TU Braunschweig
Englisches Seminar
Seminar: Teaching Grammar and Lexis
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The Lexical Approach

1. What is Lexis?

Vocabulary vs. Lexis

> - **Vocabulary:**   - traditionally understood as an inventory of single words with fixed meanings

> - **Lexis:**   - is the <u>basis of language</u>
>   - consists of thousands of lexical items

> - **Lexical Items:**   **-** are not only the individual words but also the word combinations and meaningful chunks that we memorise in our mental lexicon

2. Lexical items

Different kinds of lexical items

> - **Single-words:**   - most basic kind of lexical item
>   **-** most useful distinction:
>   o <u>words of high information content:</u>
>   *- examples: book, write, red*
>
>   o <u>words with low information content:</u>
>   *- examples: with, of*

> - **Multi-words:**   **-** are accepted as single unanalysed wholes
>   **-** 'Polywords', 'Collocations, 'Institutionalised Expressions'

> ❖ **Polywords:**   **-** *example: record player*
>   **-** e.g. compounds and phrasal verbs
>   - frequently found in dictionaries
>   - usually relatively short
>   - consist of 2 or 3 words
>   → each word may belong to any word class
>   → meaning of the whole group may be totally different from the component words

> ❖ **Collocations:**   **-** refer to individual words which are expected to co-occur with others
>   - *examples: prices fell*
>   *rancid butter*

- non-reciprocal relation between the components:
- *example: rancid butter*
  → the word rancid strongly suggests the noun butter, while the word butter does not suggest the adjective rancid with the same degree of certainty.

❖ **Institutionalised**
  Expressions: - differ in their length:
  - o   short, hardly grammaticalised utterances:
    example: just a moment, please
  - o   sentence heads or frames:
    example: Sorry to interrupt, but can I just say ...
  - o   full sentences:
    example: Would you like a cup of coffee?
  - help the listener to identify what the language user is doing: complaining, explaining, contradicting
  - important part of fluency in a conversation

Characteristics of lexical items

- o   meaning is not (totally) predictable from form
- o   each is a minimal unit for certain syntactic purposes
- o   each is a social institution

3. Lexis as the basis of language

General **structuralist position** in language learning:
The ability to generate new sentences is based on mastering the "rules" of the language (grammar).

L1-acquisition:
- speakers pass a stage in which they use a large number of unanalysed chunks of language
- chunks are connected to certain predictable social contexts
- chunks stand at the centre of language acquisition, grammatical knowledge develops only later

Two sources for the production of sentences by native speakers:
1. generatively using acquired competence (grammar-rules etc.)
2. recalling sentences as learned wholes ("chunks") → **advantage:** they come "readymade"

→ Process of L1-acquisition as model for language learning implies that lexical phrases can/should be presented to L2-learners right from the start.

Adequate examples for L2-learners cannot be artificially created but need to be taken from "naturally spoken English". Accordingly, they should:
1. be presented in an identifiable context.
2. be readily accepted by native speakers as institutionalised utterances.
3. reflect instantly identifiable pragmatic meaning.
4. include different degrees of variability from fully fixed to changeable sentences.
5. cover a representative range of possible (grammatical) subjects which reflect the frequency of occurrence in real world data.

→ Many institutionalized sentences will find their way into language teaching.

Idiomaticity

1. It´s raining cats and dogs.

2. He is a wolf in sheep`s clothing.

3. I see what you mean.

4. I´ll go along with that.

5. We decided to go out and paint the town red.

6. The police caught sight of the robber.

7. The taxi driver played down the accident.

8. She went there like a lamb to the slaughter.

Spectrum of idiomaticity - degree of transparency:

high level of transparency   low level of transparency

⟵⟶
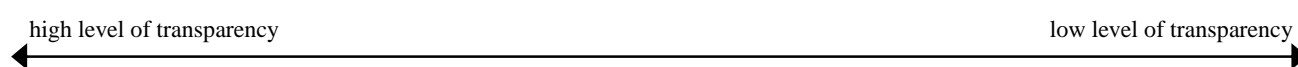
- assumption: lexicalised sentence stems (idioms) form the *basis* of a native speaker´s utterances
- each of those idioms seems to have a rather unique grammar in the notion of native speakers
- unique grammar: **different from what might be correct according to general grammar rules**
→ possible changes of stems defined by **cultural conventions, there is no explanation for them!**
→ "Natural" idioms should play an important role in language teaching, starting at early levels

4. The Lexical Approach: Conditions and implications for language learning

Lexical Density

Speech	Writing
o low lexical density o more grammar words o more verb phrases than noun phrases	• high lexical density • Subordinate clauses • many complex noun phrases

The fact, that there is a difference between spoken and written language brings up at least three important pedagogical implications:

1. - Teachers have to focus on both mediums, speech as well was writing.

   - The main focus as should still be on spoken language because "we normally

     don't learn to write until we are already able to speak" (Carter/Cornbleet 2001, 1)

2. - WRITTEN LANGUAGE IS NOT SPOKEN LANGUAGE WRITTEN DOWN.

   - Good speakers do not have to be good writers.

3. - need for a **special training** to improve writing skills**.**

Vocabulary size

For an efficient use of spoken and written language it is also important to look at the vocabulary size.

- Classroom procedures are almost exclusively directed towards nouns.

- **PROBLEM:** language can only be used effectively if the speaker knows words which co-occur with the noun otherwise he/she cannot form sentences!

- Language learners also need: - verbs, adjectives, adverbs, connectors, intensifiers,

auxiliaries, determiners and prepositions.

- collocations, sentence stems and institutionalized sentences.

Context and Co-text

❖ **lexical items are best learned when they are put in an adequate context.**

 - Teachers are aware of this fact but understand contextualization as:

➢ *any form of putting words together in a sentence.*

- The actual meaning of contextualization: *situation in which the word may occur. (co- text with which it regularly occurs).*

- **context determines meaning.**

5. Conclusion

- in the lexical approach the main focus is not on form but on meaning

- utterances should always be understood as a whole (in the given context)

- lexical items and idioms should play an important role in language teaching, starting at early levels

- a focus on the component elements of an utterance / on the grammatical structure occurs only later

References

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