

# **The Effect of Semantic Features of Native Lexical items on Persian Speaking Learners of English in Translation**

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## **Abstract**

This article deals with the effect of semantic features of native lexical items on Persian speaking learners of English in translation and has been arranged in four parts.

In the first part the semantics and different kinds of errors including interlingual errors has been introduced briefly.

In the second part, some experiments carried out in high school and university to observe the effect of semantics features of native lexical items on Persian speaking learners of English has been presented.

In the third part the results of these experiments has been analyzed and in last part the reasons why most of Persian speaking learners of English make lexico-semantics errors and some solutions are mentioned.

**Key Words:** Semantic features, native lexical items, Persian speaking learners, interlingual errors, translation

## **Introduction**

Semantics is the study of the meaning of words and sentences. (Saeed, 203: 22). It tries to understand why meaning is as an element of language and how it is constructed by language as well as interpreted, obscured and negotiated by speakers and listeners of language. (Falk, 1978:24).

Meaning can be analyzed in terms of semantic features. A semantic feature is a notational method which can be used to express the existence or non-existence of pre-

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established semantic properties by using plus and minus signs. (Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia)

Man is [+HUMAN], [+MALE], [+ADULT]  
Woman is [+HUMAN], [-MALE], [+ADULT]  
Boy is [+HUMAN], [+MALE], [-ADULT]  
Girl is [+HUMAN], [-MALE], [-ADULT]

Features such as ‘+animate, -animate’, ‘+human, -human’ can be treated as the basic elements involved in differentiating the meaning of each word in a language from every other word. (Yule, 2010:114).

Roman Jakobson (1959:232) believes that language without meaning is meaningless. Now you understand what has been written because you know the meaning of the words I have written. So by knowing the meanings of words we can communicate with others. Meaning in linguistics is what a language expresses about the world. Lyons (1977) says meanings are ideas or concepts which can be transferred from the mind of the speaker to the mind of the hearer by embodying them as it were, in the forms of one language or another.

Two branches of semantics are lexical and sentential semantics. Lexical semantics refers to the lexical definition of a term. It is also known as the dictionary definition and is the meaning of the term in common usage. The main lexical categories are nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, or prepositions.

The meaning of a sentence depends upon the meaning of its constituent lexemes. (Lyons, 1990:140). The linguistic meanings of a sentence consist of more than just the sum of lexical meaning involved for example:

- 1) John chased the dog.
- 2) The dog chased John.

Although sentences (1) and (2) contain the same words, they have different meanings. So, it is necessary to know which noun phrase is the subject and which is the object of the sentence.

Errors are rule-governed and systematic. They reveal something about the learner's underlying knowledge of the target language to date, i.e. his transitional competence. (Keshavarz, 1994:49). So an error results from incomplete knowledge that is competence. For example:

3) I don't know where does he live.

Another kind of meaning is utterance meaning. It is the meaning a speaker conveys by using a particular utterance in a particular context situation. For example, sentence (4) can convey according to the context situation the following meanings.

4) My watch has stopped again.

- a) I cannot tell you the time.
- b) This is the reason for my being late.
- c) I really have to get it repaired.
- d) What about buying me another one?

Errors are classified in terms of their sources into Intralingual and Interlingual errors. Intralingual error results from faulty or partial learning of the target language rather than from language transfer. So, it may be caused by the influence of one target language item upon another. For example, sentence (5) is based on a blend of English structures: "He is coming" and "He comes." (Keshavarz, 1994: 107)

5) He is comes.

Second and foreign language learners who are in the process of learning a language may make errors which are called interlingual error. These errors result from the transfer of phonological, morphological, grammatical, lexic-semantic and stylistic elements of the learner's mother tongue to the learning of the target language. Interlingual errors reflect native language structure, so it can be said that the first language influences the second or foreign language. For example, consider sentence (6)

6) He is student.

In this sentence the learner has omitted indefinite article "a" according to his previous knowledge in L<sub>1</sub> acquisition.

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In the interlingual category errors may be divided into two subcategories Cross –association false cognates. Sometimes there are two words in the target language for which there is only one word in the target language. For example:

7) I heard his sound.

In Persian language the word/sedâ / can be used for man, animal, and inanimate. This is Cross –association.

A word may have the same or very similar form in two languages, but have different meanings in each, so the similarity may cause a second or foreign language learner to use words wrongly. For example:

8) My father bought a new machine last week.

In Persian language the word "machine" means car. This is false cognates.

There are different ideas in the significance of errors. Behaviorists believe that if there is a perfect teaching method, the errors will never be committed and therefore the occurrence of errors is merely a sign of the imperfect method or technique. But according to cognitive code theory we live in an imperfect world and consequently errors will always occur in spite of our best efforts. So our ingenuity should concentrate on techniques for dealing with errors after they have occurred. As Brown and Frazer (1979) point out the best evidence that a child possesses construction rules is the occurrence of systematic errors, since when child speaks correctly, it is quite possible that he is only repeating something he has heard

Errors are significant in three different ways:

1. To the teacher: because errors tell him if he undertakes a systematic analysis, how far towards the goal the learner has progressed and so what remains for him to learn.
2. They provide to the research evidence of how language is learned or acquired, what strategies or procedures the learner is employing in his discovery of the language.
3. (The most important aspect) they are necessary to the learner himself, because we can regard the making of errors as a device the learner uses in order to learn. It is a way the

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learner has of testing his hypotheses about the nature of the language he is learning.  
(Brown,1991)

In this article only interlingual errors including lexico-semantic errors are studied.

## Methods

Some experiments were carried out in high school in an attempt to observe the effect of semantics features of native lexical items on Persian speaking learners of English in translation. First, I prepared a list of new words of English book one of high school which causes lexico-semantic errors (see pages4-5). Second, I designed some multiple- choice items based on those words and some sentences to be translated from Persian in to English (see pp. 5-8). The testes were designed for two classes of Students of grade two of high school.

## Data Analysis

The list of new words of book one of high school, words for which there is only one word in Persian language.

	Lesson	English	English	subcategory	Persian
1	1	Alone	Only	Cross - association	[tanhâ]
2	1	Love	Like	Cross - association	[dowst dâstan]
3	2	Beautiful	Handsome	Cross - association	[Zibâ]
4	2	Cow	Bull	Cross - association	[gâv]
5	2	Land	Ground, earth	Cross - association	[zamin]
6	2	Long	Tall, high	Cross - association	[boland]
7	2	Make	Repair	Cross - association	[dorost kardan]
8	2	Weather	Air	Cross - association	[havâ]
9	3	Between	Among	Cross - association	[beyn]
10	3	Then	From ,of	Cross - association	[az]
11	4	Borrow	Lend	Cross - association	[qarz kardan, daştan]
12	4	Ground	Land, earth	Cross - association	[zamin]
13	4	Loud	Long	Cross - association	[boland]

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14	4	Seat	Chair	Cross - association	[jâ]
15	4	Voice	Sound	Cross - association	[sedâ]
16	5	Bull	Cow	Cross - association	[gâv]
17	5	Draw	Pull	Cross - association	[kešidan]
18	6	Build	Make	Cross - association	[sâxtan]
19	6	Engine	Moter cycle	False cognate	[motor]
20	7	Air	Weather	Cross - ass.	[havâ]
21	7	High	Long	Cross - ass.	[boland]
22	7	cool	cold	Cross - ass.	[sard]

23	7	Moon	Month	Cross - ass.	[mâh]
24	7	Turn off	Extinguish put out	Cross - ass.	[xâmowš kardan]
25	7	Way	Path	Cross - ass.	[râh]
26	8	Dress	Shirt	Cross - ass.	[pirâhan]
27	9	Earth	Land, ground	Cross - ass.	[zamin]
28	9	History	Date	Cross - ass.	[târix]
29	9	Pull	Draw	Cross - ass.	[kešidan]
30	9	Surface	Level	Cross - ass.	[sath]
31	10	among	between	Cross - ass.	[beyn]

For students of grade 2 of high school(class 1) choose the best answer.

- 1- Ali is the ..... student, who has a bicycle,  
A) alone                      B) only                      C) A&B
- 2- Ali is .....  
A) beautiful                      B) handsome                      C) A&B
- 3- The ..... is our planet.  
A) earth                      B) land                      C) ground                      D) A&B

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- 4- I come..... Iran.  
A) from                      B) of                      C) than                      D) A&B
- 5- Ali animals and plants need.....  
A) air                      B) weather                      C) A&B
- 6- Our teacher has a ..... voice.  
A) long                      B) loud                      C) tall
- 7- Can you .....tea?  
A) build                      B) make                      C) A&B
- 8- The ..... is black.  
A) air                      B) sky                      C) weather                      D) A&B
- 9- In winter the weather is .....  
A) cold                      B) cool                      C) A&B
- 10- Aban is a .....  
A) Month                      B) Moon                      C) A&B
- 11- Mina's ..... is dirty.  
A) address                      B) shirt                      C)A&B
- 12- This pen is .....  
A)high                      B) long                      C) B& C

Translate into English:

- 1- من خودکارم را به شما قرض می دهم .
- 2- صدای علی از ماشین بلندتر بود .
- 3- یک کشاورز روی زمین کار می کند .
- 4- علی زیباست .
- 5- آن ها درختانی بلند هستند .

For students of grade 2 of high school (class2) choose the best answer:

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1-The back ..... of the car is wide enough for three persons.

- A) chair                      B) seat                      C) A&B

2-He has lost his..... because of a bad cold.

- A) sound                      B) voice                      C) A&B

3-It's ..... time to go.

- A) high                      B) long                      C) A&B

4-Let's sit in the shade and keep .....

- A) cold                      B) cool                      C) A&B

5-I went to Spain to watch .....fight

- A) bull                      B) cow                      C) A&B

6- He stays indoors in wet .....

- A) air                      B) weather                      C) A&B

7-I saw him ..... the crowd.

- A) among                      B) between                      C) A&B

8-He was killed..... a knife.

- A) by                      B) with                      C) A&B

9-My father bought a .....last week.

- A) car                      B) machine                      C) A&B

Translate into English:

1 - اگرچه علي زيباست ولي زنش زيبا نيست.

2 - در تابستان هوا در همدان خنك است.

3- انتخاب بهترين كتاب بين چند كتاب مشكل است.

4- كتاب را به او قرض دادم.

5-آتش را خاموش كردم اما فراموش كردم چراغ روشنايي را خاموش كنم.

6- صدای علي بلندتر از صدای ماشین بود.

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7- اگرچه او خوب یاد می دهد اما شاگردان او خوب یاد نمی گیرند.

The result of multiple-choice test  
The number of students:31

Students of grade two of high school(class1)

Q.N.	A	B	C	D
1	Alone 10	Only 15	A&B 6	
2	Beautiful 12	Handsome 17	A&B 2	
3	Earth 7	Land 13	Ground 5	A&B 6
4	From 16	of 5	than 23	
5	Air 3	Weather 5	A&B 23	
6	Long 8	Loud 22	tall 1	
7	build 3	Make 25	A&B 3	
8	Air 4	Sky 16	Weather 2	A&B 0
9	Cold 17	Cool 9	A&B 4	
10	Month 26	Moon 4	A&B 0	
11	Dress 16	Shirt 1	A&B 13	
12	High 4	Long 10	Tall 7	B&C 10

\*How to read the table: for example question 1: the right answer is B (only), 15 persons have chosen A (alone), 15 persons have chosen B (only, 6 persons have chosen C (A&B).

The result of translating into English

for students of grade two of high school(class 1)

Number of students: 31

Q.N.	Right translation.	Wrong translation	No. of wrong translation.	Wrong answers in multiple-choice questions
1	Lend	Borrow	6	
2	Voice Sound Car Loud	Voice  Tall	- 16 - 4	9
3	Land	Earth	4	24
4	Handsome	Beautiful	16	14
5	Tall	Loud Long	2 2	

\*How to read the table: for example question 3: the right translation is "land", but 4 persons have written "earth" which is wrong translation and 24 persons have made the same error in the multiple- choice test.

The result to of: Multiple - choice test

Students of grade two of high school (class2)

The number of the students: 21

Q.N.	A	B	C
1	chair 4	seat 17	A&B 0
2	sound 2	voice 18	A&B 1
3	high 9	long 12	A&B 0
4	cold 4	cool 12	A&B 2
5	bull 15	cow 6	A&B 0
6	air 2	weather 16	A&B 0
7	among 19	between 2	A&B 3
8	by 9	with 12	A&B 0
9	car 15	machine 3	A&B 3

\*How to read the table: for example question 1: the right answer is B (seat), 4 persons have chosen A (Chair), 17 persons have chosen B (seat, none of them has chosen C (A&B).

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The result to of: translating into English

. Students of grade two of high school (class2)

The number of the students: 21

Q.N.	Right translation.	Wrong translation	No. of wrong Translation.	Wrong answers in multiple-choice
1	Wife Handsome	Woman Beautiful	1 15	
2	Cool	Cold	14	9
3	Among	Between	8	2
4	Lend	Debt Borrow	8	
5	Extinguish Put out Turn off	Turn off Extinguish Put out	2 7	
6	Voice Sound Car	Sound Voice Machine	2 6 6	3 6
7	Teach	Learn	3	

\*How to read the table: for example question 2: the right translation is "cool", but 14 persons have written " cold' which is wrong translation and 9 persons have made the same error in the multiple-choice test.

\*Most of the students had written "put off" and "distinguish".

The number of students: 53

Grade: two of high school

Learning vocabulary:

	<i>yes</i>	<i>No</i>
1. In the sentence	13	40
2. English to Persian	32	21
3. Persian to English	8	45
4. English to English	21	51
5. Oral repetition ( more than usual)	20	33
6. Written repetition ( more than usual)	23	30

These two have translated correctly the sentences which they were given

## Conclusion

It's necessary to know about the reasons why most of Persian learners make lexical - semantic errors. These reasons and solutions may be:

1-The ways such words are taught. The teacher should clear the meaning of such words. The teacher should explain that although two words may have one equivalent in Persian, they don't have one meaning and usage in the target language. He/she should use words in different sentences and situations.

2-Such words are taught in separate lessons or separate grades, but they should be taught in one lesson or at least in two continuous lessons, for example on pages 9-10 the word " weather " is taught in lesson 2, but the word "air " is taught in lesson 7 or the word " between " is taught in lesson 3, but the word " among " is taught in lesson 10. So the words for which

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there is only one equivalent in Persian should be taught in the same lesson.

3-If such words are used in different lessons and in different grades with different meanings, the students will not forget them easily.

4-The way the learner learns or memorizes vocabulary is also important. When a learner tries to memorize words separately, that is, out of a text or a sentence, he /she may make such errors. If learners learn or memorize words in different sentences and situations, they will learn them effectively; learning vocabulary in a sentence will also help the learner to improve his/her grammatical knowledge.

We asked students to fill out the questionnaire. It is interesting to say that among 53 students of grade two of high school only two students could translate the sentences accurately and only these two students learn vocabulary from English to English. As it is recorded above, most of the students learn vocabulary out of a sentence or a text and from English to Persian. We often ask my students to say the meanings of words from Persian to English and most of them cannot answer, so we always ask them to learn the meanings of words from English to Persian and also from Persian to English. So the ways words are presented, taught, and learned are important to reduce or increase lexico-semantic errors and text-book, teacher, and method of learning is effective factors.

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