

English and Nepali Nouns through the Lens of Componential Analysis

Nabaraj Neupane

Department of English Education, Prithvi Narayan Campus, Pokhara, Nepal

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Corresponding Author: Nabaraj Neupane, **Email:** nabaraj@pncampus.edu.np

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Abstract

The meanings of nouns are crucial in facilitating cross-linguistic communication, which is increasingly common in the multilingual world. This article examines English and Nepali nouns using the theory of componential analysis, which analyzes the meanings of words as combinations of universal semantic components. To achieve the objective, this study adopted the document analysis method. The important semantic features of English and Nepali nouns were identified by exploring sources like Ekta English-Nepali Dictionary (1st ed.) and Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (10th ed.). First, equivalence was found in gender, such as cock: hen: chick.: bhāle: pothi: callā. Second, semantic overlap was noticed between the English nouns 'leather', 'skin', and 'shell', and the Nepali nouns chālā, bokrā, and khostā. Finally, some meanings of nouns were found converged while others diverged. For instance, Nepali terms like kākā (father's brother) and māmā (mother's brother) converge to mean 'uncle' in English, while 'nephew' diverges into Nepali terms like bhatijā (brother's son) and bhanjā (sister's son). These findings are significant for lexicographers, semanticists, and material developers in creating suitable resources. They also help second language teachers to reduce learners' errors and choose effective vocabulary teaching strategies.

Keywords: Componential analysis, convergence, divergence, equivalence, overlapping

Introduction

This article explores English and Nepali nouns through the lens of componential analysis, to minimize semantic errors the learners may commit while learning either of the two languages. Numerous semanticists have expressed their views regarding the ways componential analysis (CA) can be carried out. Lyons (2004) has asserted that CA is carried out "by the view that the senses of all lexemes in all languages are complexities of universal

atomic concepts” (p. 154). Similarly, Thakur (1999) has conceded, “Just as an atom can be analyzed in terms of its constituent electrons, protons and neutrons, the meaning of a word can also be analyzed in terms of certain semantic components” (p. 44). Further, the smallest linguistic unit can be divided and analyzed in terms of the components of its meaning (Nasser & Salih, 2020). Thus, CA is carried out to investigate the meaning components of the words.

A word consists of numerous meaning elements and CA is focused on meaning, which for Nwachi et al. (2020) “is related to diverse functions of language and it is chameleonic in nature” (p. 1034). So, a word equals a combination of certain components of meaning, and words can be analyzed in different ways. So, Richards et al. (1985) define CA as the way to the study of meaning, in which linguistic units are analyzed into a set of meaning components or semantic features (p. 53). In this connection, Leech (1977) has written, “Componential analysis is a technique for describing interrelations by breaking each concept down into minimal concepts or features, which are distinctive in terms of a semantic opposition or dimension of contrast” (p. 124). Palmer (1996) supports the view by saying that the total meaning of a word equals several distinct elements or components of meaning (p. 108). To illustrate this phenomenon, the English word ‘woman’ can be analyzed in terms of <HUMAN>, <ADULT>, and <FEMALE>. Generally, the study is applied to the concerned words, which may differ from one another only by one or two components. For example, boy= + HUMAN, + MALE, -ADULT; and girl= + HUMAN, - MALE, - ADULT. In this example, ‘boy’ and ‘girl’ differ from one another only by one component, i.e. <MALE>. In the same regard, Todd (1991) has conceded that components are complementary which is a characteristic of such pairs that “denial of one implies the assertion of the other” (p. 83). Thus, if one is not a male, it is a female. For example, ‘girl’= < -MALE >, so ‘girl’= <FEMALE>.

CA aims to separate the components in the meaning of a word, studies the analysis of these components, and clarifies the mutual correlation of the meaning (Neupane, 1994). CA has been rooted in the following ground (Varshney, 1995, p. 262, Leech, 1977, p. 103, Palmer, 1996, pp. 110-111, & Thakur, 1999, p 46):

- Word meaning can be factorized into several smaller components.
- These components are universal.
- These components are small and in a limited set.
- These sets are binary in nature. Plus (+) refers to the presence and minus (-) refers to the absence of the feature.
- These components are abstract in nature.

In the light of the above-mentioned assumptions, CA is carried out based on semantic components or semantic features which are the smallest units of meaning in a word. Different linguists have used different names for the components. Some of them are pleremes, sememes, semantic features, semantic components, and so on (Crystal, 2008). In this article, ‘semantic components’ that have been used throughout, are defined as:

a technique for the economic statement of certain semantic relations between lexical items and sentences containing them. It is an attempt to describe the structure of vocabulary in terms of a relatively small set of very general elements of meaning called 'components', 'markers' and their various possible combinations in different languages. (Varshney, 1995, p. 261)

Thus, CA can be carried out to study the vocabulary of two or more languages.

Table 1 exhibits that English and Nepali can be studied in terms of general elements of meaning such as noun, concrete, animate, human, count and definite.

Table 1

Semantic Components of Some English and Nepali Nouns

English	Nepali	noun	concrete	animate	human	count	definite
despair	<i>nirāsā</i>	+	+	+	+	+	+
temple	<i>mandir</i>	+	+	+	+	+	+
dog	<i>kukur</i>	+	+	+	+	+	+
man	<i>mānab</i>	+	+	+	+	+	+

In the limelight of the discussion above, this article compares some English and Nepali nouns to trace similarities and discrepancies between the two languages in terms of equivalence, overlapping, and multiple meanings. The significance of the study is that many cases of semantic errors committed by Nepali learners of English and English learners of Nepali can be minimized.

Methodology

This study employs the document analysis method to examine the existing documents within the selected phenomenon (Krippendorff, 1980 & Bell, 1999, as cited in Al-Jardani, 2012). Thus, this study explores English and Nepali nouns in three parameters: equivalence, overlapping, and multiple meanings. These parameters are justifiable as one-to-one correspondence in vocabulary in all contexts across languages is not possible. Further, the senses may overlap in terms of multiple meanings. The study investigates the phenomenon within these parameters and observes nouns through the lens of componential analysis in terms of their semantic features. Unless otherwise mentioned, the textual citations are extracted from the *Ekta English-Nepali Comprehensive Dictionary* edited by Lohani and Adhikary (2010) and *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* edited by Lea et al. (2020).

Findings and Discussion

Equivalence

When a meaning of a word coincides with the meaning of another word, 'equivalence' is defined. Equivalence exists if there is a one-to-one correspondence of the meaning of words across languages. The meanings of some English nouns coincide with the meanings of some Nepali nouns. Table 2 demonstrates some English nouns as used in Traught (1980, pp. 204-6) and their Nepali equivalents.

Table 2*Examples from English and Nepali Nouns*

S.N.	English	Nepali
1	My bachelor brother is married to a movie star.	<i>mero abibāhit bhāilē sinemāko hironisanga bibāha garyo.</i>
2	A dog is an animal.	<i>eutā kukur eutā janābar ho.</i>
3	The corpse was alive.	<i>tyo lās jiudo thiyo.</i>

Source: English examples are cited from Traugott and Pratt (1980, pp. 204-6) & the author's Nepali translations.

Sentence (1) of Table 2 portrays contradictions. 'Bachelor' refers to 'not with spouse' whereas 'married' refers to 'with spouse'. Whatever the meaning, maybe, there are Nepali equivalences of the English nouns 'bachelor brother' and 'movie star'. The second sentence is the case of tautology. The English word 'dog' refers to <+ANIMATE> and the Nepali word 'kukur' also refers to <+ANIMATE>. Likewise, the third sentence represents an implicit contradiction, i.e., an anomaly. 'Corpse' equals 'lās' and 'alive' equals 'jiudo'. These examples denote the existence of semantic equivalence or one-to-one correspondence in English and Nepali nouns. The concept matches Rajimwale's (2000) view, "CA is primarily concerned with the issue of ambiguity, anomaly and paraphrase" (p. 147). A further illustration of semantic equivalence is observed in the three-fold division of the male-female-child relationship between English and Nepali (Table 3).

Table 3*Three-fold Division of Living Creatures in English and Nepali*

S.N.	English	Nepali
1	man: woman: child	<i>purus: mahilā: bacca</i>
2	bull: cow: calf	<i>goru: gāi: baccho</i>
3	ram: ewe: lamb	<i>bhēdo: bhēdi: pātho</i>
4	stallion: mare: foal	<i>ghoda: ghodi: bacheto</i>
5	dog: bitch: puppy	<i>kukur: kukurni: chauro</i>

Table 3 demonstrates the male-female-child relationship which can easily be presented in a mathematical concept viz. 'proportional' relationship. Thus, 'man' is to 'woman' as *purus* is to *mahilā*. Similarly, 'bull' is to cow as *goru* is to *gai* and so on. From this analysis, it can be generalized that sex terminology in English and Nepali is semantically equivalent. Furthermore, the relation of 'man-woman-child' is equivalent to *purus-mahilā-baccā* respectively. The same is applied to all the six cases in Table 3. Hence, semantic equivalence is observed in English and Nepali three-fold division of living creatures in English and Nepali languages.

Furthermore, table 4 illustrates kinship terms in English and Nepali in terms of the common components such as genetic, generation, male and female. To be specific, English and Nepali kinship terms contain equivalence.

Table 4*Semantic Components of Kinship Terms*

S.N.	Components Kinship Terms	<i>bamsagat</i> (genetic)	<i>pustā</i> (generation)	<i>purus</i> (male)	<i>mahilā</i> (female)
1	<i>kākā</i> (uncle)	+	+	+	-
2	<i>kākī</i> (auntie)	+	+	-	+
3	<i>bābā</i> (father)	+	+	+	-
4	<i>āmā</i> (mother)	+	+	-	+
5	<i>bahinī</i> (sister)	+	-	-	+
6	<i>bhāi</i> (brother)	+	+	+	-
7	<i>chorā</i> (son)	+	+	+	-
8	<i>chorī</i> (daughter)	+	-	-	+

Table 5 displays the English and Nepali collective nouns with a little bit of controversy.

Table 5*English and Nepali Collective Nouns*

S. N.	English	Nepali
1	group	<i>samuha</i> (general)
2	team	<i>samuha</i> (specialized group, e.g. play group)
3	crowd	<i>bhid</i>
4	swarm	<i>hul</i> (of insects/birds)
5	flock	<i>bathān</i> (of sheep/goats)
6	herd	<i>bathān</i> (of cattle)
7	army	<i>senā</i>
8	committee	<i>samiti</i>

Table 5 demonstrates some collective nouns in English and Nepali like army-*senā*, swarm-*hul*, crowd-*bhid*, and committee-*samiti*, having semantic equivalence. However, *bathān* refers to either 'flock' or 'herd' and *samuha* refers to either 'general group' or 'specialized group'. Hence, all nouns in English and Nepali cannot be studied from the point of view of coincidence. So, the cases of overlapping and multiple-meaning exist as well.

Overlapping

Semantic equivalence is the range of meaning of a word in a language that coincides with the range of meaning of a word in another language (Basnyat, 1999, p. 586). The cases of semantic equivalence or one-to-one correspondence, as presented in the previous section,

are only a few. There exists the fact that some of the meanings of a word in a language overlap with some of the meanings of a word in another language.

Figure 1

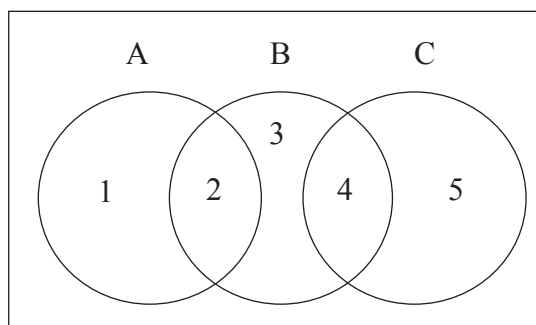
The Range for Meaning of English Words

skin	the layer of tissue that covers the body (e.g. dark skin) the outer layer of some fruits and vegetables (e.g. banana/tomato skin) the thin layer that forms on the surface of some liquids (e.g., skin of milk/paint)
leather	material made by removing the hair or fur from animal skins and preserving the skins using special processes (e.g., leather jackets/shoes)
shell	the hard outer part of eggs, nuts, some seeds and some animals (e.g., egg/ snail/ crab/walnut/coconut/peas shell)

Figure 1 exhibits the English words ‘skin’ and ‘leather’ mean *chālā* in Nepali. In turn, ‘skin’ refers to *chālā* or *bokrā* both. Similarly, ‘shell’ refers to *bokrā* or *khostā*. The range of meanings of the words in English overlaps with the range of meanings of the words in Nepali (Figure 2).

Figure 2

Semantic Overlapping of Nepali and English Nouns



In Figure 2, A, B, and C are dual domains representing leather, skin and shell respectively. Similarly, parts 2 and 4 represent Nepali terms *chālā* (leather and skin), and *bokrā* (skin and shell) respectively. Part-1 refers to <-ANIMATE> leather (e.g. leather shoes) whereas part-2 represents <+ANIMATE> (e.g. tiger skin, white skin) and/ or <+FRUIT> (e.g. banana skin). Similarly, part-3 represents, <+LIQUID> (e.g. skin of milk) whereas part-4 represents <-LIQUID> (e.g. peas shell) and part-5 represents, <+HARD COVER> (e.g. eggshell). Thus, Nepali learners of English and English learners of Nepali may commit semantic errors in their performances in speech and writing.

Multiple meaning

Multiple meaning, here, denotes the number of intralingual and/ or interlingual meanings of a word. For example: ‘walk’ and ‘look’ as nouns resemble different meanings as mentioned in Foning (1999, pp. 12 & 34) (Figure 3).

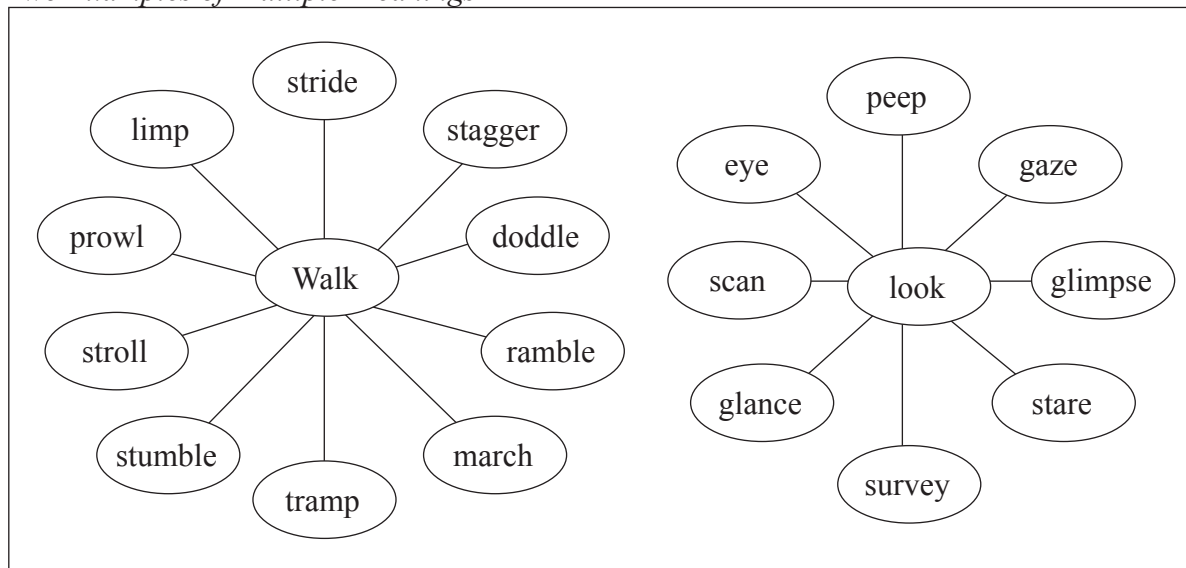
Figure 3*Two Examples of Multiple Meanings*

Figure 3 exhibits that ‘walk’ and ‘look’ have 10 and 8 meanings respectively in English. These examples are intralingual multiple meanings of the two words. Similar cases are found in Nepali, too. To cite the interlingual multiplicity of meaning, let’s compare some English and Nepali kinship terms (Figure 4).

Figure 4*Some English Kinship Terms and their Nepali Counterparts*

uncle- 1) *kākā* (FB) 2) *māmā* (MB) 3) *fupāju* (FSH), 4) *sānābā* (MYSH) 5) *thulābā* (MESH)

aunt- 1) *māiju* (MBW) 2) *kāki* (FBW) 3) *phupu* (FS), 4) *thuliāmā* (MES) 5) *sāniāmā* (MYS)

nephew 1) *bhatijā* (Bs) 2) *bhānjā* (ss)

niece 1) *bhatiji* (Bd) 2) *bhānji* (Sd)

Note: F=Father, M=Mother, B=Brother, S=Sister, s=Son, d=Daughter, H=Husband, W=Wife, Y=Younger, E=Elder.

In Figure 4, ‘uncle’, ‘aunt’, ‘nephew’ and ‘niece’ represent five, five, two and two meanings in Nepali, respectively. In other words, English nouns have multiple meanings in Nepali (they diverge into many meanings). From the English perspective, there is a case of divergence whereas from the Nepali perspective, there is convergence. It can be generalized that kinship terminology in English and Nepali can be analyzed in terms of the elemental family relationships of a nuclear family. So, kinship terms in English and Nepali are language-neutral. Therefore, “The data for each language can be expressed in terms of the elemental family relationships of a nuclear family (F, M, B, S,d, s, H, W)” (Leech, 1977, p. 247).

Pedagogic Implications

This study explores how the words of English may coincide, overlap, diverge or converge with the words of Nepali. English contains a larger repertoire of terminology. Thus, equivalent nouns in the two languages are only a few. As a result, the learners may commit semantic errors while learning another language. It is believed that teaching equivalent nouns is easy. However, absolute synonymy does not exist. So, using translation only, proper use of nouns cannot be taught. This study throws light on the some pedagogic implications. Firstly, there exists semantic equivalence in the English and Nepali tripartite male-female-child relationship. It implies that while teaching gender words, three-fold relationships in two languages should be flashed simultaneously. Secondly, to teach the appropriate use of collective nouns, the contextualization technique is to be used. Thirdly, it is difficult to teach nouns which overlap in the range of meanings in two languages. For teaching them, it is desirable to use different visual aids (like match-stick figures, realia, and word cards) and explanation techniques. Fourthly, the cases of divergence and convergence in the two languages imply that a word in a language is unique. So, teaching such words to second/foreign learners is quite difficult. It also implies that there is no existence of absolute synonymy. So, words cannot be taught in isolation. Instead, they should be taught in context. Fifthly, using comparative and contrastive methods, learners should be made aware of inherent similarities and differences between the two languages. It is suggestive to sensitize them against their tendency to equate English and Nepali nouns. Finally, the nouns of high frequency and usability should be selected and graded scientifically. The almost equivalent nouns should be selected and taught first and then the cases of overlapping, divergence and convergence should be taught respectively. .

Conclusion

This study reveals semantic equivalence in the tripartite division (i.e., male-female-child relationship) in both English and Nepali languages, exemplified by pairs like cock: hen: chick and bhāle: pothi: callā, as well as dog: bitch: puppy and kukur: kukurni: cāuro. Secondly, the semantic overlap between the English nouns 'leather,' 'skin,' and 'shell' and the Nepali nouns chālā, bokrā, and khostā has been observed. Therefore, kinship terms in both languages can be analyzed, suggesting that they are language-neutral. Lastly, some instances of convergence and divergence in the meanings of words between English and Nepali nouns are revealed in this study. These findings indicate that teaching techniques like contextualization, explanation, and illustration can be effective for teaching nouns. Furthermore, conducting comparative and contrastive studies could help reduce semantic errors among the learners.

This study has some limitations. It does not encompass all types of nouns, and the data presented here are insufficient for drawing precise conclusions. Hence, this study paves the way for further studies in semantic fields across languages.

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