



Prototypical English Daily Expressions Used by Non- Native Speakers

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Abstract

The current study deals with one of the categorization theories namely 'prototype theory' in which the term prototype is defined as the instance that carries the essential features of a concept. The researchers make a questionnaire by applying the adopted theory to a good number of daily used expression, and the participants of the questionnaire are required to select the expression that they think it fits the situation and why they choose it. This study aims at discovering the criteria that form the typical instances. It tries to prove that prototypes are influenced by the social context and some other personal factors. This research also tries to prove that the non-native speaker's selection of daily expressions does not depend on the appropriateness of the expression in specific context, rather it depends on the expressions that they are familiar with. This research comes with a number of conclusions but the most important ones are that: (1) The differences in the frequencies of the selected choices in the presented questions in this research shows that it is impossible to find an idea or a selection that is agreed upon by all speakers but still there are some choices that get the highest frequencies which represent the prototypical ones compared with the other choices, (2) The factor of familiarity represents the highest factor that affects the selection of prototypical expressions by non-native speakers as they select the expressions that they are familiar with and neglect other possible answers either because they don't know them or because they avoid committing mistakes through the selection of expressions that are more familiar for them..

Keywords: Prototype theory, Prototype, Defining features, Characteristic features, co-relational structure.

التعابير الانكليزية اليومية النموذجية المستخدمة من قبل الناطقين غير الاصليين لها

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المخلص:

يتناول البحث الحالي احد نظريات التصنيف والتي تدعى "نظرية النموذج البدئي" والنموذج البدئي يمكن تعريفه على انه المثال الذي يحمل الصفات الاساسية للمفهوم. قام البحث بعمل استبيان من خلال تطبيق النظرية المختارة اعلاه وتم تطبيقها على عدد من التعبيرات اليومية. يتمثل واجب المشاركين في الاستبيان اختيار التعبير اليومي الذي يرونه ملائماً للموقف المحدد ثم يبينون ما سبب اختيارهم له. تهدف الدراسة الحالية الى الكشف عن المعيار الذي ادى الى اختيار المثال النموذجي كما تحاول الدراسة الى بيان ان النماذج البدئية تتأثر بالسياق الاجتماعي وبعض العناصر الشخصية الاخرى فضلا عن كون الاختيار قد لا يرتبط بملائمة التعبير للسياق بل يكون للتعبير الاكثر الفة لدى المتكلم. اسنتج البحث عددا من الاستنتاجات ولكن اهمها (1) اختلاف نسبة التكرار للاجابات المختارة على الاسئلة المقدمة للمشاركين بينت انه من المستحيل ايجاد فكرة او اختيار متفق عليه من قبل جميع المتكلمين ولكن بالرغم من ذلك فان هنالك اختيارات تحصل على نسبة تكرار اعلى من غيرها مقارنة مع الاختيارات الاخرى، (2) يمثل عامل الالفة العامل ذو النسبة الاعلى في التأثير على اختيار التعابير النموذجية من قبل الناطقين غير الاصليين لانهم يختارون التعابير التي يألفونها ويهملون التعابير الاخرى وذلك اما لعدم معرفتهم بها او لانهم يتجنبون الوقوع في الخطأ من خلال اختيار تعابير يعرفونها اكثر من غيرها..

الكلمات المفتاحية: نظرية النموذج البدئي، النموذج البدئي، تحديد السمات، السمات المميزة،

البنية العلائقية المشتركة.



1.1 Introduction

In everyday discourse, ideal language users use various linguistic forms, phrases, and expressions according to their levels (beginners, intermediate, advanced) and the situation in which they build their discourse. In their speaking style or skill, language users give distinct attempts to sound native-like.

Akmajian et al (2001: 568) define the concept of prototype as the most typical or representative instance that is capable of representing a certain concept, i.e., it is the best example of something.

Ideal people, to make sense of our boundless world, can create or structure what is so-called mental models. For example, they have the ability of deciding which type of birds is the prototypical type of birds. Psychologists bring the term 'mental models' into existence, but those who have interest in cultural studies use the term 'representation' in place of the 'mental models' (Aitchison, 2003: 97).

Helpfully, the meanings of words are illustrated or understood via relying on the concept of prototype. Chair, as a wooden material and piece of furniture, is realized readily and immediately by people more than the other furniture (Yule, 2014: 116).

Naess and Ashild (2007:11) indicate that the most important feature of the prototype model, in terms of psychology, is that it is a category instance if it shares similar aspects with the ideal instance of that category. In addition, gradation is a remarkable aspect of a category prototype. So, depending on the number of similar shared features, the entity is a category member if it shows the defining features of the category in question.

It is indicated that the theory of prototype is a two-direction theory. The first direction dates back to Rosch's research whose findings are taken by Psycholexicology. In this direction, a model is created to clarify the conceptual memory of humans and how it works. The second direction comes into sight in 1980s which succeeds in linguistics (Geeraerts, 2006: 142).

There are different definitions of 'prototype' proposed by different linguists or scholars. In the researchers' view, it is the example or member that shows the most remarkable aspects of a concept or category i.e. it is the central member of a category under which the other members are grouped .

When investigating the historical background of the categorization strategy or process, one can find that there are three theories namely (classical or Aristotelian theory, prototype theory, and exemplar theory). Each of these theories comes into sight as a reaction to the one that appears previously (Basil, 2007: 1). Because the selected theory in this research is prototype theory, an elaboration will be presented about it rather than the other perspectives.

Within the prototype theory, there are two sorts of features which are the 'defining features' and the 'characteristic features. The features that a category member must be referred to as the defining features, i.e. any category member has to represent or show the defining features. Birds, for instance, should have two wings, feathers, put eggs, and two legs. The second sort of features are not obligatory ones, but optional features that a member of a category has to have. For example, birds are small, can fly lonely or in groups, have short legs. If any language user wants to investigate and verify the statement 'A chicken is a bird', he/she has to make a comparison between the chicken and the bird which stands as a typical instance of the bird's category. In such situation, the number of



features that a chicken shows against the typical member is the most proper solution (Finch, 2005: 226).

Prototype theory which is a human categorization theory has two basic principles that support a good sort of assistance in the formation of a category. A ‘cognitive economy’ is the first principle in which humans use a few attempts to obtain information about their environment, that means they minimize their cognitive efforts in processing or acquiring information. The ‘principle of perceived word structure’ is the second principle and it states that our world has a ‘co-relational structure’. For example, Wings occur frequently with feathers. In this principle, people account on co-relation structure to forming and organize categories (Finch, 2005: 226).

In physical terms, the number of attributes or features help in defining the concepts. Let us consider the concept of ' triangle ', it is an architecture shape of three straight sides. The boundaries in concepts like oxygen, water, or triangle are so apparent. Moreover, there are concepts whose boundaries are fuzzy and that tells not all of the concepts have obvious boundaries. The process of determining how or where a concept begins or ends is difficult. Trumpet and piano, for instance, in Europe are prototypes of musical instruments (Malt and Okami, 2019: 365-366). In short, fuzzy boundaries occur when it is not easy to decide where a concept begins or ends.

It can be said that each individual has his/her own prototypes and the environmental or social factors (like background knowledge, scientific development, environment, and religion, etc.) play a great role in creating the typical instances. The current study tries to prove that in the prototypes’ formation, not all the people share the same typical instance and discovering the reasons of such diversity and this is related to the nature of human beings as they

have different perspectives or tendencies but still some instances are more frequent to be used and they represent the typical members compared with the other members of the same category. More importantly, the current research is concerned with non-native speakers' use of daily expressions to show that they select expressions that they are familiar with rather than others that are used by native speakers according to their being appropriate in specific contexts or situations. This means that the factor of familiarity is the more effective one in the selections of the non-native speakers as the learners of a foreign language do not know all the options that give the same meaning but each of them is used in specific situations for specific purposes. Also, non-native speakers are not exposed to all possible situations that they need variety of daily expressions according to their appropriateness to these situations. The aims of this study are: (i) showing how a representative instance (prototype) is different from one individual or cultural setting to another. (ii) showing what influences the typical member formation.

1.2 Research Methodology

In this study, there are ten groups of expressions. Each group forms a category and the expressions are the members of the category. The member that scores more points than the others is regarded as the category prototype. The researcher makes a questionnaire via applying the prototype theory to the students of higher studies at Tikrit University/ College of Education for Humanities/ Department of English. The questionnaire is presented to the subjects via google form. Each question in the questionnaire is followed by five choices that the participant should choose from. Then, another question follows in which the participant shows the factor that makes him/her chooses the daily



expression in the previous question. The factors which are suggested by the selected model are given to the participant. The total number of the subjects (students) is fifty and each of them is required to choose or say which expression is the prototype and the reason (s) of choosing it. Qualitative and quantitative methods of research are used to achieve the aims suggested above. The data are put in tables followed by a discussion immediately below each table. The category members (expressions) are listed according to their centrality (points).

The factors that Chiren (2013: 23-26) states in his research entitled ‘Studies in Sociology of Science’ are eleven. These factors are adopted, in this study, to present the reasons of creating different typical instances. Familiarity, commonality, background knowledge, the way people deal with instances (things, concepts), culture and custom, scientific and technological development, living environment and experience, age of the participants, and religion are the factors. Because of one or more of the given factors, the expression is rated as a typical one. The typical expression is on the top whereas the others (marginals) are listed below the typical one. In this study, a three –point scale is used to show whether there are fuzzy boundaries among the members (expressions) or not.

1.3 Data Analysis and Results

This section deals with the analysis, based on the factors suggested above, of the ten groups of expressions or phrases which are used in our daily life.

Question. No 1. How do you respond to an apology?

Expression No.	Expression	Frequency
1	That is ok	17

2	No problem	15
3	Do not worry about it	10
4	It happens	5
5	I forgive you	3

Discussion:

The points next to each expression simplify the task of deciding which expression is typical. The sentence 'That is ok' is the prototypical expression that the participants choose. The factor of familiarity, based on the questionnaire, has the role of forming the prototype. Therefore, the sentence that is placed above all is the central member whereas the others are regarded as marginal category members. The second answer, as shown in the table, has more closeness degrees to share with the typical answer than the others. The first and second answers are fuzzy since they score close points. The fourth and fifth answers are also fuzzy because two points separates them. The final answer is the poorest one since it has the least points in comparison with the answers listed above it.

Question. No 2. How do you end a conversation politely?

Expression No.	Expression	Frequency
1	It was nice chatting with you	30
2	I am sorry to cut you off, but I actually get to run	6
3	Well, it is getting late	5
4	Sorry, but I am afraid I need to...	5
5	Anyway, I should get going	4



Discussion:

The first expression is the typical answer of the given question. The factor of culture and custom, of the participants, plays a significant role in forming the prototypical answer. The custom of the participants leads them to choose 'it was nice chatting with you' rather than any other expression as the answers of the participants shows in relation to these factors. In this question, there are no closeness degrees to be mentioned. However, the second, third, fourth and fifth are of fuzzy boundaries due to their points, each point stands for one student which makes the answers fuzzy. The final answer that takes four points only is the poorest member in the category.

Question. No 3. How do you say “I do not know”?

Expression No.	Expression	Frequency
1	I have no idea / clue	24
2	I am not really sure	19
3	I have been wondering that, too	6
4	I cannot help you there	1
5	Beats me	0

Discussion:

The expression ‘I have no idea / clue’, due to its twenty four points, is the prototypical answer of the stated question. Familiarity is the factor that forms the typical expression. In comparison with the other expressions, it seems that the typical answer is more familiar to the participants. There are no closeness degrees at all and the concept of fuzziness is not present as well. The last answer whose

score is zero is the poorest category member, perhaps because it is an idiom that is rarely used by non-native speakers.

Question. No 4. How do you respond to bad news?

Expression No.	Expression	Frequency
1	I am sorry to hear that	21
2	Oh no	17
3	That is terrible	7
4	I am sorry for your loss	5
5	Poor you	0

Discussion:

The participants in the questionnaire use the expression ‘I am sorry to hear that’ as a way of responding to an apology. The factor of the way people deal with instances (things, concepts, or situations) tells or shows that the participants are familiar with the typical expression as it expresses their sorry about what is in question that is why it scores more points than the others. Moreover, the presence of the word 'sorry ' helps to make the expression on the top. The second answer scores a good number of points that make it closer to the typical answer than the other answers. Fuzzy boundaries are present between the third and fourth answers. The last answer is the poorest answer as it does not have points at all.

Question. No 5. How do you make a suggestion?

Expression. No	Expression	Frequency
1	How about ...	25
2	Why do not you	16
3	Maybe we should	3



4	I would recommend	3
5	Have you thought about ...	3

Discussion:

The participants are of good knowledge in making suggestions. The prototypical expression 'How about ' is one of the grammatical ways of making suggestions. The participants are aware of the rules or ways that are employed to make a suggestion. So, the factor of background knowledge of the participants leads and help them to choose the typical expression and give a little attention to the other ways of making a suggestion. It is clear that the answers do not show closeness to the typical answer, but the last three answers have the same scores or points which make them have the same centrality level, and they are similar in their status as they are the poorest answers within the category limits.

Question. No 6. How do you ask for clarification?

Expression No.	Expression	Frequency
1	Pardon?	21
2	What do you mean?	11
3	Could you explain?	10
4	Would you mind repeating that?	7
5	I am not sure I follow you.	1

Discussion:

The phrase ' pardon ' has twenty one points which help it to be the typical answer although it is not the more polite one, but it still delivers a message to the address. Background knowledge of the questionnaire participants help and make them say 'pardon' rather than saying another expression. It is obvious that there

are no closeness degrees to be mentioned in this question. However, second, third, and fourth answers are fuzzy since three points only separate or judge their centrality levels with the category (question) scope. The last answer whose point is only one is the poor category member.

Question. No 7. How do you interrupt someone?

Expression No.	Expression	Frequency
1	Sorry to interrupt, but ...	27
2	Excuse me – Could I talk to you for a minute / do you have a minute?	11
3	Sorry – I just want to say.	9
4	Could I jump in here?	3
5	May I have a word?	0

Discussion:

The table clarifies that the expression ' sorry to interrupt, but ... ' is the prototypical expression for the questionnaire participants. The factor of familiarity helps and it is the reason in the process of forming the typical answer of the question in question, that is to say the participants are more familiar with this answer more than with the others. No answer has closeness degree to exhibit or share with the typical one. The second, third, and fourth answers have fuzzy boundaries as their scored points show the fuzziness. The last answer which does not score any point is considered as the poorest answers.



Question. No 8. How do you complain?

Expression No.	Expression	Frequency
1	I am sorry, but this is unacceptable.	14
2	I am not very satisfied with ...	12
3	I am not happy about this.	11
4	I can't stand it when ...	10
5	This sucks.	3

Discussion:

The table shows that the expression 'I am sorry, but this is unacceptable' which takes more points than the other expressions is the typical category member (answer). The factors of the commonality and background knowledge of the questionnaire participants are the reasons of forming the prototypical expression. In terms of commonality, the expression is the commonest one to the participants. Concerning the background knowledge, the participants have a good way to express their complain or problem as they use the word 'sorry' within the typical expression. The second answer that scores twelve points is the closest answer to the typical one. The first four answers have fuzzy boundaries since their points are under the scale of three points. The final answer is the poorest one because of its three points.

Question. No 9. How do you describe hot weather?

Expression No.	Expression	Frequency
1	It is absolutely boiling!	19
2	The sun is really strong today.	17
3	It is hot and humid.	5

4	It is nice and warm today	5
5	We are having a real heat wave.	4

Discussion:

The expression ' it is absolutely boiling ' is the most expressive one to describe hot weather as it has nineteen points which lead it to the top. The factor of familiarity is the responsible reason of forming the prototype of the category (question). The second expression that has seventeen points shows more closeness degrees to the prototypical answer. These two answers have the highest scores because they represent the common ideas about the hot weather in Iraq as it is very hot and it seems to be boiling. The third and fourth answers are of the same centrality levels as they have the same number of points. The concepts of fuzziness cover the first two answers on one hand, and the last three answers on the other. The answer that is placed below the others is seen as the poorest answer.

Question. No 10. How do you talk about heavy rain?

Expression No.	Expression	Frequency
1	It is raining cats and dogs.	26
2	It is raining cats and dogs.	15
3	It is drizzling.	4
4	I think the rain is letting up.	3
5	I got caught in downpour.	2



Discussion:

The participants' background knowledge is the basic and responsible factor that forms the prototypical expression in this question. They are of wide and good knowledge that enables them to differentiate the literal meaning and the communicative (idiomatic) meaning. The real meaning of the expression is not that it rains domestic animals (cats and dogs), but its meaning is that it rains heavily and continuously. In this prototypical expression, the phrase ' cats and dogs ' is used to refer to the great number of cats and dogs that people raise in their houses. There are no closeness degrees in this question. The final answers are fuzzy as their points make them so. The answer that scores only two points is the poorest answer in the given question.

Table (11) Frequency of the Prototype Formation Factors in the Questionnaire

No	Factors	Frequency	Percentage
1	Familiarity	5	50 %
2	Commonality	1	10 %
3	Background Knowledge	2	20 %
4	The way people deal with instances	1	10 %
5	Culture and Custom	1	10 %
6	Scientific Development	-	-
7	Living Environment	-	-
8	Living Experience	-	-
Total		10	100 %

Table (11) shows that not all the factors are selected, but only five are used differently by the questionnaire participants. The numbers in the frequency column does not represent the numbers of answers by participants but it represents the number of questions in which this factor gets the highest rate in the prototypical answer. The factor of familiarity has the highest rate in forming the typical category member (answer) of five prototypical daily expressions, thus its rate is (50%). The commonality factor is used only twice and its rate is (10 %). The factors of the way people deal with instance and culture and custom are used only once and their rates are the same (10 %).



1.4 Conclusions

After what is presented and done above, the researcher arrives at the following conclusions:

1. A strong relation exists between the prototype and the context in which it occurs or is discussed.
2. Each person has his/her own prototype depending on some cultural and personal factors.
3. Cultures have their reasons to rate and name their typical instances.
4. The differences in the frequencies of the selected choices in the presented questions in this research shows that it is impossible to find an idea or a selection that is agreed upon by all speakers but still there are some choices that get the highest frequencies which represent the prototypical ones compared with the other choices.
5. The factor of familiarity represents the highest factor that affects the selection of prototypical expressions by non-native speakers as they select the expressions that they are familiar with and neglect other possible answers either because they don't know them or because they avoid committing mistakes through the selection of expressions that are more familiar for them.

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