

## E.2 STRATEGIES FOR LEARNING VOCABULARY

### E. 2B Making use of Associations

One way of adding meaning and organization to vocabulary learning is by consciously making use of associations. Clearly, words with strong associations whether visual, mental or emotional, are more easily remembered. 15 years after her visit to Japan and without review in the meantime, my mother could remember that the Japanese word for 'eagle' was 'washi', because a chance visit to a coffee shop in which there was displayed a stuffed eagle, resulted in the shop owner teaching her the word and presenting her with a doll! On the other hand, 'itadakimasu' was a far more useful word but one she just couldn't grasp however many times it was repeated. (Admittedly it is a longer and more difficult word to pronounce.) I myself have never had any difficulty remembering that 'one way street' is 'ippotsuukoo' in Japanese ever since the day in my first year in Japan when I was hauled off to the police station and fingerprinted for the crime of turning the wrong way into a one way system right in front of Kyoto station! The word was introduced to me in such an emotionally charged situation that it is forever burnt into my mind.

#### **Creating mental images**

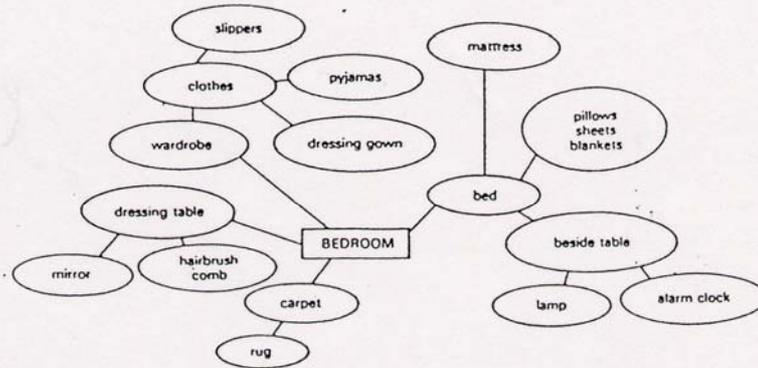
Research suggests that words are stored and remembered in a **network of associations**. These associations can be of many types and linked in a number of ways. Words can be tied by meaning, form, sound and sight. Some people seem to form mental images which are clearly visual pictures. For others, mental images are largely non-visual - not so much a mental picture as a 'mental feeling.' 'No matter what kind of imagery comes most naturally to you, it will be well worth your time to pause and associate the new foreign word or sentence directly with that imagery rather than with some translational equivalent in your native language'. (\*1) If you are learning vocabulary to do with a school, for example, mentally 'feel' the atmosphere of a real school as you learn the word. When learning the names for concrete objects, like vegetables or fruits, imagine their colour, smell, taste, shape etc. Personalize where you can by, for example, grouping in your mind the words you are learning into personal likes and dislikes. This can be done with abstract words as well as concrete items. When learning the days of the week imagine what you do on particular days and whether or not you like those days. When you try to recall the words you have learnt at a later date, the mental images you associated with those words will help you to remember the new vocabulary.

**To reiterate the basic principle of learner training - find out what associations work best for you and make the most of them as an aid to memory.**

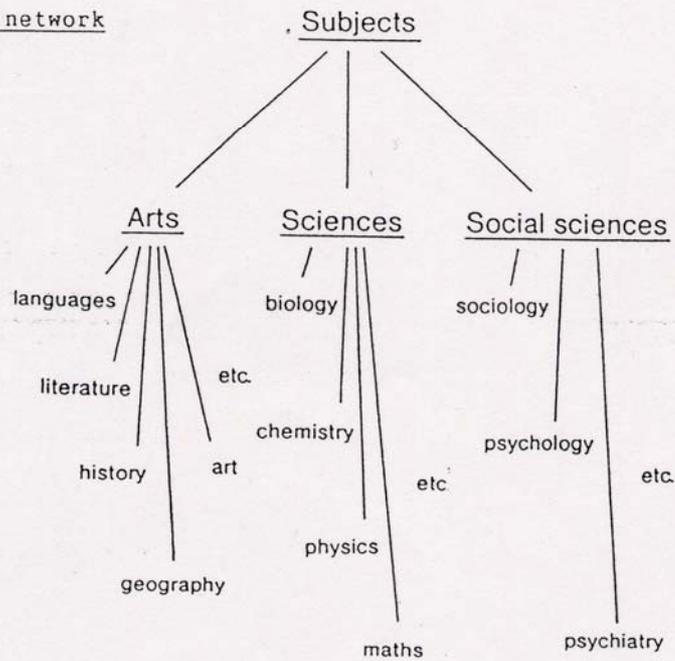
#### **Word networks**

Group words according to their meanings, by topics such as household articles, or situations such as at the bank. Word groups can be listed in linear form but creating diagrams or networks with the words can be more helpful. 3 possible types of network are illustrated below from English. (\*2)

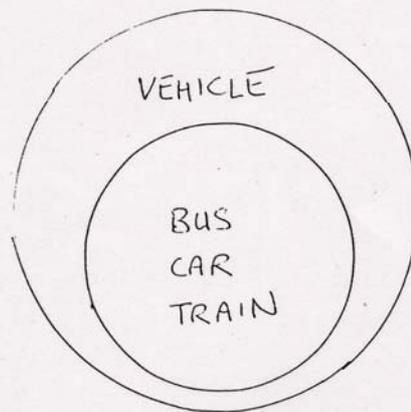
1. Situation network



2. Topic network



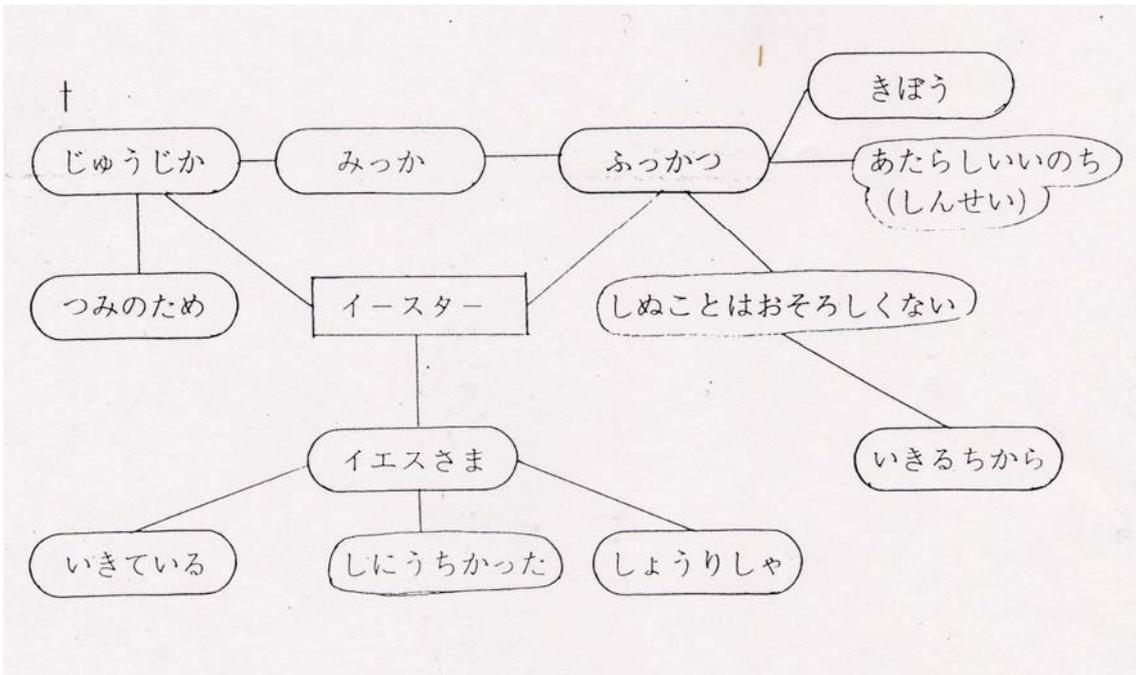
3. Network with headword



These three examples have all dealt with nouns. But you can, of course, mix parts of speech. **The networks can be used both to learn new words and to test yourself.**

**a. To learn new words**

Imagine someone asked you what Easter was and you didn't have adequate vocabulary to explain in Japanese. Write 'Easter' in a box in the centre of a page. What is the first word that comes into your mind in connection with Easter? Write that also and link it to your central box. Continue adding new words as you think of them. If you don't know the Japanese, pencil the words in in your mother tongue and look up all the unknown words when your network is completed. You can now erase the mother tongue word and replace it with the Japanese. Your network might look something like this when finished.



Memorize the new words in your network by paying close attention to the associations that came to mind as you created it. Try at this point to put flesh onto the skeleton of your network by creating sentences around the words. **This is not only a vocabulary exercise but also excellent practice in sentence production.** Imagine you are actually explaining Easter to someone and use your network as prompts for an oral composition. Practice until you can use the vocabulary fluently.

**b. To test yourself**

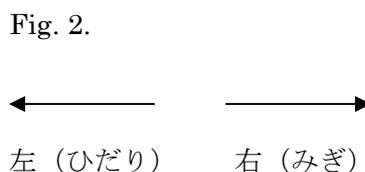
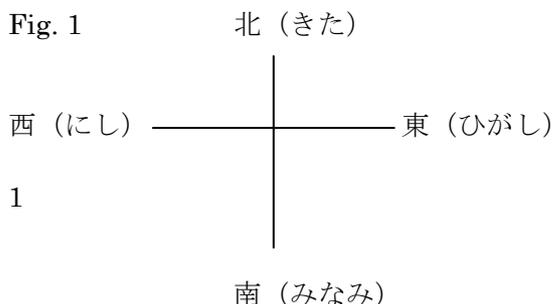
Test your passive knowledge of the newly acquired words later by seeing if you can remember the meaning of the words without looking up the mother tongue equivalents. Alternatively, block out the words in the boxes or bubbles and see if you can fill them in again. Of course, the order would not then matter.

**Task**

You have to memorize the 66 books of the Bible in Japanese. What associations between books could you use to help you and what kind of networks might you draw?

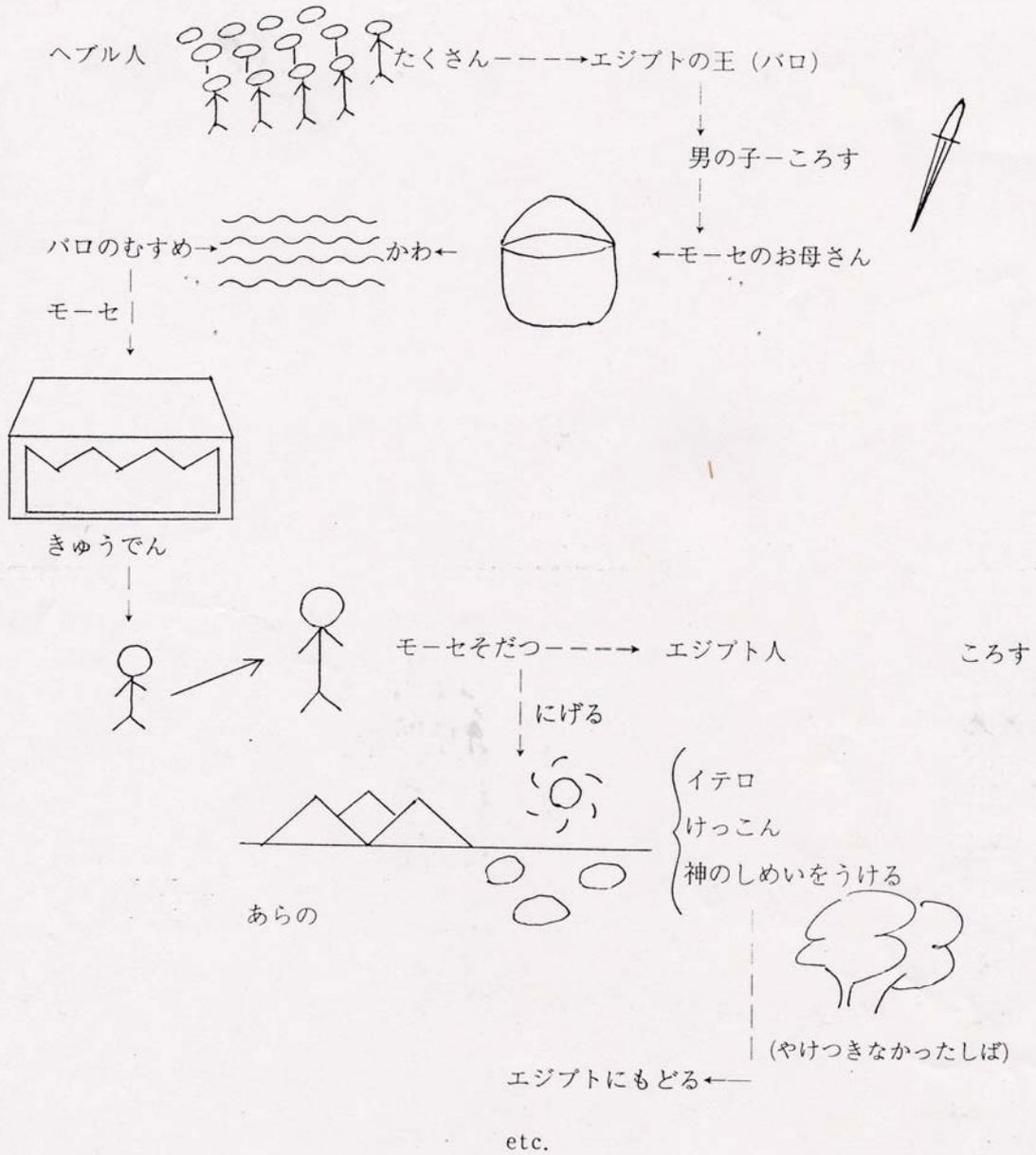
**Diagrams, pictures and maps**

Whatever your artistic ability, make as much use as you can of diagrams, pictures and maps to heighten the visual impact of what you are learning. If you are learning the parts of the body or objects in a house, draw a diagram of the body or of a house and label the parts. If you are learning the names of shops or any words which could be marked on a map, draw a diagrammatical map and label it. If your diagram or map can represent a house or street that you are very familiar with so much the better. There is obviously a limit to the amount of vocabulary which we can present pictorially, e. g. concrete words such as cat or tree, but quite a lot of language can be noted in diagrammatical form as a visual aid to memory especially at beginner level. For example, try visualizing the points of the compass as in figure(\*1).



Directional arrows can be used to indicate left and right as in figure 2. Arrows, symbols and diagramming could also be a good way of revising the vocabulary of a Bible story as in figure 3

Figure 3.



## The importance of images in memory

If drawing pictures and diagrams strikes you as being rather childish and a waste of time, try the following task. (\*3)

1. Have someone tell you a set of unfamiliar street directions. Try to remember just the words.
2. Listen to another set of directions to a different destination. Try to visualize them as you listen.
3. Listen to a third set. As you listen try to draw a simple map that corresponds to them.

Which set of directions are you likely to be able to remember 24 hours later?

We have already discussed the importance as association for memorization in considering word networks. Rubin and Thompson (\*4) suggest other ways associations can be made to work for the language learner as follows.

### **1. Use rhyming.**

Items that rhyme are often easier to remember. When memorizing a list of words, see if some rhyme with each other or with other words that you know.

### **2. Associate words with the physical world.**

This is a factor we have already referred to in other sections. Sometimes a word is more easily learned if it can be associated with colour, size, sound, smell, feel or some physical characteristic. (cf Buzan's Smashin' Scope Memory Principles) E. g. in learning the names of fruits or vegetables you can associate some with being red and round, others with being long and green etc.

### **3. Associate words with their function**

(This is the sequence or ordering principle of 'Smashin' Scope). E. g. when memorizing words for furniture, you can group them according to which are used for sitting, which for lying and so on. Think of your favourite chair or couch.

### **4. Use natural word associations such as opposites.**

In English we tend to associate words like hot-cold, brother-sister, husband - wife etc. Therefore when learning words in a foreign language, try to form pairs so that when one is mentioned, the other instantly comes to mind.

### **5. Learn classes of words**

Sometimes it is helpful to learn words by class, such as colour words, days of the week and months of the year. Try to memorize them in several different orders, however.

### **6. Learn related words**

Groups of words that have a common core, such as white, whiten, whitish, are more easily memorized together than are groups of unrelated words. If you have a list of words to memorize, try to organize them into groups that share a common core, or try to link a new word with previously learned words that have the same core.

### **7. Associate words with context.**

You can also associate a new word with the context in which it occurred. Thus, when trying to remember a word, you think of its context and the word will come back to you. For instance, in trying to remember the word for breakfast, think of what people usually talk about at breakfast, or think of a conversation about breakfast you have had in the

recent past.

## Mnemonics

The above suggestions from Rubin and Thompson make use of natural associations in vocabulary learning. **A mnemonic, in contrast, is a device which makes use of an arbitrary association** of something that is hard to recall with something that is easier to recall. Some writers talk of 'keywords' or 'meaning bridges' instead of 'mnemonics' but the various terms refer to basically the same technique. This is that a new word is memorized in the foreign language by

1. finding a familiar word in the first language-that sounds like or resembles the new word in some way and
2. creating an easily recalled image of some relationship between it and the new word.
  - One of Stevick's learners, Fred, was studying Japanese and had difficulty remembering the word 'tanoshii' (meaning 'nice', 'fun' or 'pleasing'). He overcame the difficulty by creating the mnemonic device 'tan-o-she', that is, that a tan on a woman is pleasing!
  - A learner of Bengali found it helpful to remember the word for 'tree' which is 'gatch' by thinking of the trunk of a tree with a gash on it.
  - In German 'Rathaus' meaning 'townhall' looks like 'rat house' in English. It is suggested that one remembers the word by imagining rats coming out of the local town hall.
  - Another mnemonic example is the German word 'schwarz' meaning black, which can easily be associated with the English word 'swarthy'.

Opinions vary as to the usefulness of mnemonic devices but if you can devise them easily and find them helpful, by all means make full use of them.

## Word tour

Regarding the principle of association in his list of 12 Memory Principles 'Smashin' Scope, Buzan comments on the need to link the item to be learnt with something stable in our mental environment. One of the oldest memory techniques known is the idea of mentally placing words or ideas to be remembered in your house or along a familiar street. (\*5) Ellis and Sinclair have adopted this idea in their activity 'Word Tour' for students of English. (\*6)

Activity: Word tour

- a) Think of a town or city you know well. Imagine that you are organising a sightseeing tour for tourists.
- b) Think of five places you would include on your tour and write down the order in which the tourists will visit them.
- c) Learn your tour off by heart so that you can picture it in your mind.
- d) Whenever you have five new English words to learn, imagine these words are the tourists on your tour and picture the words in the places on your tour, like this:

Tour: Trafalgar Square  
Buckingham Palace  
Houses of Parliament  
Westminster Abbey  
Downing Street

Words to learn: apron  
dustpan  
vacuum cleaner  
feather duster  
broom

Imagine Nelson (on his column in Trafalgar Square) wearing an apron. Imagine the Queen brushing the floor in Buckingham Palace and using a dustpan. - Imagine a Member of Parliament vacuuming the corridors in the Houses of Parliament. Can you imagine pictures for the other words?



### *Activity: Word Clip*

For words that are difficult to picture in your mind, make up a story, like a video clip, in your mind. Imagine famous people acting in your video clip and doing or saying the words you want to remember.

### Lexical furniture

Morgan and Rinvulcri's activity 'lexical furniture' (\*7) is based on the same kind of idea as the Word Tour, but shows how abstract words as well as concrete ones can be memorized by this technique. They ask students to draw a plan of their house and place a set of words to be learnt or revised on it thinking out their reasons for so doing. In one class the items to be memorized included the words 'perplexed', 'furious' and 'to do an experiment'.

- One student put 'perplexed' in the garage because her mother could not understand why her car would not start; 'furious' outside the house because her parents would not allow expressions of anger inside; and 'do an experiment' in the kitchen.

### Notes for E2 B Making Use of Associations

1. Stevick, E. W. Success with foreign languages Prentice Hall International

- 1989 p34
2. These examples are from Redman, S. and Gairns, R. Working with words - a guide to teaching and learning vocabulary CUP 1986
  3. Stevi ck op c i t p. 95
  4. Rubin, J. and Thompson. I. How to be a more successful language learner Heinle and Heinle 1982 p.67ff. This, by the way, is an excellent introduction to language learning for the non-specialist. It is very readable and practical.
  5. Buzan in 'Use your memory' BBC 1986, has a chapter on this system which is called the 'Roman Room System'.
  6. Ellis, G. and Sinclair. B. Learning to learn English student's book CUP 1989 p. 38.
  7. Morgan, J. and Rinvoluceri, M. Vocabulary OUP 1986 p. 114