Cultural Words—A Literature Review

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Good language learners know how to acquire new vocabulary day by day. Cultural words are included in the wide range of words and expressions. As far as this succinct study is concerned, the authors investigate theoretical frameworks on cultural words and give appropriate comments and assessment. Key research methods are accumulating and analyzing findings from books, articles on cultural words and teaching vocabulary. Findings reveal that cultural words have been the topic researched by a number of authors in Vietnam and in the world for its significance in linguistics. The aspects which have been clarified as theoretical framework consist of different definitions and classification of cultural words, meaning of cultural words, and strategies for teachers to teach English vocabulary.

Keywords: cultural words, teaching vocabulary, meaning of cultural words

Introduction

Acquiring vocabulary frequently is considered as a key to success in mastering a foreign language. Goulden, Nation, and Read (1990) suggested that a native speaker of English knew around 20,000 words families. For each year of his early life, a native speaker added on average around 1,000 words families a year to their vocabulary. Therefore, it could be implied that a second language learner needs to know a very large number of words (Nation, 2001, p. 9). Among the common range of vocabulary, cultural words account for a large number. Therefore, cultural vocabulary has been concerned by numerous linguistic researchers in Vietnam and in other countries.

The research focuses on theoretical frameworks of cultural vocabulary in terms of definition, classification, and meaning; after that, comments are written based on the discussed theories.

Literature Review

Definition of Cultural Words

There exist a few definitions of cultural words proposed by authors in Vietnam and in other countries. Wierzbicka (1997, p. 5) said that, in a sense, it may seem obvious that words with special, culture-specific meanings reflect and pass on not only ways of living characteristic of a given society but also ways of thinking. She considered cultural key words as extremely vital and revealing words in a certain culture (pp. 15-16). Another research done by Li, Ran, and Xia (2010) called cultural words as words with image culture, explained that the words are the results of long-lasting history and culture of tribes, closely associated with traditional legend or ancestors' worship.

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In Vietnamese linguistics, Nguyen Van Chien (2004) emphasized that, cultural vocabulary is initially a fundamental unit among sources of cultural words of a language. He added through meaning and semantic structure of vocabulary, cultural words are closely associated with definitions related to certain characteristics of people's culture. He asserted that, they are forms of languages reflecting definitions of recording basic tribal cultural features; as well, content of symbols from culture always reflects unique culture of a language when contrasting them with equivalent symbols of words in another language. He clarified that on the other side, cultural vocabulary, as fundamental symbols of languages, always shows distinctive things of the world outside the language.

Basing on the previous theoretical frameworks of cultural words, Nguyen Lien Huong (2018, p. 38) defined cultural key words as words of fundamental common vocabulary in a language with culture-specific meaning, reflecting characteristics of social life, human community's thinking in that society, having high frequency of appearance and a wide range of usage.

In terms of criteria to define cultural words, Wierzbicka (1997, p. 16) explained that the words are of common vocabulary, frequently used on a typical semantic aspect, and finally put in the central position of a particular complete phrase.

Turning to forms of cultural words, Wierzbicka (1997, p. 17) confirmed, cultural words were not only single words but also common collocations, set phrases, grammatical constructions, proverbs, and so on. Naturally, cultural vocabulary is expressed in a variety of forms.

The definition collected by Nguyen Lien Huong is easy to understand and recognize cultural words; thus, the authors are most interested in this one.

Classification of Cultural Words

Cultural words have been categorized by a number of researchers. Hereinafter several selected ways are to classify this special type of words.

To begin with, Newmark (1988, p. 94) categorized cultural words into five smaller types, as follows: (1) ecology which covers flora, fauna, wind, valley, and mountains; (2) material culture or artefact which covers food, cloth, housing and city, transportation; (3) social culture which covers work and leisure; (4) organization which covers customs, activities, procedures, political and administrative concepts, religion, arts, and (5) gestures and habits.

Two other linguists namely Balaban and Çağlayan (2014) investigated common cultural Turkish words in Albanian and Greek languages. These writers divided cultural words into 17 categories, as below: (1) plant names; (2) animal names; (3) food culture; (4) goods, material, or object words; (5) maritime-related words; (6) argo words; (7) business and money, weight, number and size; (8) everyday cultural (abstract) words; (9) urban planning, building, building materials and related words with hand tools; (10) nomenculaton words; (11) games-fun words; (12) military (war and peace) concepts and words; (13) business, occupational and vocational names; vocational equipment and Supplies; (14) geographical terms; (15) clothing and finery, fabrics, leather, rope, embroidery, and accessories; (16) terms of medicine and health, human and animal limbs; (17) paint, color, fragrance, and cosmetic.

Alonso and Ponte (2015) proposed the following classification for cultural words, specifically, into 12 types.

Table 1

Classification of Cultural Words

Everyday living	Food, working, school, holidays, leisure activities, clothes, housing.
Cultural heritage	Famous monuments and people, literature, TV shows, movies, music.
National identity	Languages, religions, nationality, history, humour, art and politics from different cultures.
Popular culture	Rites, traditions, celebrations, festivals, social conventions, dances, discos, religious observances and values, types of music, among others.
Society	Living standards, classes, urban tribes, minorities, family structures, regional cultures, and subcultures.
Geography	Countries, continents, cities, towns, streets.
Stereotypes	Typical features attributed to certain cultures.
Languages	Borrowings, informal register, idioms, collocations.
Worldwide issues	Political, economic, social, and environment issues.
Institutions and organizations	Official institutions and organizations from different countries.
Varieties	Words from other varieties of English.
Social interactions	Greetings, apologies, politeness.

The final way of classification is the one to choose for the authors to collect cultural vocabulary and divide them into smaller groups for further research on cultural words in English textbooks.

Meaning of Cultural Words

The topic of meaning of cultural words has been so far discussed widespread in Vietnam and in the world. A variety of authors possess both similar and different viewpoints.

Smirnitskiy (1957) defined that meaning of words is the natural reflection of objects, phenomena, or relationship in awareness (or psychological composition similar in nature, formed on the reflection of separated elements in reality) in the structure of words in terms of their inner side (Nguyen Lien Huong, 2018, p. 21).

Ullman (1967) clarified that meaning of a word is the relation between sound of the word and its content of definition. He drew a triangle of meaning, in which he focused on distinguishing between linguists, logicians, and psychologists. He assumed that it should not be considered the same between viewpoint, position of linguists with that of logicians and psychologists.

Another researcher called Lyons (1995) changed the triangle of meaning into one called "triangle of signification" with three tops, that is, signal, definition, and things signified. He thought that content of meaning definition consisted of numerous parts distinguished in functions and contents; and it is necessary to distinguish different types of meaning.

In Vietnam, numerous linguists expressed their interest in definition of meaning of words. According to Do Huu Chau (1999, p. 103), meaning of a word is a spiritual entity. He drew a meaning pyramid of spatial geometry illustrating relation between such entities as word and elements which were separated. He also classified meaning of words into four major categories: symbolized, significative, expressive, and grammatical meaning.

Le Quang Thiem (2008, p. 86) made it clear that, meaning is an abstract spiritual entity existing in every expression, level of language so that it can function as a tool of communication, thinking, and all other diverse specific functions, especially in speech, text, and discourse. Nguyen Thien Giap (2008, p. 312) held the opinion that, meaning of a word is a series of relation of the word with other phenomena including things, process, nature and symbol, definition and other words, as well.

Regarding meanings of selected cultural words, there witnessed numerous research papers. In *Semantics, culture and cognition—Universal human concepts in culture-specific configurations*, Wierzbicka (1992) studied different dimensions of psychology, emotion, and ethics throughout comparing meanings of couples of words in English and Russian, that is: *soul, memory and heart*; *fate and destiny*; *courage, bravery, risk*, and so on. As well, Wierzbicka figured out and contrasted meanings of a few cultural key words in Anglo English, including: *privacy*, *personal autonomy*, *fairness*, *mind, reasonable, sense, evidence, experience* (Wierzbicka, 2010), Australian English: *bloody*, *bullshit*, *whinge*, *dob in* (Wierzbicka, 1997; 2002), Russian: *duša* (soul), *sud'ba* (fate), *toska* (thirst), *iskrennost'* (genuineness), *pravda* (truth), *obščenie* (communication), and *avos'* (possible) (Wierzbicka, 1997; 2002; 2010), Polish: *przykro* (annoyingly), *rodzina* (family), *wolność* (freedom) (Wierzbicka, 1997). One pivotal thing to bear in mind is that the principles for semantics analysis practiced by Wierzbicka were also utilized in analyzing cultural key words.

Levisen (2012) continued the direction of Wierzbicka's research on several cultural key words. In details, in *Cultural Semantics and Social Cognition—A Case Study on the Danish Universe of Meaning*, he analyzed systematically, from the perspectives of semantics and national pragmatics, a few Danish cultural key words, that is, *hygge* (warmth)*, tryghed* (security), *lykkelig* (happiness), verb *synes* (seem), *và mener* (think), etc.…in the light of theoretical framework of Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) (Goddard & Wierzbicka, 1994; 2002).

There appear a few works done on meaning of words in Vietnam. Nguyen Van Chien (2004) was interested in Vietnamese vocabulary. He classified cultural vocabulary into three sub categories: (1) words denoting things, phenomena, definition…of natural world; (2) words denoting things, phenomena, definition…of society/organization and social structure that human beings create and obey; (3) words denoting things, phenomena, definition…relating to awareness of men themselves and about men. He determined aspects of meaning in symbols of cultural words and semantic organization of these words; he owned the opinion that, this process was considerably controlled by cultural and linguistic principles of each country. He explained, cultural words, as basic symbols of language, reflected its outside world.

Additionally, Nguyen Lien Huong (2018) overviewed meaning of words in the relationship with culture in Vietnamese and international studies, compared cultural and lexical semantics of Vietnamese and English cultural keywords, and also established a framework to compare cultural keywords. More specifically, her thesis compared and contrasted two groups: the semantics of cultural keywords with specific references and the semantics of cultural keywords with non-specific references between Vietnamese and English; as well, she revealed the similarities and differences on the linguistics (characteristics of semantics) and culture (characteristics of social life, perceptions, thinking...) between two cultural keywords groups of Vietnamese and English community. Two groups of cultural words were discussed, that is, the group with real referential things (*land*, *water*, *house*, *man*) and another group without real referential things (*dragon*, *ghost*, *fairy*).

Author Lê Thi Kieu Van (2017, p. 15) analyzed the role, functions, and meaning of four cultural keywords: *fate-hometown-face-soul* in Vietnamese people's awareness and action compared to English and Russian. She clarified several cognitive features of Vietnamese people accompanying with similarities and differences between Vietnamese and English, Russian. The author consulted typical linguistic materials (Vietnamese, English, and Russian), with sociology survey data, to figure out conceptions used by Vietnamese for painting the world picture in words differed from other languages during expressing the same conception.

Method

The following methods were applied for the research paper. First and foremost, the authors consulted linguistic books and journals on vocabulary and cultural words. Moreover, they also read and quoted crucial sentences from books and journals on teaching and learning vocabulary. Finally, they analyzed and commented on theoretical framework of cultural vocabulary painted by a diversity of authors.

Findings and Discussion

Definition of Cultural Words

This research mentioned definitions of cultural words by both Vietnamese and foreign linguists. They are Wierzbicka (1997), Li, Ran, and Xia (2010), Nguyen Van Chien (2004), and Nguyen Lien Huong (2018). Wierzbicka (1997) was one of the very first researchers giving definition of cultural words. She is also a big name in terms of cultural keywords as for her large number of works related to the topic. In fact, there have been different researchers discussing definition of cultural words. Within this research, they took some into account. The definitions shared both similarities and differences. The authors found the definition collected by Nguyen Lien Huong informative and easy to comprehend and follow.

Classification of Cultural Words

The piece of writing discussed ways of classifying cultural words given by three research papers. Newmark (1988) categorized cultural vocabulary into five groups. Balaban and Çağlayan (2014) classified this special type of words into 17 categories. Alonso and Ponte (2015) divided cultural words into 12 smaller groups. The authors tended to be favored by the final way of categorizing cultural words as this is an easy-to-implement and practical one to divide cultural words for genuine purposes of teaching and learning foreign languages.

Meaning of Cultural Words

As far as the research paper is concerned, definition of meaning of words was discussed by a few authors, that is, Smirnitsky , Ullman (1967), Lyons (1995), Do Huu Chau (1999), Le Quang Thiem (2008), Nguyen Thien Giap (2008). These researchers have been key figures in terms of word meaning. The aspect of linguistics, as a result, has been noticed and studied by a variety of linguists and researchers.

Our research, as for limited time, mentioned several authors' works. They are: Wierzbicka (1997), Levisen (2012), Nguyen Van Chien (2004), Le Thi Kieu Van (2017), and Nguyen Lien Huong (2018). These researches on word meaning are all typical and outstanding. Cultural vocabulary is included in common vocabulary; thus, the meaning of this group of words follows the above-mentioned rules.

Conclusion

From all the findings discussed above, it could be asserted that, cultural vocabulary has so far been a noticeable topic for study among linguists and those who are concerned. Definition, classification, and meaning of cultural vocabulary have been clarified based on different authors' research. Both Vietnamese and foreign researchers have been named, relating to the topic.

For limited time and study scope, the authors expect to expand their scope with many more renowned and experienced researchers' viewpoints.

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