "kelong". Likewise, French use "clonage" to tell others about this technology. "clone", "kelong" and "clonage" have the same meaning but are spread out in different forms. The other is the phenotype of the meme. The contents of the meme are changed with the same form while transmitted. Also "clone" can describe it fully. At the beginning, clone only has one implication, which refers to a copied animal or plant. But with the transmission and extensive attention of this word, man extends its denotative meaning. If someone or something is a clone of another person or thing, they are so similar to this person or thing. Like you are a perfect clone of your mother. That's to say, your appearance or personality is just as the same as your mother.

3.2. Memeplex Mechanism

3.2.1. The definition of memeplex mechanism

Language meme is always integrated with the specific context in the process of imitation and transmission, and produce some new relating memeplexes. In other words, memes support mutually and assemble together to constitute memeplexes closely linked (He Ziran, 2005). "Memeplex" is a combination of "meme" and "complex". This word is widely adopted because it complies with the least effort of the cognitive principle. Besides it, we have "language meme" in philology, "contagious meme" in pragmatics, etc. Man creates many other extensive words in different contexts when a new word comes out.

3.2.2. The formation of memeplex mechanism

As the thesis mentioned before, meme is spread out in the education and knowledge imparting, the utilization of the language itself and the exchange and communication of the information (He Ziran & He Xuelin, 2003). Dawkins (1976) states that a meme is transmitted from one brain to another, and copied in the books or the computers. Then it is generated and well known by a majority of human beings. Thus it can be seen that the information stored in the brain is meme, and the information transferred by various ways is also meme. Similarly, the words we learned from teachers or books are copied and delivered to others during the communication (Guo Jing, 2005). When the imitation and transmission happen, memes and memeplexes come into being. "Clone" and its memeplexes can give it a thorough explanatory notes. After learning the meaning of "clone" in the class, students use clone article to represent a copied article, clone film to refer to a reproduced movie. Moreover, the judgment, "it is a

female” , comes to man’s mind when he heard the word “nurse”. Nowadays many men take part in this career, so we have men nurse. In China, children are always polite to call the nurse “sister” but it may sound weird to call a nurse “brother”. So the memes like that are in a weak position to copy and propagate. This memplex will disappear probably sooner or later. This phenomena is called the utilization of the language itself. The last way happens in the communication, especially in a cross-cultural communication, in which it makes memes or memplexes extemporaneously. A student in China majoring in English often talks something unconsciously in both English and Chinese, like “今晚我不想去 party”. There’s no need for translating the word “party” because its meaning is familiar to most Chinese. Another very common phenomena is that almost every student in China has an English name. They greet each other by calling their English names instead of Chinese names in three or even more characters. Many English words seem more widely accepted in Chinese conversations and substitute for some Chinese characters. Interestingly, there is a brutal competition for survival for the fittest when the foreign language memes turn into the native language vocabulary.

3.3. The relationship of meme, memetics and memplex mechanism

In order to make the memplex mechanism serve English vocabulary acquisition better, the thesis decides to probe the relationship between meme, memetics and memplex mechanism. The memetics is a theory or a study whose research target is meme, an idea or element of social behavior passed on through generations in a cultural, especially by imitation. And memes derive and compose memplexes in accordance with the particular contexts. While memplex mechanism reflects the basic rules or principle about the formation and application of memplex. Putting it in another way is that memplex mechanism emerge where memes and memplexes come from, how they form, how they can be applied in daily life, and what rules they should obey.

In a word, memes and memplexes are the essential components in memetics and memplex mechanism.

4. The Vocabulary and Meme

4.1. The relationship of meme and vocabulary

The relationship of meme and vocabulary is that of including and included, subset and aggregation. Vocabulary is a part or a subset of meme which is a cultural unit (an idea or value or pattern of behavior) that is passed from one generation to another by non-genetic means (as by imitation). Memes are the cultural counterpart of genes. While language is just one of categories in the culture, and vocabulary is an integral part of a language. So the relationship between them is shown to all as plain as daylight.

4.2. The formation mechanism of the new vocabulary memes

Language itself is a kind of memes, and meme dwells in language. Any words, phrases, sentences, paragraphs and writings can be memes only if they are copied and spread out by imitation. The vocabulary is the foundation and the essential part in English teaching. As the replicator, it is taught and transmitted in English teaching. That is what we called the vocabulary meme. It usually includes morpheme memes,

word memes and phrase memes.

A morpheme is a dual combination of both sound and meaning, including free morpheme which can be used independently and bound morpheme which has to combine with the stem or the root. The continually developing language brings many new words, which compete with each other to strive for the acceptance of human beings and be translated into different languages. Over the period of the development of English, the morpheme memes intermesh into another new memplex. Those, seldom copied or disseminated, are weak memplexes, which are going to be abandoned early or late. In the contrast, the strong memplexes hold the exuberant vitality. The author takes the prefix “micro-” as an example. “Micro” is copied and widely utilized to compose hundreds of memplexes like “microbe”, “microwave”, “microbiology”, “microblog”, “microsoft” and so on. The suffix “-ist” also brings thousands of new vocabulary memes such as “novelist”, “stylist”, “violinist”, “scientist”, “chemist”, “physicist”, “typist”, etc. “Micro-” and “-ist” combine with other words, and produce the new vocabulary memplexes. They survive only when a large amount of people employ and transmit them.

As to the word memes, they are invented in some particular events. For example, since a well-known political scandal, Watergate, happened, the meme “-gate” which refers to that scandal, has got its space in the vocabulary. Many new word memplexes are brought out companionably like “Irangate”, “Debategate”, “Whitewatergate”, “Hurricanegate”, “Girlfriendgate”. This approach to form new memplexes is called the phenotype of meme. While the genotype of meme is very common. There are a bunch of words to show the act for saying something, such as “speak”, “talk”, “persuade”, “explain” and “doctrine”. These words explain the similar content with different forms. For another example, we have “run”, “jog”, “canter”, “rush” and “dash” to describe different types of running.

The third one is phrase meme, which is enlarged with synonyms or antonyms. These memes also can be clarified to two categories, the phenotype and the genotype. For instance, the lost generation comes to man’s mind. After that, “the beat generation”, “the World War II generation”, “the silent generation”, “the generation X” and “the me generation”. All these words are the phenotypes of the meme “the xxx generation”. But those words like “hundreds of”, “thousands of”, “millions of” and “billions of” are the genotype of the meme “(quantifiers) of”.

4.3. The relationship of the new vocabulary memes and memplex mechanism

The new vocabulary memes come from its original meme and make up memplexes, which are key and basic elements in memplex mechanism. As a result, the memplex mechanism is a study or a theory to explore the formation of new vocabulary memes and the rules of their changes. This mechanism helps people understand and learn new vocabulary clearly and thoroughly. Moreover, having the knowledge of the new vocabulary memes inspires people to figure out some methods or approaches for English teaching and learning. They develop and perfect with mutual interaction and promotion.

5. Memeplex Mechanism and English vocabulary teaching

5.1. The positive factors of Memeplex Mechanism in vocabulary acquisition and teaching

In this part, the thesis devote to solve the three above problems with memeplex mechanism. The formation of meme digs out the positive effects of construct in SLVA. The conception of the word “meme” is inspired by the message and pronunciation of “gene” and “mimetic”. So Richard Dawkins (1976) adopts a similar sequence of characters with “gene” and inherits the meaning of imitation to think about this new word “meme”. In the part of the forming process of a meme, the thesis discusses the forming process of the memeplexes of “clone”. The conception of “a clone sheep”, “a clone article” and “a clone film” all date back to the original meme “clone”. If students catch this points, they can master a bunch of memeplexes after knowing a meme. In the same way, they can grasp and understand a group of vocabulary relating to that new word taught by the teacher. During this learning process, some new vocabulary memeplexes also can be invented by students. However, one thing needs to be noticed, is that meme can be copied and spread out like virus. For example, the bald language like “fuck” and “shit”, is spread out quickly and often used when students learn it from movies. And sometimes they add some other words to emphasize their angry, like “fuck your sister”. In this circumstance, some measures such as to teach them to be polite and control their temper, should be taken to prohibit this kind of memeplexes.

As to the lexical chunks acquisition, the thesis sees new teaching ideas from the memeplex acquisition. A newly born meme always brings about a stack of memeplexes, which are produced and learned unconsciously in the social intercourse. For example, students who learn the meme “triple” and its meaning are asked to try to guess the word for an object, arrangement, or flat shape with three straight sides and three angles. They can easily take the word “triangle” out of their mouth. The same procedure is easily adapted to obtain the other memeplexes like “trimester”, the points of greeting somebody with “Good afternoon”, “Good evening” and “Good night” and figure out the meaning of these memeplexes without translation. That’s to say, teachers can benefit a lot by applying chunk approach instead of teaching every single word independently. This can also enhance the sense of students’ achievement and increase their interest in vocabulary acquisition because that they can grasp a bunch of memeplexes (words) after learning its original meme (a basic word).

Another positive factor is found in the oral production. Actually, the oral production occurs in the transmission of meme and memeplex. The author exemplifies the positive effects with the following examples. As the thesis has mentioned, the meme and memeplex exist and own their tenacious vitality because of imitation and transmission. Likewise students repeat key phrases or expressions over and over again so that the words become ingrained in their brain. The founder of Crazy English, Li Yang, put it to practice. He emphasizes the function and effect of the oral production and encourages English learners to read and practice words, phrases and sentences again and again so as to blurt them out. The process students speak English in daily life is regarded as

the oral production. There are many ways for oral production, such as conversation, discussion and social intercourse. In the class, the teacher shows the meaning of a new word “gracious” and a sentence “Her soft voice and gracious smile put everyone in the room at ease ” on the PowerPoint. And then he asks students to make other similar sentences. This procedure of making sentence is a kind of imitation. When students go back home, their mothers give them a big smile. At this moment, they say “Mom, how gracious you are!”. So the word “gracious” is imitated and transmitted successfully and impressed in their heart. That’s to say, the acquisition of “gracious” completes. To sum this part, the oral production stimulated by the imitation and transmission help students acquire new words easily and effectively.

5.2. The inspiration of Memeplex Mechanism to students

In China, students are normally required and forced to learn words by reciting and dictation. But after exploring the memeplex mechanism, the author discovers some other approaches for SLVA.

First of all, from the genotype and phenotype of the memeplex mechanism, students should learn how to express the meaning in different ways and apply various contents with a same pattern. In other words, students need to learn a bunch of synonyms or antonyms instead of being satisfied with a single word. If students get the word “walk”, “pad”, “track”, “totter”, “stumble”, “stagger” and “hobble” which are use to describe different kinds of walking can be put together and learned. Moreover, if students are told that “a lot of” means many and can be used to modify nouns, they will ratiocinate the meaning and use of “a number of”, “a stack of”, “amount of” and “a bunch of”.

What’s more, students need to pay more attention to the comparison of the differences between words. During learning the vocabulary chunks, many memeplexes relating to a meme are easy to acquire. But it is incredible to ignore their differences. That is the reason why students often make mistakes and lost their scores in the examination. For instance, we all know that “school”, “campus”, “university”, “college” and “institute” have a same meaning for referring to a place used to educate students. Students put them together to remember according to the lexical chunks learning. When they see a sentence like “ our university has 28 schools” in a passage, they will be confused. So there is a certain need for noticing the otherness between memeplexes.

Finally, students can change their traditional thoughts of only playing well the foundation. The majority students who are too shy to speak English in public complain lack of vocabulary. They never make a point of reciting new words, just memorize a huge amount of words crazily without practice. In the end, they trap in a cul-de-sac. From the perspective of memeplex mechanism, to adopt the inverse method instead of learning step by step can do wonders to improve SLVA. At the very beginning, students are trained to make conversations or communicate with people around them in English without just memorizing the words. Meanwhile, they can grasp and master the words perfectly with the help of specific contexts in the process of speaking English. Also language as a kind of tool for communication is triumphantly applied. For example, seeing a school, students can associate with “teacher”, “students”, “library”, “classroom” and “playground”. Or on the way of going to the school, the bus

can take some relating words “bicycle”, “car”, “train” and “plane” into their mind. That’s to say, they can learn a group of memplexes by practicing English in everyday life.

5.3. The inspiration of Memplex Mechanism to teachers

Above all, there is no controversy over the vocabulary chunk teaching method for consummating SLVA. So the thesis puts the lexical chunks teaching in the first place. Bai Renli and Ma Qiuwu (2001) indicate that the lexical chunk is the ideal mode of vocabulary memorization and the teaching of that is suitable for Chinese students. Chen Linxia and He Ziran (2006) underlines it in both the design of vocabulary exercise and glossary teaching in class on the purpose of improving the oral production according to the current situation that active vocabulary of students are woefully inadequate.

Nowadays, the modern language teaching advocates the interactive teaching with special emphasis on the students’ initiative, which is fairly similar to the way of memplex transmission implied in memplex mechanism. The language is inherited from one generation to the next mainly because children imitate their parents’ pronunciation, tone and the way of expression. The transmission of vocabulary memplexes goes from successful memplex copying to the parasitifier, and finally to the host of a parasite. Therefore as to vocabulary teaching procedure, the words moves from teachers to students. The means of vocabulary transfer include listening, speaking, writing and mental lexicon. The teacher can use various teaching methods by combining vocabulary acquisition with those means in order to make the lesson more interesting and inspiring instead of forcing students to memorize.

The most important inspiration is that memes and memplexes survive and keep longer in the transmission of the specific contexts. Similarly, words need to be taught in the specific contexts. In this circumstance, students know how to use different expressions to convey the same thoughts in disparate environments, or learn how to exchange their inner thoughts in authentic English (David, 2000). The memplex mechanism tells us that it is quite practically significant for English teachers to create proper communication context in a vocabulary class, which is a positive way to improve students’ ability of understanding and using those new words. And the flexible and multifarious teaching methods can attract students’ attention and stimulate their interest and motivation in vocabulary acquisition (Zhou Feng, 2008).

However, the study of memplex mechanism is not contradictory with the traditional vocabulary teaching method. By the contrary, the memplex mechanism recommends memorization because memorization maintains words’ fidelity to assimilate students. Moreover, memorization improves the imitation, which is very important to SLVA. Teachers should encourage and correctly guide students to imitate.

6. Conclusion

In this thesis, it chose memplex mechanism to explore the positive effects on English vocabulary acquisition. Compared with the traditional vocabulary teaching methods, it creates them an active and flexible environment in which they could learn words with a great interest if teachers combine the memplex mechanism with vocabulary teaching. After reviewing and analyzing so many literatures, the author finds that the memplex mechanism is very useful and practical for students to master the meaning, usage and collocation of new words. It also plays an important role in English vocabulary teaching. the theory of the memplex mechanism inspires teachers and students a lot not only in vocabulary acquisition but also in other aspects of English learning. Such theory is worthwhile to be applied in the students’ autonomous learning situations. And it coordinates well with the traditional methods of memorization. Nevertheless, how to further its application scales such as applying it in English writing teaching is another question to be solved.

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