

A Pleasure in Words

Teacher	Cheng-lung Chang (張鎮龍)
Book	A Pleasure in Words (字源趣話)
Editor	Peter T. Morris
Publisher	Bookman
Publishing Date	1992/08/01
Paperback	578
Price	280
Content Introduction	<p>In this massy volume, Peter T. Morris collects several etymologically significant English words along with the “background” stories about the words themselves. The stories accompanying these collected English words are not simply interesting anecdotes intended to motivate readers, but also a valuable collection of etymological data tracing back to the origin of the words.</p> <p>This serious research thus results not only in a casual book intended for entertainment, but also a semi-reference book for academic consultation. For any native as well as non-native speakers of English, this book is certainly a must.</p>

Abstract

Based on the actual experience of reading Peter T. Morris' *A Pleasure in Words*, this paper aims to formulate a tentative approach to teaching vocational high school students English vocabulary with the well-established method of etymological analysis. With a long and well-recognized history in the college-level education of foreign language, this method certainly possesses many advantages over other approaches, but for senior high school students, it presents several practical difficulties which we need to take into consideration before we move on.

In the preface, I begin this study with a famous Marxist quote on being “radical,” trying to justify the necessity for etymological analysis in Chinese students' understanding and memorization of English vocabulary, and then move on to the second part to demonstrate how the etymological meaning of an English word deviates from the Chinese translation. In the third part, I make a brief comparison between Chinese and English principles of word-formation, to demonstrate how basic etymological knowledge affects our understanding of individual words. The fourth part is devoted to listing some pros and cons in putting this method into practice, finally coming to the conclusion in favor of etymological approach in the fifth part.

To Be Radical with Words:

The Application of English Etymology to Vocational Senior High School

Classrooms

“To be Radical is to Grasp Things by the Root.”

—Karl Marx

I. Preface: The Root of the Radical Root in Marx’s Slogan.

“To be radical is to grasp things by the root” (Marx 1). In his masterpiece on Hegelian philosophy, *Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*, Karl Marx makes this world-renown statement about how we should approach social problems, which, though not directly related to the practice of English teaching in its proper sense, implies in its implicit overtone a significant lesson for English teachers. Not an English teacher in any sense of the term, Marx actually is trying to present his attitude toward social problems and human existence through the explication of etymological sense of the adjective “radical,” which, according to Merriam-Webster’s 11th Collegiate Dictionary, comes from “radix” in Latin, meaning “root” exactly.

Reading this quote by Marx in reference to an etymological analysis of “radical,” we see the paradoxical contrast between the etymological meaning inherent in the word itself on the one hand, and the actual sense we usually attribute to the word in the daily application on the other. If a person takes a “radical” position in regard to a certain issue, we tend to dub him as an extremist, i.e., a person who deviates from the common ground of social consensus. To be “radical” here means no less than being a person who has been taken far away from the fundamental ground, thus who has lost sight of the root of things. What is really as paradoxical as ironical here is that, as it has been demonstrated above, what the English adjective “radical” carries in its etymological meaning is a position which takes a person, not away from, but back to, the root of things.

The problem of explicating the semantic core of a word through etymological analysis can more complicated, especially when we come to the teaching of English as a foreign language, which inevitably involves the inter-linguistic conflicts between two individual semantic fields, i.e., between English and Mandarin Chinese in the present case.

II. The Semantic Conflict between English and Chinese

To illustrate this semantic conflicts, we may take a closer look at some typical examples of daily English words' etymological meanings in connection with its counterparts in Mandarin Chinese. Let's take "baseball," the national sports both for American and Taiwanese people, "baseball," for example. In the Chinese-speaking world, "baseball" has long been commonly recognized by as 棒球, which can be literally translated as "batball" in Chinese. From the perspective of analysis, it is obvious that the this difference results from the semantic conflicts between the two. While the focus is laid upon a batter's running to the bases in the case of English, in Mandarin Chinese, speakers take the fact of a batter's striking the ball with a bat as the major feature of the sports. This Chinese translation of "baseball" as "batball" (「棒球」) has been so well accepted and then taken for granted by native speakers of Mandarin Chinese that the obvious discrepancy in the two languages' different stresses on the same target has been completely left aside and ignored. What is revealed through this brief comparison is the tremendously huge gap between the semantic fields of the two languages.

The same phenomenon of semantic shift can be found in cases of other words as well. For example, while "Softball" is dubbed as "soft" because it is regarded as a sports activity milder than baseball by speakers of English, it is translated to Chinese as 「壘球」, which can be literally translated back to English as "baseball." It is

interesting to notice the ironic fact that English speakers' "baseball" is "batball" for speakers of Chinese and that English speakers' "softball" is "baseball" for speakers of Chinese. This phenomenon of semantic shift from one language to another can be further extended to other linguistic items as well, such as "television" (電視, literally meaning "electric vision" in Chinese), "telephone" (電話, literally meaning "electric talk" in Chinese), "bicycle" (腳踏車, literally meaning "feet-stepping vehicle" in Chinese), "binoculars" (望遠鏡, literally meaning "watching-far glasses). The conclusion here is obviously that this phenomenon of semantic shift is in no way an individual case, but an obligatory rule inherent in the linguistic structure itself, a rule, in other words, that can be extended to all words in a linguistic system *ad infinitum*.

With these two examples of "baseball" and "softball," we come to detect a difference in the logic of linguistic abstraction behind the constitution of individual words in all languages. To formulate a practical approach to teaching vocabulary in a high school classroom, we have to explicate this logic of linguistic abstraction by delving into the principle of word-formation both in Chinese and English.

III. The Principles of Word-Formation in Chinese and English

In the Chinese-speaking world, the most famous work on this subject of word-formation is doubtlessly 說文解字 by 許慎, in which the author formulates the so-called Six Principles of Word-Formation (六書) in the Chinese language: 象形、指事、會意、形聲、轉注、假借。To illustrate the actual process of Chinese word-formation, we may quote some passages from the preface to this Chinese masterpiece. In the preface (說文解字序), the author lists these six principles with an explaining line to each of six principles: 「一曰指事。指事者，視而可識，察而見意，上、下是也。」「二曰象形。象形者，畫成其物，隨體詰詘，日、月是也。」「三曰形聲。形聲者，以事為名，取譬相成，江、河是也。」「會意者，比類合

宜，以見指撝（同「揮」），武信是也。」「轉注者，建類一首，同意相受，考老是也。」「假借者，本無其字，依聲託事，令長是也。」（許慎 說文解字序）。 As the author clearly indicates in the preface, the logic behind the linguistic abstraction of Chinese is not based on the idea of sign as an abstract pointer referring to a concept, but on an intricate mechanism in which the pen strokes are intended to work as the pictorial imitation of the shape of the actual objects in the world. While the vocabulary of the English language is mainly constituted of pure random combination of alphabets, the individual words in the Chinese language can be best described as individual “pictures.” It is in this sense that the Chinese words are often referred to not as “words,” but as “characters.”

While the idea of the Six Principles of Word Formation in Chinese (六書) is an exotic and alien concept to speakers of English, it is a household commonsense in the Chinese-speaking world, even to senior high school students. On the other hand, the word-formation process of English vocabulary presents itself as a blocking obstacle to speakers of Chinese, even though it has been familiar to educated native speakers of English. This gap between Chinese students and English as a foreign language for them leads us to see a need to formulate a proper introduction of English etymology to Chinese students.

While the Chinese language begins with the pictorial imitation of actual objects through pen strokes, English depends on the combination of three elements into a single word: the prefix, the word root, and the suffix. Explaining these three elements in theoretical terms may be too abstract to convey a clear idea of English etymology; Some typical examples of English words can do a better job here.

Let us take a common English adjective “predictable” for example. This seemingly complex word, if we submit it to the etymological analysis, can be broken down into three parts, “pre,” “dict,” and “able.” The first three alphabets, “pre,” is a

prefix, the part put in the initial place of an English word, which means “before,” or “in advance”; the second part of this word, “dict,” is a **word root**, the central semantic core which determines the overall meaning of a word, meaning “to speak” here; the third part of this word, “able,” is a **suffix**, the ending part which is attached to a word to determine the kind of speech the word belongs to, meaning “having the ability to do something.” Combining the three parts of an English word, the prefix “pre,” the word root “dict,” the suffix “able,” we can come up with an integrated semantic picture for “predictable,” which means no less than “able to speak about the outcome of an event even before it takes place.”

This pattern, as we have presented above, is not an individual case, but represents the general structure of an English word, in which we can see a clearly meaningful correspondence between the isolated segments of prefix, word root, and suffix on the one hand, and the integrated semantic structure of a word on the other. Thus from this process of integrating segments of prefix, word root, suffix into an English word, I would like to propose the argument that from the perspective of semantic analysis, the most basic element for an English word is not individual alphabets, but the combination of alphabets as prefix, word root, and suffix, just in the same way a Chinese word is composed not of individual pen strokes, but of several 部首。

IV. Pros and Cons in the Etymological Analysis

This recognition of the necessity for etymological analysis in the practice of English teaching carries a significance for Chinese students which can never be overestimated. Several advantages from this approach can be listed here. The most noticeable strength is doubtlessly the precision with which Chinese students understand every single English word. In the traditional approach of studying

English through English-Chinese translation, students are asked to memorize English vocabulary with its Chinese translation, even without slightest awareness of its etymological meaning, thus at an extremely high risk of being misled by the double-edged sword of translation method. On the other hand, instead of taking a detour on the way to understanding English vocabulary, the approach of etymological analysis delves into the semantic core of English words, thus presenting a vivid picture for each English word to Chinese students. Apart from this advantage of precision, economy is a noticeable strength as well. Although students are required to memorize extra-segments of prefix, word root, and suffix, thus at a risk of wasting valuable time, all these etymological units will reappear in other English words; in other words, it can be reused and recycled again and again. The other side of the economical strength of this approach is that with this etymological method, the Chinese students can arrange some related English words in accordance with the repetition of word roots, thus setting up a database of vocabulary in which any wanted word can be easily retrieved through the share of word roots.

There are some visible disadvantages on the horizon as well. The first one is the psychological barrier in which both teachers and students hold a strong but false belief in the impossibility and futility of this approach. There may be this problem in the way indeed, but eventually it will turn out to be nothing but the lack of actual experience of practicing this method in the past. Teaching English vocabulary with the method of etymological analysis is a common practice at the college level; doing it in the high school classrooms will probably be taken as a outrageous scandal. As positive experience is accumulated, this problem of psychological barrier will dissolve itself along the way automatically. The other possible obstacle is the actual limitation of resources available to teachers and students in the real situation of high school classrooms. Just like other professional fields, there are several different

levels of textbooks and materials available to teachers and students. As long as we spend time researching for appropriate materials to meet the actual needs in the teaching and learning situation, this method will be more accessible to teachers as well as students.

V. Conclusion

In conclusion, English etymology is a complementary, as well as necessary, part for students' acquisition of English vocabulary. The problem is not whether, but how, we should employ this approach to help students study English. Considering Students' actual limited proficiency in English, instructors can initiate this approach by instilling simple suffixes step by step into students in the classrooms, thus opening a royal road to the study of English vocabulary for teachers as well as students.

Works Cited

- Marx, Karl. *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*. Trans. Annette Jolin and Joseph and O'Malley. London: Cambridge UP, 1982.
- Morris, Peter T. *A Pleasure in Words*. Taipei: Bookman Books, 1992.