

## JĘZYKOZNAWSTWO

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### IMPORTANCE OF PRAGMATICS IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING: LEXICAL APPROACH

A good teacher of a language is one who reflects on the nature of the language they teach, who has certain views on its origins, structure, function and rules of use, in a similar fashion that a teacher of physics should have a deep knowledge of the subject that they teach. And, although some teachers are ignorant of, or even hostile to linguistics, it goes without saying that the subject matter of language teaching is language. Thus, there should be no doubt that the study of the subject matter should concern any professional language teacher, who should not just trouble themselves with methods and techniques how to teach, but first of all –what to teach and why.

Linguistics has always exerted powerful influence on the theories of language teaching. Early on, when linguistics emphasized paradigmatics and syntagmatics, when language needed to be organised, with language as a reified abstraction, structural syllabuses were the mainstream. Later, the influence of pragmatics came to be felt, resulting in the rise of functional and communicative approaches (for overview, see Harmer 2001). Nowadays, along with pragmatics, language teaching is influenced by socio-linguistics, ethnology, as well as cognitive linguistics. As a result, we examine language mainly as a means of communication between people, and in our research we very much concentrate on language in use, as an inter-personal instrument for cross-cultural communication (Harmer 2001, Lewis 1993, 1997).

Pragmatics entered the stage of language pedagogy when researchers from the field of applied linguistics whose main interest was language in use, either from a psychological, sociological or pedagogical perspective, felt that the lack of description of pragmatic knowledge with respect to competence and performance in Chomsky's model has to be somehow fulfilled. In this model, there is a sharp dichotomy between competence and performance, competence being the tacit knowledge of language structure, an abstract idealization, "the perfect knowledge of the ideal speaker-listener in a homogeneous speech community" (Chomsky 1965). It contrasts with performance, language in use, subject to all limitations which can befall performance, such

as false starts, interruptions, memory limitations, etc. At that time the syllabuses were structural, and learning a language was synonymous with mastering the structures of the language – that is, achieving competence (Harmer 2001, Lewis 1993).

This model has been largely discredited. First of all, as Widdowson (1979) pointed out, what is the native speaker competence? In the real world, are there any idealised speaker-listeners? Are there any homogeneous speech communities? Also, between an autonomous syntactic competence and erratically performed speech, there is an area of linguistic ability which is also subject to general rule, for example the knowledge how to use sentences to form continuous discourse, how to use them in acts of communication. Thus, new approaches to what exactly is competence and performance appeared. Widdowson proposed that "there is a good deal of argument in favour of extending the concept of competence to cover the ability to use language to communicative effect" (1979: 5), thus maintaining the dichotomy between competence and performance. Katz (1977), Kempson (1975, 1977) and Wilson (1975), on the other hand, equate pragmatics with performance. Later on, Levinson (1983) presented arguments against equating pragmatics with performance factors and saw pragmatics as a separate component within the overall theory, and further, as a component that interacts with both semantics and syntax. Leech (1983) divided general pragmatics into socio-linguistics and pragmalinguistics which "can be applied to the more linguistic end of pragmatics – where we consider the particular resources which a given language provides for conveying particular illocutions" (1983). In 1984 Fillmore wrote that pragmatic competence "comprises judgments on the fittingness of particular expression types to particular situations" (Fillmore 1984: 126), although at the same time he admitted that this kind of knowledge – pragmatic knowledge – is not easily taught in the classroom but is easily learned in the world, that is why not much time was devoted to it in a language learning program. Cognitive linguistics goes even further. Langacker (1987) claims that the distinction between semantics and pragmatics (or between linguistic and extra linguistic knowledge) "is largely artificial, and the only viable conception of linguistic semantics is one that avoids such false dichotomies and is consequently encyclopedic in nature" (Langacker 1987: 154).

The approach to teaching which relies heavily on pragmatic considerations on the nature of language is the Lexical Approach as advocated by Michael Lewis (1993, 1997), and a few other researchers. It arose as an answer to Communicative Approach which, although mostly accurate and highly relevant, also remained largely un-implemented. Also, it was claimed that Communicative Approach, relying heavily on an ability to use language appropriately, may lead to a lack of necessary grammatical knowledge and the ability to compose or decompose sentences (Widdowson 1989). What was needed then was an approach which would provide some kind of middle ground which would neglect neither.

The term lexical phrase was first used by Becker (1975), who called for the systematic treatment of these large classes of phrases such as *let alone* or *as well as*. In 1984 Wilenksy et al. (1984) proposed a phrasal approach in which lexicon should not only contain individual words but also entire phrases. However, the first attempt at resolving the problem more globally was proposed by James Nattinger and Jeanette DeCarrico (1992), who claim, in their book "Lexical Phrases and Language Teaching", that the answer to the problem lies in recent studies of language acquisition, according to which "learners pass through a stage in which they use a large number of unanalysed chunks of language in certain predictable social contexts" (Nattinger and DeCarrico, 1992: XV). They further claim that those units called lexical phrases – chunks of language of varying length – are ideal units which can be exploited for language teaching. They believe that our language behaviour is permeated with ritualisation, and that routinised formulas and other sorts of prefabricated language chunks, which are product of this ritualisation, play an important role in both acquiring and performing language. Thus, they can also serve as an effective basis for both second language and foreign language learning.

Nattinger and DeCarrico define lexical phrases as "form/function composites, lexico-grammatical units that occupy a position somewhere between the traditional poles of lexicon and syntax: they are similar to lexicon as being treated as units, yet most of them consist of more than one word, and many of them can, at the same time, be derived from the regular rules of syntax, just like other sentences. Their use is governed by principles of pragmatic competence, which also select and assign particular functions to lexical phrase units" (1992: 11). They further claim that lexical phrases are different from idioms or clichés, because they have no particular function. Phrases such as *how do you do?*, *a \_\_\_\_\_ ago*, *as far as I \_\_\_\_\_*, etc., on the other hand, are used in discourse to perform functions. They are also different from collocations or ordinary syntactic strings such as NP+VP.

Apart from the evidence from the field of language acquisition, they also quote research from computational analysis of language (Gasser 1990), according to which such multiple lexical storage – namely the existence of intermediary units between the levels of lexis and grammar – is characteristic of connectionist models of knowledge. Such models assume that all knowledge is embedded in a network of processing units joined by complex connections, and that redundancy is common in a model of language.

Nattinger and DeCarrico (1992) divide lexical phrases into 4 groups:

1. Polywords: *in a nutshell*, *so long*, *so to speak*, *as it were*, *in essence*
2. Institutionalized expressions: *how are you?*, *be that as it may*, *have a nice day*, *give me a break*
3. Phrasal constraints: *good \_\_\_\_\_*, *dear \_\_\_\_\_*, *a \_\_\_\_\_ ago*, *your \_\_\_\_\_*
4. Sentence builders: *my point is that X*, *let me start by/with X*, *that reminds me of X*

They also group lexical phrases according to the function that they fulfill in spoken and written language; the groups represent various categories of meaning and pragmatic discourse devices.

Although credit must be given to the authors of the book for ordering the data and presenting them in a unified form, they did not manage – or maybe they did not even attempt to do it – present their ideas as an approach to language teaching. They do suggest a number of ways in which lexical phrases can be incorporated into the process of teaching a foreign language, but that is all.

Something that might be called an approach, first discussed by Dave Willis (1990) and popularized by Michael Lewis (1993, 1997) – indeed was called an approach by the author of the book "The Lexical Approach" Michael Lewis, appeared in the 90's. It was later criticised for not providing "a set of pedagogic principles or syllabus specifications which could be incorporated into a method" (Harmer 2001: 92).

No matter what the critics claim, the suggestions presented by Lewis and called the lexical approach by him are worth considering, because not only does the author present his views on the nature of language, provoking a debate about what exactly students should study, but also attempts at proposing a method, though not fully satisfactorily.

To start with the basic things: the Lexical Approach is based on the assertion that "language consists not of traditional grammar and vocabulary but often of multi-word prefabricated chunks" (Lewis 1993: 3), thus contradicting the standard view dividing the language into grammar and vocabulary. He also proposes that a learner is fluent when he has acquired a large store of fixed and semi-fixed prefabricated items, and this store is "available as the foundation of any linguistic novelty or creativity" (Lewis 1993: 15). What can be considered particularly attractive in Lewis's approach, especially to a cognitive linguist, is his belief that the division into grammar and vocabulary is artificial, which is so much in agreement with the spirit of cognitive writing (Langacker also claims that the distinction between grammar and lexicon cannot be maintained (Langacker 1987: 449). Also, Lewis insists that, if a teacher really wants to prepare his pupils for the process of communication, much more attention must be paid to pragmatic meaning, which is frequently not obvious from a knowledge of lexis and syntax (Lewis 1993). As an example he gives idioms which convey pragmatic meaning very different from surface meaning, and which have traditionally been regarded as marginal to the language. What is also interesting in Lewis's writing is the attention he pays to metaphorical patterning in language developed by Lakoff and Johnson (1980), and he says that language teaching should recognize that metaphor is a part of everyday language.

Thus, for Lewis, "lexical items are socially sanctioned independent units" (Lewis 1993: 90), and he proposes the following taxonomy of lexical items:

## 1. Words.

2. Polywords, the "messiest category" (Lewis 1993: 92), with a variety of phrases with fuzzy boundaries, items such as phrasal verbs, but also *taxi rank, record player, by the way, of course, on the other hand*.

3. Collocations, varying along the spectrum from the totally unexpected novel free collocations to the rigidly institutionalized fixed collocations.

4. Institutionalized expressions (of most interest for a pragmatist) as they allow the language user to manage aspects of the interaction; they can be further divided into three sub-headings:

- short, grammaticalised utterances: *Certainly not. Just a moment, please.*
- sentence heads of frames, typically the first words of an utterance: *I see what you mean, but....Sorry to interrupt, but can I just say...*
- full sentences, with identifiable pragmatic meaning e.g. *I'll drop you a line. I'll see you later. I'll see what I can do. That'll be the day*, which are all examples of what he calls "archetypal utterances exemplifying the use of 'I' in spoken language" (Lewis 1993: 97), or phrases such as *I see what you mean, I'll go along with that, We're not getting anywhere*, etc.

Lewis goes on to elaborate on the nature of idiom. As John Sinclair noticed, "the principle of idiom is far more pervasive than we have allowed so far (...) most of the text will be interpretable by the idiom principle" (Sinclair, 1991). Lewis notices that numerous institutionalised utterances and holophrases are highly idiomatic; for instance, *Could I just say a few words* has a pragmatic meaning not associated with *Could I say something*. Thus, the former utterance is idiomatic, technically speaking, because, traditionally, an idiom is defined by the fact that the meaning of the whole is not immediately apparent from the meaning of the constituent parts. Pawley and Syder (1983), in their paper on institutionalised sentences, notice: "The number of memorized complete clauses and sentences known to the mature English speaker is probably many thousands" (205).

So, it's all very well as far as theory is concerned, but what about its application in the classroom situations? What are the guiding principles that a teacher working within the Lexical Approach should bear in mind?

The central strategy in the classroom is "pedagogical chunking". Some of its basic principles are the following (Lewis 1993, 1997):

1. Less attention is paid to production, which is postponed to a later stage in comparison with the Communicative Approach: the teacher's task, on the other hand, is to talk extensively to the class, to provide the students with comprehensible input, to expose them to the target language (What is important at this point is the fact that teachers are not forced to use only those structures which have already been introduced, on the contrary, they are expected to introduce powerful patterns as lexical items – that is, without analysis of their internal structure, e.g. *Have you ever been to...* doesn't have to wait until Present Perfect.)

2. Recycling not only grammatical knowledge, but also lexical knowledge, especially in phrases, collocations, expressions, etc.

3. "Noticing" and "consciousness-raising" (Willis 1996): the teacher's task is to help learners make better use of all the language which they meet; they should be trained how to notice lexical chunks, how to notice phonological or grammatical patterns, so that learners become more and more sensitive to language and aware of the way it works (because it helps convert input into intake).

4. Translation is welcome in the classroom – providing it is translation from L2 to L1 and students translate not word-for-word, but chunk-for-chunk, looking for equivalent expressions in the other language, especially with whole expressions whose pragmatic meaning is socially determined.

Typical lexical exercises within the Lexical Approach are the following (Lewis 1993, 1997):

1. Identifying chunks – single most fundamental strategy, the basis of lexical teaching; learners have to be weaned away from their natural word – to – word assumption and introduced very early to the idea of equivalents; (as the students search for chunks, it gives the teacher an idea what they think a chunk is) – different chunks, completely fixed expressions, adjective-noun or verb-noun collocations, phrases with verbs, etc.

2. Matching: parts of collocations, expressions, lines of stereotypic dialogues, etc.

3. Completing: make sure the gaps are partner-words from fixed collocations, or fixed expressions.

4. Categorising: because patterns are easier to memorise, learners should be asked to sort words or expressions, according to their own categories or some guidelines, for instance, according to their formality, positive or negative connotations, etc.

5. Sequencing: as fixed expressions express a recognizable pragmatic meaning and most adult learners recognize the same events without having linguistic means to react to these events, learners may be asked to put expressions or collocations in the most likely order.

6. Deleting: exercises of this kind help learners avoid over-generalisations, for example by looking for odd-man-out collocates, or deleting content words to reveal a discourse frame (such as *Could you pass the ....., please?*)

Obviously, the most interesting of all the activities are those which concentrate on fixed expressions, as they are most heavily pragmatically loaded. As far as the author is concerned, the most interesting but also the most valuable activities – and we can say that from our classroom experience – are two kinds of activities: identifying chunks and discussing fixed expressions.

Identifying expressions is a very simple kind of activity: what is needed is a text – and a guideline. For fixed expressions the best text is a dialogue, recorded but with a tape script available, so that students can not only read the text themselves, but also hear the intonation, tone of voice, etc. The

following are examples of activities whose main objective is to identify expressions (adapted from Lewis 1993):

### **1. Expressions with a keyword.**

Discuss in what situations someone might say these.

1. *I can't make head or tail of this.*
2. *Two heads are better than one.*
3. *Off the top of my head, I'd say about 200.*
4. *I think we're heading for trouble.*
5. *Heads or tails?*
6. *If I were you, I'd give him / her his / her head.*

### **2. Expressions with will.**

Discuss in what situations someone might say these.

1. *I'll get it.*
2. *I'll give you a ring.*
3. *I'll be in touch.*
4. *I'll be back in a minute.*
5. *You'll regret it.*
6. *It'll take time.*
7. *That'll do.*
8. *We'll see.*

### **3. Useful fixed expressions.**

Discuss in what situations someone might say these.

1. *How are you?*
2. *How's things?*
3. *What's new with you?*
4. *What have you been up to recently?*
5. *I don't agree.*
6. *I'm afraid I don't agree.*
7. *Rubbish. That's just not true.*
8. *Yes, I suppose so, but..*

As the above activities show, they do not only highlight the pragmatic content of the expressions, but may also focus on different grammatical or lexical aspect, such as typical "archetypal" (Lewis 1993) expressions using "will" (the aim of the activity is to present the sentences from the list as full expressions and finding their functional equivalents in the native language, but it goes without saying that it focuses on a given grammar point), or expressions with keywords, such as "head".

Discussing fixed expressions is also straightforward: what we need is a clear aim in mind – what is it that we want to focus on? A grammar structure? A set of useful phrases in a given everyday situation? A particular word and phrases connected with it? Or maybe just a handful of expressions

without which our learners will not be able to cope? Then a list of expressions is made and a variety of instructions may be applied, such as:

**4. Discuss the expressions in pairs and decide:**

- A/ where and when you might hear the following,
- B/ what might be a suitable answer / what might have been said before that,
- C/ how formal it is,
- D/ which expressions the students feel comfortable using themselves,
- E/ which they think they will never use,
- F/ why they like or dislike certain expressions.

The follow-up activities typically include using the expressions in short dialogues where the emphasis is placed on matching the expressions to real-life situations in which students are likely to find themselves in the real world.

To sum up: what is it about Lexical Approach that the author finds attractive? First of all, it is because what Lewis and his colleagues propose is so much in the spirit of what cognitive linguists have to say about the nature of language. We have always believed and tried to teach our students – whether the learners of English as a foreign language or students of linguistics – that all the divisions into grammar and vocabulary, semantics and pragmatics – divisions which are still to be seen in the majority if not all course books of English – are artificial, that they are only different aspects of one language. Secondly, we believe that the primary function of a teacher of English is to teach how to communicate and the teacher is successful only when his learners go out in the world and they are able to cope on their own, without resorting to dictionaries, mini-dialogues, interpreters and their own hands. And without pragmatics in the classroom – this is virtually impossible.

Thus, we are convinced that in the classroom where a foreign language is taught – be it English, Polish or any other foreign language – there must be time and place for pragmatics. Furthermore, we believe that the Lexical Approach, though not fully developed into an approach, offers an alternative to those teachers who believe in the necessity of incorporating pragmatics into their teaching practice.

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