

Concept Checking : Semantic Analysis for Language Teachers

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コンセプトチェックング：言語教師のための意味解析

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Abstract :

Learning the vocabulary of a foreign language is perceived as difficult primarily because of the sheer size of the task. However, vocabulary acquisition consists of more than just rote learning. Words are often not easy to translate between languages and the process of making words understandable is a difficult task for teachers. Common problems involve defining a word with itself (circularity), defining a word with vocabulary more complex than the word being defined (obscurity) and reliance of translation, which assumes one-to-one correspondence that may not actually exist. A way around these problems is by concept checking where the teacher asks a series of questions with set answers that work towards an explication that is accessible to learners. This paper will outline the theory behind the practice and give some examples of concept checking for common words in English that are problematical for learners and teachers alike.

要旨：外国語の語彙を習得するのは沢山の単語がある為難しいと思われがちだ。教師は単語の説明を容易にする事は難しい。共通の問題として単語の定義（circularity）、難解な言葉での説明（obscurity）と簡略化しすぎた翻訳だ。この問題を解決するには概念確認（concept checking）が必要であり教師は選択肢を入れながら一連の質問をしていく。それぞれの質問が理解できれば単語の深い意味が見えてくる。この論文は概念確認の原理を述べると共に教師や生徒に説明し難い単語を概念確認で説明する。

Key words : Concepts, semantics, explication

For definitions, as has been said, being only the explaining of one word by several others, so that the meaning or *Idea* it stands for may be certainly known ; languages are not always so made according to the rules of logic, that every term can have its signification exactly and clearly expressed by two others.

John Stuart Locke. *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690/2008, p.263).

Introduction

Teaching a language to non-native speakers of that language demands that the teacher have a thorough understanding of the many and varied components of that language. Besides the grammar of

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the language, its writing system(s), the pronunciation system(s) and so on, one central area of teacher knowledge is the words used by speakers of the language to express meaning. But teaching vocabulary is more than just disbursing neatly packaged words of the target language to passive learners. The teacher must also be able to answer the two recurrent questions that all learners will (hopefully) at some point ask. These two questions are : a) What does word X mean? and b) What is the difference between word X and word Y? Answering these two questions can be a more challenging task than would at first glance seem to be the case.

The problem that speakers of a language (either native or non-native) face is that although they may be able to use a word automatically, and understand its use unproblematically, when asked to define a word, the task may prove beyond them, especially when the questioner is a language learner who perhaps has limited proficiency in the language in question. (In addition, the phenomenon of learners with limited proficiency in the target language being able to sniff out shortcomings in a teacher's explication of vocabulary is one most language teachers would probably recognize.)

I say that some words 'may' prove to be beyond the ability of the teacher to define because some words are certainly easier to define than others. Words such as 'hand', 'dog', 'pen', 'eat', 'big' 'red' and so on should present few problems to a teacher, who can usually illustrate with, gesture, mime, picture or pointing, no matter the level of the learner. However, words such as 'any', 'even', and 'some' may cause the teacher a real headache. Similarly, although a word such as 'see' may be relatively easy to explain superficially, the difference between words like 'see', 'look' and 'watch' or 'say', 'speak', 'talk' and 'tell' may leave the teacher struggling to answer their students' enquiries. Even educated speakers of a language may face difficulties when asked to define such high frequency words or explain the differences between near synonyms.

The pitfalls of definitions

The difficulties of defining words often cause those doing the defining to fall into certain ways of explaining the meaning of words. Speakers may be fluent in their use of the word in question but have limited meta-cognitive awareness of the word. The problems of obscurity, circularity and translation are relevant both for the rarefied debates of academics and semanticists and also for the more prosaic field of language teaching to speakers of other languages.

Obscurity

One common problem recognized in the field of semantics since the time of Aristotle is the problem of obscurity. Simply stated, obscurity refers to a definition of a word which uses language which is more complex than the word being defined. Goddard (2011) states : "Any explanation of a word meaning worth its salt must be framed in terms of simpler, more easily understood terms." (p.33). Goddard then goes on to give the following examples from various dictionaries where the definition of the word would clearly be problematical for anyone whose command of the English language was insufficient to understand the initial term.

- *Take* : accept or receive possession of
- *Make* : to produce by any action or causative agency
- *Fire* : state of combustion.

The problem of obscurity is compounded by the traditional definition style of monolingual dictionaries, which generally favored recourse to abstract and academic terms in the definitions given. An upgrade of language used in a definition does not in-and-of-itself constitute a definition of a word, and is especially problematic for language learners.

Circularity

A second problem that besets many attempts at definition and explication is the problem of circularity. Circularity involves defining one word or term with another word or term without coming any closer to giving a naïve reader or listener any idea of what the original word is about and then defining the second word or term in terms of the first word or term. Teachers (and teaching materials) may fall all too readily into the circularity trap with definitions like this : “So, ‘*speak*’ means to *say* something to someone, you know, like when you *tell* someone something.” Or, “When you look at something, you see it with your eyes.” Such explanations often bewilder students, especially if their own language conceptualizes aspects of reality differently.

Translation

Another aspect of definitions connected to dictionaries and specific to language teaching is the problem of translation. In trying to define a word, it is a temptation to give a word in one language as the exact parallel of a word in another language. In some cases the one-to-one correspondence is more or less justifiable. The (British) English word ‘football’ to all intents and purposes matches the German word ‘Fußball’ or Japanese ‘Sakka’. Similarly, English ‘Snow’, German ‘Schnee’ and Japanese ‘Yuki’ could be described as being semantically equivalent at the level of introspection that is suitable for language learners. However, in many cases no such one-to-one correspondence exists. Locke identified the problem of translation thus :

A moderate Skill in different languages will easily satisfy (sic) one of the truth of this, it being so obvious to observe great store of words in one language which have not any that answer them in another. . . . Nay, if we look a little more nearly into this matter, and exactly compare different languages, we shall find that, though they have words which in translations and dictionaries are supposed to answer one another, yet there is scarce one of ten amongst the names of complex ideas . . . that stands for the same precise idea which the word does that in dictionaries it is rendered by. (1690/2008, p.275).

It is not only complex ideas that are problematic. The English word ‘wear’, referring to clothing, can be rendered in Japanese as ‘Haku’, ‘Kiru’ ‘Kakeru’, ‘Kaburu’ and others, depending on the item being worn. In a reverse example of one-to-many non-correspondence, the Japanese word ‘Noru’, referring to transport, can be translated into English as ‘Get on’, ‘Get in’, ‘Take’, ‘Ride’ and others. So we can see that a word that exists in one language may have several words in another language that all fit the definition to an extent, but none do so fully.

In addition, sometimes words are specific to the linguistic culture of the language in question

and do not readily submit to translation. As Wierzbicka states : “Meanings are not universal, because reality is, by and large, open to different conceptualizations, and different meanings embody those conceptualizations which have emerged within a particular speech community and are shared by its members.” (1996, p.391) For example the cultural practice in Japan of removing shoes before entering a house accounts for the space at an entrance to a house for removing shoes, called ‘Genkan’ in Japanese. The English words ‘lobby’, ‘hall’, ‘porch’ and so on do not really come to grips with the central feature of what a Genkan is, and what it is for, and consequently, most non-Japanese residents of Japan readily incorporate the Japanese word into their active vocabulary, even when speaking a language other than Japanese.

Metacognitive blind spots

Even educated native speakers of a language do not have comprehensive knowledge of the underlying conceptual basis of the lexis of that language. The lack of conceptual lexical knowledge can be illustrated by the following ‘reverse engineering’ exercise : The definition of a word is given thus : “This word refers to an animal. It is often kept as a pet. It is friendly and excitable. It barks and wags its tail.” There is no particular difficulty in identifying the word in question as ‘dog’. However, the following definition experiment is more difficult. “This word is used in comparisons and it means that both of the items in the comparison can be objectively described as possessing the quality of the adjective, but possessing it to a differing extent.”

When presented with this definition by the author, English speakers are usually at a loss, and to date, no one asked by the author has ever been able to hit upon the word so defined. (The word is ‘even’ as in ‘Siberia is even colder than Hokkaido.’)

Now, most English speakers have no difficulty when using or hearing the word used in daily conversation. The problem seems to be that the concept of the word is somehow below a cognitive horizon, not readily available to the intuition. A learner hearing such a definition might be doubly challenged, both by the obscurity of the definition and by the possibility that their native language does not have such a term, or if it does, it likewise lies below the metacognitive horizon in that language as the English word does for the non-specialist native speaker of English.

Concept checking

Now that we have seen some of the problems that may arise with issues of definition, (and there are certainly others) I will turn to concept checking which is a way that meanings can be dealt with in in the language classroom that, if done properly, avoids the pitfalls of obscurity, circularity and so on.

A caveat

From the outset it is conceded that concept checking does not seek to offer a fully comprehensive definition of a particular word or term that would survive critical analysis in a purely intellectual setting. For example, a concept check of the expression ‘used to’ to indicate that something was habitual in the past but is not now, (E.g. “*I used to play tennis in high school.*”) will probably not be helpful if the teacher delves into a further explication involving the fact that ‘used to’ can refer to both past states and past actions that were habitual, (“*I used to have long hair in my teens.*”),

whereas the use of ‘would’ for past habit can refer only to past actions (“*I would get home at midnight on weekdays*”) and not states (“*I would have long hair in my teens*”). If the learners are told explicitly that other senses, meanings and nuances exist, there is no need to fall under the obligation of comprehensiveness and the definition will serve sufficiently for the task of defining a word in the here and now of an ongoing lesson.

Principles of concept checking

Concept checking involves asking learners a sequence of questions about the word or term and, crucially, giving the learners a limited menu of possible answers from which to choose. Once a question has been answered correctly, the next question is then asked until the sequence is complete and the conceptual boundaries of the word or term have been more or less delineated. The guidelines for concept checking are as follows :

- Ask yes/no or multiple choice questions
- The menu of example answers may include ‘We don’t know’
- Do not use the target language in the question
- Do not use language which is more complex than the target language
- Do not ask open ended questions
- Avoid asking ‘do you understand?’

Some Examples

Even

In the section above there was an obscure definition of the word ‘even’ as used in comparison sentences, for example : ‘Siberia is even colder than Hokkaido.’ Following is a concept check sequence that addresses the meaning of this word.

- Is Siberia a cold place? Yes or No? (Answer : Yes.)
- Is Hokkaido a cold place? Yes or no? (Answer : Yes.)
- Are Siberia and Hokkaido the same level of cold? (Answer : No.)
- Which is colder? Siberia or Hokkaido. (Answer : Siberia.)

In this sequence it is made clear that both places in the comparison are conceived of as empirically cold, with Siberia being the colder of the two. Contrast this with a simple comparison : Bill is older than Bob. Even though the comparative structure indicates that there is a difference between Bill and Bob, there is no indication as to whether Bill or Bob are children, adolescents or pensioners. The comparison merely states difference. This can be clarified with a concept check sequence.

- Is Bill old? Yes or no or we don’t know? (Answer : we don’t know.)
- Is Bob old? Yes, no or we don’t know? (Answer : We don’t know.)

This is conceptually challenging to learners as there is a natural tendency to assume that the use of an adjective in a comparison indicates that the referents are objectively old, or tall, or thin and so on, which is not the case with the basic comparison structure, but is the case with the comparative structure using ‘even’.

Any

Any is a polysemous word and as such any concept check should begin with the question, ‘Does this word have one meaning or many meanings?’ (Answer : many meanings) The following section will deal with the meaning in negative sentences referring to countable nouns. Setting the scene of a classroom devoid of human presence, we can state, ‘There aren’t any students in this classroom.’ And ‘There isn’t a teacher in this classroom.’ Ask the students the following or a similar sequence.

- How many teachers are there usually in a classroom? One or more than one? (Answer : More than one.)
- How many students are there usually in a classroom? One or more than one? (Answer : One.)
- How many teachers are in this classroom? Is it zero? (Answer : Yes)
- How many students are in this classroom? Is it zero? (Answer : yes)
- Is the sentence ‘There aren’t any students’ opposite in meaning to ‘There is a student’ or to ‘There are students’? (Answer : There are students.)
- Does the phrase ‘not any’ show singular zero or plural zero? (Answer : plural zero)

This is clearly a conceptually difficult vocabulary item to deal with, even for native speakers of English for whom the concept of singular and plural seems to apply only to positive countable nouns, and for whom the concept of singular and plural zero may seem outlandish. Nonetheless, in this case the word ‘any’ indicates that what is not present is a plurality of things, lending symmetry to the plural/ singular distinction in both presence and absence.

It is worthwhile noting that it is entirely possible to say ‘There is no teacher in this classroom’ and ‘There are no students’ in this classroom. (But again, note the singular and plural forms of the nouns and verbs.) It bears repeating that this concept check sequence is not intended to satisfy the rigorous demands of professional, academic semantic investigation, but rather, to give learners an insight, however partial, into the meaning of a word.

Bored/ Boring

The distinction in meaning between participle adjectives such as ‘bored’ and ‘boring’ is often difficult for Japanese learners to understand and use. Many students categorize the forms erroneously as referring to people (～ed) and things (～ing). A simple approach may be to explicate the cause/effect relationship between the two words. Invoke the scene of a teacher speaking to a classroom of dozing students and elicit the sentences ‘The teacher is boring’ and ‘The students are bored.’ This illustrates usage and also nicely dispels any ‘people versus things’ conceptual errors that the learners may have. The concept may then be checked with the following or similar questions.

- Why do the students feel like this? Because of the teacher or another reason? (Answer : Because of the teacher)

This question makes clear the causal relationship between the teacher’s speaking and the students’ feeling. However, it must be remembered that the learners are operating with a partially realized knowledge of English, so further explication may help the learners get a firmer grasp on the items.

For many students, the presence of a ‘be’ verb followed by a verb + ing suffix is often automatically categorized as a past continuous structure, and hence an utterance such as ‘I was boring last Saturday’ may make immediate sense, indicating that in the past the state of being bored continued for some time for the speaker. What needs to be addressed in the case of participle adjectives is that the familiar structure is doing a different job in this case, namely that the ‘ing’ suffix here is not performing the role of indicating continuous or repeated action, but rather, doing the separate and distinct job of indicating the cause of a feeling. So, prior to explicating the cause/effect relationship some concept checking of suffixes may be in order. For example :

- Does the ‘ed’ of ‘bored’ mean past, present, future, or something else? (Answer : Something else.)
- Does the ‘ing’ of ‘boring’ mean continuous, finished or something else? (Answer : Something else.)

In this case it is vital not to take for granted that the students can differentiate between the different meanings of the suffixes in question. It is all too easy to overlook recycling of language items for different purposes. For example, in German definite articles are recycled as relative pronouns and in Japanese ‘Ga’ doubles as a topic marker and also as a conjunction (‘but’). Native speaker intuition can obscure difficulties that learners may face in recycling morphemes and so on for various meanings and functions.

Conclusion

Words are easy to use but often not so easy to define. The knowledge that native/proficient speakers have of words allows them to select appropriate words within fractions of a second in unfolding discourse, but the knowledge is often not available to introspection. First and foremost, language teachers must have a more detailed knowledge of vocabulary and meanings than the layperson. Secondly, he or she must have the ability to convey some sense of the meaning to learners who may be struggling with concepts that are unfamiliar, either because of the ‘foreignness’ of the word or because of their own linguistic-metacognitive blind spots.

Concept checking can resolve this problem. In addition to helping students understand problematic vocabulary it can also provide the teacher with a good starting point for dealing with word meanings that are as yet unanalyzed but have arisen in the here and now of the unfolding classroom scene. Concept checking can also establish the bona fides of the teacher as a professional rather than merely a native speaker of the target language. Concept checking is a vital resource for all language teachers.

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