

Lexical Gaps: Their Filling and Impacts

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The issue of lexical gaps is one of the major concerns in linguistics. By confining it to one and the same language and redefining a lexical gap as any lexical item which can potentially occupy a reasonable slot but does not do so in reality in a lexical field, this paper conducts an exploration into the devices for their filling with a purpose to highlight the impacts thus arising.

Keywords: lexical gap, filling, impacts

Introduction

In the linguistic system, vocabulary is of vital importance in grammatical structuring and meaning making thanks to its role both as a carrier of language and as a drive for language development. According to Saeed (2009, p. 63), the vocabulary of a particular language is not just a random list of lexemes. As a matter of fact, the vocabulary is organized in terms of lexical fields. A lexical field is a group of lexemes which belong to a particular activity or area of specialist knowledge, such as the terms in cooking or sailing; or the vocabulary used by doctors, coal miners or mountain climbers. However, some lexical fields lack integrity in that some lexemes which should and could occur are absent. Starting with a definition of what a lexical gap is, the current paper explores the possible methods for compensating lexical gaps and reveals the consequential impacts thus arising.

What Are Lexical Gaps?

Lexical gaps are also known as lexical lacunae. Take the English nouns *horse* as an example. As a hypernym, its denotation covers both *stallion* (male horse) and *mare* (female horse). However, with the words referring to *cows* and *bulls*, there is no such a hypernym which covers both *cow* and *bull* in denotation. The shortage of such a hypernym is called a lexical gap. Addressing lexical gaps from a structuralist perspective, Lyons (1977, pp. 301-305) defines lexical gaps as slots in a patterning. Among Chinese linguists, Wang (1989) defines lexical gaps as empty linguistic symbols and Fan (1989) defines them as empty spaces in a lexeme cluster.

Based on Chomsky's (1965, p. 170) expounding, Li (2007, pp. 114-115) proposes that three aspects must be taken into consideration in defining lexical gaps: the rules of phonological system, the rules of morpheme combination and the rules of sememe combination. That is to say, a lexical item which has the potential to materialize, but does not actually materialize, in the vocabulary according to the rules governing the phonological system, the morpheme combination and the sememe combination of the language in question constitutes a lexical gap. On the other hand, the items which are unlikely to materialize by any, or a

combination, of the three above criteria does not constitute a lexical gap. thus, the fabrications *crlikbmnapd* and *lyfriend* fail to constitute lexical gaps because the former does not conform to the phonological rule and the latter does not conform to the rule of morpheme combination. It is argued that although Chomsky's defining criteria is mainly proposed to address lexical gaps in English, they are also conducive to the definition of lexical gaps in Chinese and other languages. Nevertheless, in order to give a more precise description to lexical gaps which exist in every particular language, this paper redefines lexical gaps as follows: a lexical gap refers to the lack of a certain lexeme in a certain lexical field inside one and the same language. In other words, a lexical gap is a potential lexical item which has the likelihood to materialize but in fact does not materialize in the vocabulary, and which constitutes a reasonable compensation for the vocabulary if it materializes.

Problems With Existing Studies on Lexical Gaps

Adopting a cross-cultural perspective, existing studies on lexical gaps concentrate too much on the exploration into the lack of equivalents in the process of translating from the source language to the target language. As every translation practitioner knows, it is very common that a term expressing a particular idea or concept in the source language does not have a corresponding equivalent in the target language, in which case the translator has to resort to a group or a phrase to give full expression to the idea or concept which is expressed by one word in the source language. For example, the word *nakkele* in Tulu, a language in India, does not have an equivalent either in English or in Chinese. Therefore, when translating the word from Tulu into English or Chinese, we have to use a phrase to do justice to its meaning. In English, it can be expressed by the phrase "a man who licks whatever the food has been served on"; in Chinese, it can be expressed by the phrase "舔任何盛放食物的器皿的男人". Another example is the word "gigil" in Tagalog, which also does not have an equivalent either in English or in Chinese. It can only be rendered into a phrase "the irresistible urge to pinch or squeeze something cute" when it is translated into English, or "看到漂亮东西情不自禁要捏一下、掐一下的冲动" in Chinese.

With regard to these cross-linguistic lexical gaps, Svensen (2009, pp. 271-273) divides them into two kinds in terms of fields they are mainly concerned with: lexical gaps in political systems and lexical gaps in habits and customs. The former refers to the lexical gaps resulting from the absence of the terms in the target language for the particular political, economic and legal institutions which are readily lexicalized in the source language, such as *the Electoral College*, *the Federal Reserve System* in the USA. The latter refers to the lexical gaps resulting from the absence of the terms in the target language for the historical events, customs and festivals, such as *Thanksgiving*, *Boston Tea Party*. Since both of them are products of the lack of culture-loaded words in the source language, they cannot be translated word for word. Instead, they have to be translated freely and be added with annotations if necessary in order that the target language readers can have an accurate understanding of the source language text.

It is contended that although cross-linguistic lexical gaps deserve our attention, yet studies on lexical gaps should by no means be confined to them alone because focussing on them alone is sure to lead to the neglect of lexical gaps within one and the same language, which, in the strict sense, are the target of studies on lexical gaps, as mentioned in section one. In light of this, this paper solely deals with lexical gaps within one and the same language and explores the resulting impacts of their fillings on the language systems.

Filling Methods of Lexical Gaps

As is known to all, language is always on the change. With the elapse of time and the development of technology, great changes are sure to take place in social conditions and human thoughts, which leads to continuous emergence of things and ideas which used to be considered impossible. For this reason, trite expressions which are used to convey existing and age-honored ideas or concepts fall short of ever increasing needs on the part of the general public. It is against this background that novel expressions are brought into existence to serve the purpose of smooth communication. Different from the lexical gaps which exist across languages, lexical gaps within one and the same language result from the sharp increase in the demand for communication which the language in its status quo fails to satisfy. When a language lacks a particular word for a newly emerging concept, its speakers will spare no efforts to fill this gap. Generally speaking, there are two methods for filling lexical gaps, as shown in the following.

Filling the Lexical Gaps by Means of Hypernyms

The vocabulary of a language is a hierarchical system, in which different words are given different ranks, with some of them being superordinate terms or hypernyms while others being subordinate terms or hyponyms. When a language lacks an appropriate hyponym to express a concrete concept, we can use its hypernym to express this concept by modifying the hypernym with words borrowed from other cognitive domains. For example, in the Wu dialect of the Chinese language, the newly hatched chicken are referred to as “yangji” (秧鸡), which is a combination of “chicken” (鸡), a hypernym for 小鸡, and “seedling” (秧苗), a modifier borrowed from the plant domain, meaning “small”. Another example is that in Mandarin Chinese and many northern dialects of Chinese, the newly hatched fish are usually referred to as “yumiao” 鱼苗, which is also a combination of the hypernym “鱼” and a diminutive modifier “苗”. The reason for this combination lies in the fact that there is no word for the accurate description of the object. By combining the hypernym of the concrete concept with a diminutive modifier which comes from other cognitive domains, the lexical gaps are filled appropriately so that the communication can be carried out without failure.

Similar things happen in the English language. As we know, there is an English word for the concept “dead animals”, which is “carcass”, but there is no such a word for the concept “dead plants”. In other words, the concept “dead animals” has been lexicalized in English, but the concept “dead plants” has not yet. Therefore, when the English-speaking people want to express the concept “dead plants”, they have to fill this lexical gap by resorting to the combination of the hypernym of dead plants, which is “plants”, and the modifier “dead”. This difference between “dead animals” and “dead plants” in lexicalization can be clearly illustrated by the following two sentences:

- (1) Would you please take the **carcass** of the dog away?
- (2) Would you please clear those **dead plants**?

Filling the Lexical Gaps by Means of Antonymous Expressions

Antonymy is a sense relation which refers to the oppositeness in meaning between two words. Sometimes, however, a word does not have a corresponding existing antonym in the vocabulary although antonymy stands between the concept represented by this word and the opposing concept. In order to fill this kind of lexical gap, antonymous expression will be put to use.

In Chinese, the word “资本家” refers to “the person who possesses means of production, employs labor and profits from laborers’ surplus value” (Xinhua Dictionary, 2001). Nowadays, quite a few Chinese youth talents, such as Ma Yun of Alibaba and Zhou Hongyi of Qihoo, have made eye-catching achievements by dint of their own expertise in their respective technical field. Compared with the capitalists (资本家) who have amassed a large fortune by possessing capital and exploiting employees, these self-made youth talents are more appropriately referred to as “知本家”. Here, “知本家” is an effective filling of the lexical gap which expresses an antonymous concept which is opposed to the concept expressed by “资本家”.

Another typical example in Chinese is a new coinage “小众读者”, which is a filling of the lexical gap which expresses an antonymous concept of “大众读者”. While “大众读者” refers to the massive readers who are the target audience of traditional media such newspapers and paper books, “小众读者” refers to the specific readers who show a keen interest in the works by younger writers who were born in the 1990s or the 2000s.

In English, the word “broadcaster” refers to “a person or organization, as a network or station, that broadcasts radio or television programs”. Recently, with the rise of new internet technology, more and more people take up podcast or narrow-range broadcasting to cater to the differentiated needs of diversified audience. In order to distinguish themselves from traditional broadcasters, these people have coined a new word, “narrowcaster” to describe themselves. It goes without saying that narrowcasters are “the people who offer individualized programs to the target audience”. This new term eloquently attests to the feasibility of adopting antonyms for the filling of lexical gaps in English.

In addition to everyday communication, the filling of lexical gaps by antonymous expressions is also frequently found in literary works, as illustrated by the following quotations from *Ji Xianlin's Life Philosophy*:

(3) 在这篇随笔中, 同其他随笔一样, 文笔转弯抹角, 并不豁亮, 有古典, 也有今典, 颇难搞清他的思路。

(4) “倚老卖老”, 固不足取, “倚少卖少” 也同样是值得年轻人警惕的。

(5) 我悟到, 千万不要再迷信老马识途, 千万不要在任何方面, 包括研究学问方面以老马自居, 到了现在, 我觉得倒是 “小马识途”。因为年轻人无所蔽, 无所惧, 常常出门, 什么摩天大楼, 什么柏油马路, 在他们眼中都很平常。

In sentence (3), Ji coined a word “今典” to describe “contemporary classics” which are in contrast with “古典” (ancient classics). In sentence (4), he coined a new four-character word “倚少卖少”, which is based on the existing four-character idiom “倚老卖老”, to warn the young people to be modest rather than vainglorious. In sentence (5), he used a newly coined word “小马识途” to express his approval to the youngsters who are unfettered in thinking and courageous in creativity.

The Impacts of the Filling of Lexical Gaps

The impacts of the filling of lexical gaps manifest themselves in the following two aspects. The first is unexpectedly impressive rhetorical effects, which is the reason why writers choose to coin nonce words to fill the lexical gaps. The second is the emergence of imitation words, neologisms and nonce words. What is noteworthy is that some of these words are used only temporarily and do not become part of the vocabulary while some of them are widely accepted and thus become part of the vocabulary. In what follows, the examples selected from both English and Chinese will be analyzed so as to show the impacts of the filling of lexical gaps can exercise both on the audience and on the language system.

The Impacts of the Filling of Lexical Gaps in Chinese

In Chinese, the two aspects, namely impressive rhetorical effects and the increase of new words, as a consequence of the filling of lexical gaps are so closely related to each other that they are hardly distinguishable.

Imitation words are the words that the writer has temporarily invented by following the rules of word formation and changing one or two morphemes of the existing words. They are usually antonymous expressions of familiar words which are commonly used in the daily communication. Occurring in the same sentence or in the neighboring sentences with the familiar existing words, they echo to each other so that a stronger impression can be aroused on the part of the readers. For example,

(6) 一个阔人说要读经, 喻的一阵一群狭人也说要读经。岂但“读”而已矣哉, 据说还可以“救国”哩。(鲁迅《华盖集·这个与那个》)

(7) 他口里的阎罗天子仿佛也不大高明, 竟会误解他的人格, ——不, 鬼格。(鲁迅《朝花夕拾·无常》)

(8) 后来这终于从浅闺传进深闺里去了, 因为邹七嫂得意之余, 将伊的绸裙请赵太太去鉴赏, 赵太太又告诉了赵太爷而且着实恭维了一番。(鲁迅《呐喊·阿Q正传》)

In sentence (6), the imitation word “狭人” is based on the existing word “阔人”, which reflects Lu Xun’s scathing satire towards the pensters who worked as a mouthpiece for the reactionary rulers by preaching creativity-stifling feudalism among the general public. In sentence (7), the imitation word “鬼格”, which is based on the word “人格” is novel, brief and to-the-point. In sentence (8), the juxtaposition of the imitation word “浅闺” with the existing word “深闺” gives a vivid delineation to the massive turn from contempt to respect in attitude towards Ah Q by the women in Wei Village, thus leaving the readers deep in thoughts. Sometimes, imitation words can also occur alone, e.g.:

(9) 我赛了四年车, 中风中浪里也算过了七八年, 觉得自己的心理素质很不错, 但在楼梯上看见蔡老师的一瞬间, 还是腿软了一下。看来很多小说和电影里一直强调的“童年的影响”还是有根据的。(韩寒《杂的文·同学聚会》)

Because the existing word “大风大浪” acts as a potential anchor, the imitation word “中风中浪” is easily identifiable. By creating such an imitation word, Han Han conveys his confidence in his experience in car racing.

Besides imitation based on antonymy, imitation words are also possible based on synonymy. Besides one-to-one imitation, there can also be imitation from one to many, e.g.,

(10) 有人在县城“抓点”, 索取土特产品价值一千一百多元。……群众说: “这哪是‘抓点’, 明明是‘吃点、喝点、拿点’啊!” (Huang & Liao, 1991)

Here, with “抓点” as an anchor, three imitation words are invented, namely “吃点”, “喝点”, and “拿点”. By means of these original imitations, the writer makes an in-depth criticism against those cadres who extorted money from local farmers in the name of helping the countryside.

With regard to the increase of vocabulary, imitation words in Chinese are not widely accepted. A survey with college students indicates that the imitation “中风中浪” is readily recognizable and is likely to be accepted as a word in Chinese, whereas other imitations are not very welcome. The imitation “鬼格”, for example, is often taken to be a miswriting of “桂格” (Quaker), which is a brand name of an American food manufacturer.

The Impacts of the Filling of Lexical Gaps in English

In comparison with Chinese, English seems to have more word formation methods, to which English writers usually turn for the coinage of temporary nonce words. These nonce words often produce incredible stylistic effects by defamiliarizing clichés in the mundane communication. For instance, the nonce words in the following passage are all coinages based on derivation, conversion and blending.

(11) The purpose of **Newspeak** was not only to provide a medium of expression for the world-view and mental habits proper to the devotees of **Ingsoc**, but to make all other modes of thought impossible. It was intended that when Newspeak had been adopted once and for all and **Oldspeak** forgotten, a heretical thought – that is, a thought diverging from the principles of Ingsoc – should be liberally unthinkable, at least so far as thought is dependent on words. (George Orwell, 1984)

In this passage, George Orwell describes an imagined society, in which the government attempts to control and change people's thinking patterns by manipulating language. The two coinages, *newspeak* and *oldspeak*, refer to respectively the new and old ways of speaking in the society. With these two diametrically opposed terms, the author calls attention to the wide difference between these two ways of expression. At the same time, the coinage *Ingsoc* is a blending of English, the misspelling of English, and socialism. In addition to conveying what the author intends to drive at, these nonce words also help conjure up a weird atmosphere of terror among the readers.

By the same token, nonce words are also utilized by poets to enhance the effects of expression, e.g.,

(12) Wiry and white-fiery, and whirlwind-swiveled snow,
Spins to the widow-making, unchilding, unfathering deeps.
(G. M. Hopkins, *The Wreck of the Deutschland*¹, quoted from Milward and Schoder, 1976)

In these two lines, there are as many as five nonce words, which are *white-fiery*, *whirlwind-swiveled*, *widow-making*, *unchilding* and *unfathering*. All of them are adjective modifying respectively *snow* and *deeps*, with three of being compounds and two being derivations. The first compound *white-fiery*, by putting white and fiery on an equal footing, highlights not only the whiteness of the snow (white) but also the high velocity of its falling speed (fiery). The second compound *whirlwind-swiveled* combines the agent *whirlwind* and the process *swivel* into one word, accelerating the rhythm of the falling of the snow. The third compound *widow-making* is an amalgamation of the verb *make* and its object *widow*. The other two nonce words, *unchilding*, *unfathering* are both neologisms coined through derivation. The former, *unchilding* means “depriving parents of their children” and the latter *unfathering* means “depriving children of their fathers”. This poem depicts a ship wreck in which a sudden snowstorm hit a ship and killed all the voyagers on board. By these nonce words, the poet put the maker of this disaster, the snowstorm and the sea, on a prominent position. Both *white-fiery* and *whirlwind-swiveled* are modifiers of the snow, which not only arouse the curiosity of the readers but also fasten the rhythm by condensing the information. In this way, the poet gives a picturesque description to the scene of snowstorm on the sea. Besides, modifying the sea by the uncommon derivations *unchilding* and *unfathering* at the same time emphasizes the ruthlessness of the sea and helps to bring out the melody of this poem. In a word, the poet, by filling the lexical gaps with ingenious coinages, achieves the rhetorical effects which cannot be reached with ordinary expressions.

¹ This poem was written in 1875-1876, but it was not published until 1918.

With regard to the increase of vocabulary by filling lexical gaps, English is more receptive of new nonce words. According to a survey with the native English speakers, all the nonce words, except *Ingsoc*, used by the above two examples are acceptable as part of English vocabulary in that they can be easily understood by the guinea pigs even when they are decontextualized. What is especially worthy of mention is that the nonce word *widow-making* coined by Hopkins in the poem *The Wreck of the Deutschland* has become a word base, from which is derived a new word *widow-maker*, which originally is a name assigned to an American submarine in service during World War Two but later is extended to refer to any dangerous weapon of mass destruction.

Conclusion

Lexical gaps are products of the lag of vocabulary behind conceptual development within one and the same language. This article has conducted an exploration into the filling of lexical gaps within English and Chinese respectively and analyzed the impacts as a consequence of their filling. It is revealed that the appropriate filling of lexical gaps not only adds fresh expressions to the vocabulary but also produces impressive rhetorical effects on the audience, hence making the writing or speech more penetrating and powerful.

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