Play with Words——Palindrome: a Method to Make English Vocabulary-learning Interesting

Peng Yu¹

School of Foreign Languages, Sichuan University of Science and Engineering, 140# Longshun Road, Yibin City, Sichuan Province (644000), China.

Correspondence: E-mail: 807681933@qq.com

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Abstract

It is commonly believed that one of the unpopular English courses is vocabulary course, because the content is boring, the classroom atmosphere is dull and the students’ enthusiasm is low. Moreover some people think that English vocabulary course is unnecessary and it should only be learned by students themselves. Worse still, some teachers just give up the teaching of vocabulary for they think vocabulary lesson is to recite words and that is the students’ business.

But in fact, it is not right, for teacher’s guidance in students’ learning is crucial, and the teaching of vocabulary is important for students’ language competence. English vocabulary learning belongs to the category of basic knowledge, and the basic knowledge of students is a necessary condition and foundation for practical use of English, no matter for oral English competence or English writing and reading ability. It is the responsibility of teachers to think such a question why students have little enthusiasm and weak interest in vocabulary course, and why the classroom atmosphere is dull instead of active and interactive. It is the task of teachers to design a vocabulary course with interesting content and interactive parts to make the lesson vivid and to improve the students’ enthusiasm and interest.

Actually, in English vocabulary there are many interesting and meaningful phenomena, such as Spoonerisms, Tongue Twister Fun, oxymoron, Malapropisms, Palindrome, Redundancies, Ambiguities, "Net Lingua" – The Language of the Internet, Etymology: Word Origins, and Pangrams Section, etc., which leave a “space” for language-leaners to find out secret and surprise, and to actively explore and discover something different instead of negatively reciting words. They make the boring vocabulary lesson changed into the interesting and interactive practical course, which is one of the sources of interest for students.

The author in this paper intends to give a brief introduction to one of these interesting linguistic phenomena, Palindrome, including definition, origin and function etc., for teachers to use for reference to make their course more vivid and effective.

Keywords: English words, vocabulary course, Palindrome, teaching methods

1. Introduction

When creating, William Shakespeare loved to play with words. In A Midsummer Night’s Dream (Act V, Scene I) Theseus speaks such oxymoronic words as follows:

"A tedious brief scene of young Pyramus
And his love Thisby; very tragical mirth.
Merry and tragical! tedious and brief!
That is hot ice and wondrous strange snow."

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How shall we find the concord of this discord?

“Merry and tragical”, “tedious and brief”, “hot ice”, “wondrous strange” and “the concord of this discord”, all of the collocations are contradictory and antonyms. Used together, those apparently contradictory words produce a special effect: to profoundly reveal the inner conflict and complex emotions of the speaker.

“Able was I ere I saw Elba”, that is what Napoleon said when he was exiled to the Mediterranean island of Elba. The sentence is hard to translate because it is a palindrome, and just like oxymoron mentioned above, it is a kind of special English linguistic phenomenon. It can be read forward and backward, with a sense of rhythm and a function of enhancing the emphasis and emotion, which makes it has not only denotative meaning but also abundant connotative meaning.

Famous persons has pay attention to these special linguistic phenomena and put them into practice and so should we do.

We should understand that being a master of words is one of the most important goal of language-learner, and teachers should realize that it is crucial and necessary to help students possess a big vocabulary. Unfortunately, the situation of English vocabulary course in China is not positive, for most of the students think the content is boring, the classroom atmosphere is dull and the process is not interactive. So it is time for teachers to try hard to design a vocabulary course with interesting content to make the lesson vivid and to improve the students’ enthusiasm and interest. Here below are many methods, some special and interesting linguistic phenomena in English, for teachers to guide their students to play with words, and they are: Palindromes, Spoonerisms, Tongue Twister Fun, Pangrams Section, Malapropisms, Redundancies, Ambiguities, "Net Lingua" – The Language of the Internet, and Etymology: Word Origins. And the author in this paper is mainly going to give a brief introduction to one of these interesting linguistic phenomena: Palindrome.

2. Definition and Origin of Palindrome

A palindrome is a word or phrase which reads the same backward as forward, such as madam or racecar. Sentence-length palindromes may be written when allowances are made for adjustments to capital letters, punctuation, and word dividers, such as "A man, a plan, a canal, Panama!", "Was it a car or a cat I saw?" or "No 'x' in Nixon".

The word "palindrome" was coined by the English playwright Ben Jonson in the 17th century from the Greek Greek palíndromos, meaning running back again.

Some well-known English palindromes are:

- Do geese see God?
- Was it Eliot's toilet I saw?
- Able was I ere I saw Elba
- Some men interpret nine memos.
- Never odd or even.

English palindromes of notable length include mathematician Peter Hilton's "Doc, note: I dissent. A fast never prevents a fatness. I diet on cod" and Scottish poet Alastair Reid's "T. Eliot, top bard, notes putrid tang emanating, is sad; I'd assign it a name: gnat dirt upset on drab pot toilet."

3. The Classification of English Palindromes

3.1 Palindrome Word

Palindrome word could be further divided into three categories.

1) Forward and backward it is the same word

Civic, dad, deed, deified, did, eve, eye, ewe, gig, level, madam, minim, mum, noon, nun, pip, peep, pop, pup, radar, redder, reviver, repaper, rotator, sees, tat, tenet, tot, aha, refer, Bob, Wow, Racecar, Kayak

2) Forward and backward it is the different word

rats—star, bad—dab, deer—reed, dog—god, door—rood, draw—ward, keep—peek, live—evil, meet—teem, mood—doom,new—wen, not—ton, now—won, nut—tun, pan—nap, part—trap, pay—yap, pin—nip, pool—loop, reward—drawer, room—moor, step—pets, ten—net, time—emit, tip—pit, tool—loot, top—pot, tops—spot, was—saw, war—raw, wolf—flow, but—tub, put—tup, get—teg, got—tag, smart—trams, rat—tar, are—era
3) The reduplicated words

tick tick, so-so, yo-yo, win-win, tick by tick, hand in hand, step by step, eye for eye, shoulder to shoulder, toe to toe, layer by layer, four past four, eight to eight……

3.2 Palindrome Phrase

a Santa at NASA
A war at Tarawa

3.3 Palindrome Sentence

Madam, I'm Adam.
Murder for a jar of red rum.

3.4 Palindrome Poem

A poem of Roger Scruton, “Fortnights Anger” (Hegel, 1979):

Night, whispering to Morning, said:
“Have we death? Is life
Unlimited by prolonged persistence?”
“Birds have nest, as absurdity
Made new for long life”
Said Morning. Morning said:
“Life longs for new - made
Absurdity, as nests have birds -
Persistence prolonged by
Unlimited life is death;” we have said
Morning to whispering Night.

3.5 Palindrome Word Squares

Palindrome Word Squares are word forms in which every row and column reads as a word in both directions:

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4. Comparison between English and Chinese Palindromes

4.1 Similarities

Palindrome is used both in English and Chinese. On one hand, there are many words in English that have the same form and meaning no matter when they are read forward or backward, such as rotor, civic, pop, madam, eye, nun, radar, toot etc. While in Chinese, the same linguistic phenomena is not rare too: 讲演——演讲、觉察——察觉、累积——积累、互相——相互、代替——替代、询问——询问、吞并——吞并、质朴——朴质、妒忌——忌妒、情感——感情、别离——离别、久远——远久、和平——平和、语言——言语、胆大——大胆、质变——变质……

On the other hand, English palindrome poem is similar with Chinese palindrome poem. For example, in St. Winwalloe’ s Church there is an epitaph written there (Chen Xiangliang, 2003):

Shall we all die?
In the Song dynasty of China, Songci was very developed, among which there were quite a few exquisite palindrome poems. For example, the famous poet Sushi's two pieces of "Remembering the Two Dreams" described the scene that Sushi dreamed when he was in the snow.

记梦二首（一）
酡颜玉碗捧纤纤，乱点馀花唾碧衫。
歌咽水云凝静院，梦惊松雪落空岩。

Palindrome poems

记梦二首（二）
空花落尽酒倾缸，日上山融雪涨江。
红焙浅瓯新火活，龙团小碾斗晴窗。

Palindrome poems

4.2 Differences
Both Chinese and English palindromes emphasize the "beauty of structure" of language, and make it possible to create a special linguistic effect by reading forward and backward. But after all, Chinese and English are two different languages, and they belong to different language systems, so in the function of palindromes Chinese and English palindromes have their unique characteristics.

Chinese belongs to the Sino-Tibetan language family and is a typical analytic language, whose feature is to use word order and particle words, instead of morphological changes, to express logical meaning and grammatical relations.

In addition, Chinese monosyllabic words with flexible word structure (excluding function words) have a strong ability of phrase formation. Chinese palindrome can be read backward in the smallest unite (Chinese character), which is a special linguistic art form that English palindrome can never have -- palindrome of three-character and four-character idioms. For example, in ancient China there exists such traditional customary habits “fortune-telling”, and there is a saying (three-Chinese-characters palindrome) in the custom “看一看、断一断、占一占、算一算。苦命苦、甜命甜、贵命贵、贱命贱。”; and of course there are many four-Chinese-characters palindrome, such as “善者不辩,辩者不善”, “知者不博,博者不知”, etc. These palindromes boast the beauty of sound and form and are rich in meaning. They are not only natural and modest, but also of rhythm and with a function of enhancing the emphasis and emotion.

English palindromes are similar to Chinese ones, but English is an Indo-European language, and modern English belongs to synthetic-analytic language, paying attention to sentence pattern, complete structure and explicit meaning. English is characterized by frequently using morphological inflections, relatively fixed word order and abundant function words to express grammatical meaning and logical relations. Therefore, English palindromes also have what Chinese palindromes could never have: letters palindromes, such as “Palindrome Word Squares”. Letters palindrome stresses the symmetry of the “letter form or order”, which breaks the boundaries of morpheme and the integrity of the meaning of words.[3] Letters palindrome is interesting and meaningful, such as “Straw? No, too stupid a fad; I put soot on warts”, “Are we not drawn onward, we few, drawn onward to new era?” etc.

5. The Function and Meaning of Palindromes

5.1 Learning Value
First, it's interesting. English palindromes make the word or sentence could be read forward and backward, sometimes with the same meaning and sometimes with the different or even totally opposite meaning, which leaves a “space” for readers and language-leaners to find out its secret and surprise and this is one of the sources of interest for students to actively explore and discover something different instead of negatively reciting words. Palindrome
puzzles, Palindrome Word Squares etc. makes the boring vocabulary lesson be changed into interesting and interactive practical course. It is because of the exquisite and unique creation and design of palindromes that the study of boring and tedious words has become interesting.

5.2 Literary Value
Then, it is of beauty and worthy of appreciation. English palindromes are designed with great care, they are symmetric in form and rich in meaning, and they are of rhythm and with a function of enhancing the emphasis and emotion. Therefore, English palindrome is actually a kind of figure of speech, which makes it has not only denotative meaning but also abundant connotative meaning.

5.3 Practical Value
Moreover, it attracts attention. Because of its beauty in form and rhythm, it is easy to give people a visual and auditory shock at the same time, positively refreshing the readers’ feeling. Therefore, English palindromes has been often used in the title of the newspaper article, speech and advertisement. For example, John F. Kennedy in his Inaugural Address on Friday, January 20, 1961 used a palindrome, "Ask not what your country can do for you, Ask what you can do for your country.” Other examples, like "Rise to Vote Sir”; Ooh, a Yahoo!”; "Red Root Put Up to Order”, etc. By the use of palindrome, more audience, supporters and customers can be attracted and their attention can be better grasped.

5.4 Heritage Value
To some extent, it's easy to remember. Because English palindrome has a sense of rhythm, and is concise, it is good for readers to remember and to hand it down from generation to generation. For example, some life experience is summarized by people in palindrome, because it has such a characteristics “the language is few but the meaning is rich”, and is easy to remember. Such as: “A friendship founded on business is better than a business found on friendship”; “You can cage a swallow can’t you? But you can’t swallow a cage, can you?” (Ji Suna, 2009)

5.5 Religious Meaning
Palindrome originated from ancient Greece and Rome, and is an ancient figure of speech. The creation and use of palindromes are of quite religious significance. Both in Cirencester of England and Pompeii of Italy, the same English palindrome (palindrome word square or poem square) was found, written in Latin in the Roman era of 300 BC, created by poet Sotades in his own name.

![Palindrome Poem Square](image)

The meaning of this palindrome poem square is “Arcpo, the Sower holds the wheels with care”, engraved on the amulet of the pregnant woman to ensure her safe delivery.

The letters in the third column and the third row just form the same word: TENET, which means “belief”, and meanwhile those letters just constitute a “cross”, which is one of the three great symbols of Christianity (prayer, faith and cross). Moreover, at the four ends of this “cross”, all the letters are “A,O; O,A; A,O; O,A”. in accordance with the Holy Bible, in the Book of Revelations, “I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end, the first and the last.” (Bible, Revelation,22:13), “A” represents “Alpha”, and “O” represents “Omega”. If the square poem is rearranged, there would be such a sentence “Oro Te, Pater; Oro Te Pater; Sanas”, which means "I pray to thee, Father, Thou healest," a typical Christian prayer (Liu Jingqiu, 2000).

Another case is that in the sixteenth centuries, a poem was written in praise of the Virgin Mary, “Ave Maria, gratia plena Dominuo tecum” (Hail Mary, full of grace, the lord is with thee), which could be rearranged as “Virgo serena, pia munda et immaculate” (Virgo serene, holy, pure and immaculate).

6. Conclusion
In English vocabulary there are many interesting and meaningful phenomena, such as palindrome etc. It leaves a “space” for language-leaners to find out secret and surprise, which is one of the sources of interest for students to actively explore and discover something different instead of negatively reciting words. As teachers we should realize
that the traditional boring vocabulary lesson could be changed into the interesting and interactive practical course and it is the task of teachers to design a vocabulary course with interesting content and interactive parts to make the lesson vivid and to improve the students’ enthusiasm and interest.

Guiding students to have a study in such a special linguistic phenomenon can help them, on one hand, to improve their sensitivity in vocabulary, and on the other hand, to detect the similarity and difference in aesthetic taste and linguistic expression between Chinese and West people.

References


