

# Analysis of Semantics of a Selected Lexical Item and its Pedagogical Implications

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**Abstract:** The article demonstrated the importance of semantics of vocabulary in the pedagogical context by analyzing a commonly used word—old.

**Keywords:** Semantics; Old; Denotation and Connotation; Pedagogy

## Introduction

An English word—old with a range of meanings and uses was identified in the article; then it analyzed its semantics with focus on denotation, connotation and collocation and finally discussed its pedagogical implications in the ESL/EFL class.

### 1. Rational for choosing Old

Old is a very frequently and widely used word in English. For this reason, it is usually included in the front part of an English teaching pedagogical list. Therefore it may also be one of the beginning words for the English learners to learn English. Because of the complexity of the meanings and uses of the word, the learners may find it difficult to comprehend and produce with it properly. Therefore, the appropriate understanding and use of the word may become very important for the English learners, due to the reason that the knowledge of the word's connotation and collocation may be different from their L1 background.

### 2. Meanings set out

Old is an adjective word which is defined in Collins Cobuild English Language Dictionary to describe someone who has lived for many years and is no longer young. For example, we can say an old woman or an old man, etc. Old can also be used as the attributive to describe someone who is known for a long time; familiar, such as an old friend, etc. Old is usually used with a period of time or with how to describe a length of time. For instance, how old are you, a four-year-old boy, etc. Old can be used to describe something as well, if something that has existed for a long time and is no longer new or no longer in a good or new condition. For example, we can say old houses, clothes, etc.

There are also some different meanings of old in the idioms. For example, old boy/girl means the former pupil of a particular school; the old maid means the unmarried woman and old chap/bean may be used by elder man of the middle or upper classes as a familiar form of address when talking to another man.

When exploring more meanings of old with other source such as lyrics, the meaning of old sometimes represents a strong emotion of cherishing the past. In Delange Ilse's lyrics, the old tears means the tears shed because of the unforgettable lost love. When old used in some literature, it may represent the affection and intimacy, for example, in Salinger's novel—the catcher in the rye (1946)<sup>[1]</sup>. Old Spencer, old Selma, etc. are all used to indicate the intimate relationship between the characters.

### 3. Commentary on the meanings

A commentary is made with focus on the following aspects: denotation/connotation and collocation.

#### 3.1 Denotation and Connotation

Denotation is defined by Jackson (1988)<sup>[2]</sup> as the relationship between words and entities that we want to talk about in our experience of the word, whereas connotation relates to the associations that a word has over and above its denotation.

One of the denotations of old is to describe people who are no longer young. However, its connotation may be more complex. In general, when old is used with people, it usually connotes the people who have limited regenerative abilities and are more prone to disease, syndromes, and sickness than other. Moreover, in English, when old is put together with the word woman, it may indicate a negative connotation of bad memory, slow reaction, gossip, etc; whereas the situation is quite different if we use old with man. It may not have the same connotation with the old woman. It can be recognized from so many jokes about the old women not the old men. Since old may have some negative connotations when it describes someone, the expression of old people is usually not suitable to use in a formal context such as the Times news or a government report. Instead, to be neutral or polite, the words like the elderly or senior citizen will be used. The situation, however, may be different from another socio-cultural background (Gairns.R. & S. Redman

1986:19)<sup>3]</sup>For example, for the Chinese people, who are deeply influenced by the Confucianism, Old usually represents the attitude of respect and its connotation is often positive.

Old can also denote something that has existed for a long time and is no longer new. Yet, when it is used to describe a place, such as a city or a house, its connotation may be different. If we use old city to depict a city with a long history, its connotation may be quite different from the way we use ancient to describe it. The former may focus more on the long history; however, the later may connote an emotion of appreciation and respect of the city because of its value of the long history (A S Hornby 1989:1021)<sup>4]</sup>. Therefore, the emotion and attitude attached to its uses may differ.

### 3.2 Collocation

Collocation is defined by Nation (2001: 317)<sup>5]</sup>as a term to refer to a group of words that belong together, either because they commonly occur together or because the meaning of the group is not obvious from the meaning of the parts. Old has a wide range of collocational items, for example old men, house, cars clothes, how old are you, etc. Yet the collocational relationships between these items may be different, some are strong and some are not and some are even weak. The idioms of old boy, old maid, etc. are usually strongly collocated items. The reason is the items almost always occur together and the meaning of the whole is not deducible from the meaning of the parts. (Nation 2001:332)<sup>5]</sup> Old people, old house, old car, etc can also be seen as collocations; however, they are not collocated as strong as the idioms. Nevertheless, they are all frequently used collocations, especially in our daily life. What is worth mentioning here is how old are you can be considered both as strongly collocated group and frequently used ones. On the contrary, the expression of old tears mentioned in section 2 may be an extremely unusual and weak collocation and this untypical collocation, which is usually part of the creativity and the imaginative dimension we find in the art (McCarthy 1990:14)<sup>6]</sup>.

## 4. Pedagogical implications discussion

From the commentary made above, some pedagogic implications in the EFL/ESL class are discussed in the following aspects.

1)Denotations usually have a conceptual and in normal use have no emotional or evaluative associations (Gairns.R. & S. Redman 1986:19)<sup>3]</sup>. Therefore, it is the primary stage for the learners to get known the meaning of a word. When teaching the denotations, two methods may be used. Firstly, the teacher can use some L2 synonyms to explain the word, as most of the dictionary may do. Secondly, the teacher can directly use the learners' L1 to make a translation.

2)Connotation is more complicated in English teaching, for the items may have emotion or overtones attached which may either come from different contexts or socio-cultural associations (Gairns.R. & S. Redman 1986:19)<sup>3]</sup>. Hence if the learners find some difficulty in understanding the connotation. The teacher firstly should better teach the word in the context. The most obvious vehicle for dealing with this aspect of vocabulary teaching may be text work (Gairns.R. & S. Redman 1986:39)<sup>3]</sup>—to set up a real context of using the word for the learners. Yet when the connotation confusion comes from the socio-cultural background knowledge, the teacher should both consider the similarity and difference of the L1 and L2 socio-cultural backgrounds. On one hand, the teacher should take advantage of the similarity to facilitate the learners to comprehend the connotation of the word. Normally similar knowledge of the learners' L1 and L2 may help them to comprehend the word easier (M.McCarthy 1997:2)<sup>7]</sup>. On the other hand, the teacher can make a comparison of the connotations in different socio-cultural backgrounds. By emphasizing the difference, the learners may raise their awareness of comprehending and producing it in a more appropriate way.

3)Collocational knowledge is considered as the basis of language learning and using (Nation 2001:321)<sup>5]</sup>. However, a word may be collocated with a wide range of items; the collocational relationships of the items are different and the frequency of the collocations is not the same as well, the teacher thereby should pay attention to the issue of how and when to teach the collocations. In general, the most frequent collocations are usually the most important ones (Nation 2001:321)<sup>5]</sup>, for example old men, house, how old are you, etc. Therefore, they are necessary for the learners to know and the teacher to teach. Strongly collocated items such as the idioms should better be taught with cautions. Because of their strongly collocational relationships, they should be taught as a whole in order to help the learners to comprehend and produce. Moreover, they should be taught according to their usefulness (Gairns.R. & S. Redman 1986: 36)<sup>3]</sup>: the frequent and strong collocations should be taught before the less frequent ones.

## References:

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