Second Language Learning via The Lexical Approach

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The Lexical Approach in a Nutshell

The Lexical Approach is an acquisitional theory that was developed by Michael Lewis. While originally developed for ESL teaching, it is applicable to all natural languages because of the presence of the Linguistic Core. The main tenet of the Lexical Approach is that **"language consists of grammaticalized lexis, not lexicalized grammar ."** This completely contradicts traditional Generative Grammar theories, which posit the exact opposite.

What Is Lexis?

Whenever people hear the term "lexicon," they immediately tend to think of individual words. However, **lexis** consists of much more than individual-word units, thereby making the mental lexicon MUCH larger than previously assumed. Instead, the mental lexicon is organized in **CHUNKS** – various **phrasal-type collections** of words that carry **prefabricated meaning**. Therefore, the same words are stored in multiple chunks, each carrying different meanings. These chunks are retrieved from the mental lexicon and **assembled like pieces of a puzzle**. Grammar (inherently language-dependent) is then **applied on top of the prefabricated chunks**.

EVIDENCE FOR A CHUNKED LEXICON

Native Speakers' Mistakes
- Native speakers don't consciously think of "correctness," they think of the meaning they want to express
- Speakers instantly recognize and correct grammatical mistakes

OOPS!

Phonological Chunking
- No matter the language (even tonal languages), native speakers have a "Flow"
- This "Flow" is conveniently varied at chunks' boundaries

Native Speakers

Although adult native speakers of their first language (L1) feel as though they can express an unlimited amount of ideas and say anything they want, this is nothing but a **mirage of novelty**. In reality, **native speakers are far less original than they think**. All of what native speakers unconsciously know about their L1 was acquired via **IMITATION** of other adult native speakers. Through this imitation, native speakers develop a **finely tuned ear for their language**, allowing something to "just *feel* right/wrong." Over the approximately 10 years it takes to fully acquire high proficiency in L1, native speakers naturally acquire MANY chunks. With this large arsenal of chunks, it really does feel like native speakers are the arbiters of their L1. However, all of the **PROBABLE** combinations of these chunks, rather than the *possible* combinations, are determined by the imitation of other adult native speakers.

On either side of
- Beside
- To the left of
- In front of
- Right next to

There's a door
- There's a stone lion
- There's a tree
- There are cars
- There's a light post

Main gate
- Back gate
- Main entrance
- Front door
- Old house

There's a door on either side of the main gate.

Fig. 1: Noticing Chunks in an English Sentence

Learning a Second Language

Learners of a second language (L2) simply do not imitate native speakers enough, resulting in very small, very slowly acquired mental lexicons. Additionally, traditional teaching methods break up and destroy the natural chunks of the language, making it more difficult for the brain to store, and force learners to produce too much of the L2 before they've acquired enough. This introduces too many variables when learning an L2, resulting in a much higher margin of error. Instead, L2 learners should be taught the skill of **Noticing Chunks**.

Fig. 2: Noticing Chunks in a Chinese Sentence

去超市 = go to the supermarket
- 去公园 = go to the park
- 去商店 = go to the store
- 去农场 = go to the farm

买些原料 = buy the ingredients
- 买些肉 = buy the meat
- 买些苹果 = buy some apples
- 买些蔬菜 = buy some vegetables

就行了 = we'll be all set
- Fixed Expression!

去超市买些原料就行了。
If I go to the supermarket to buy the ingredients, we'll be all set

Semi-Fixed Expressions are King

Semi-Fixed Expressions are chunks that contain static frameworks peppered with variable slots. These slots are filled with the meat of the chunks: content-bearing words, such as nouns and verbs. If the meat of the chunks is deleted, the skeletal framework now contains variable gap sites that can be filled with a limited amount of different content words. This offers a large, but limited, amount of customization within the language. Since L2 learners do not always have the intuition for what can fill the gaps, **laser-focused, selective experimentation** at **ONE** gap site at a time is necessary in developing this intuition.
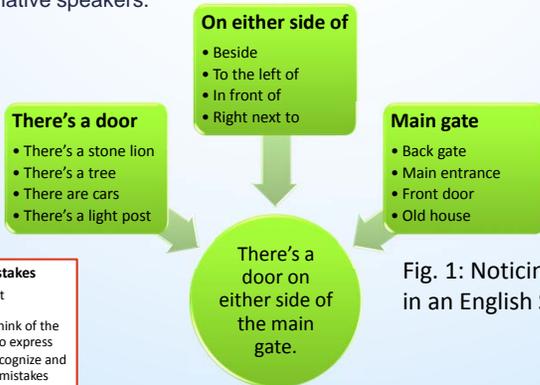
这个世界很多的地方都很安宁。
Many places in the world are peaceful/tranquil/calm.

- 这个城市很多的地方都很安宁。= Many places in this city are peaceful.
- 这个世界很多的森林都很安宁。= Many forests in the world are peaceful.

我的邻居有两个安静的小孩儿。
My neighbor has two calm kids.

- 我的邻居有两只安静的小狗。= My neighbor has two calm puppies.
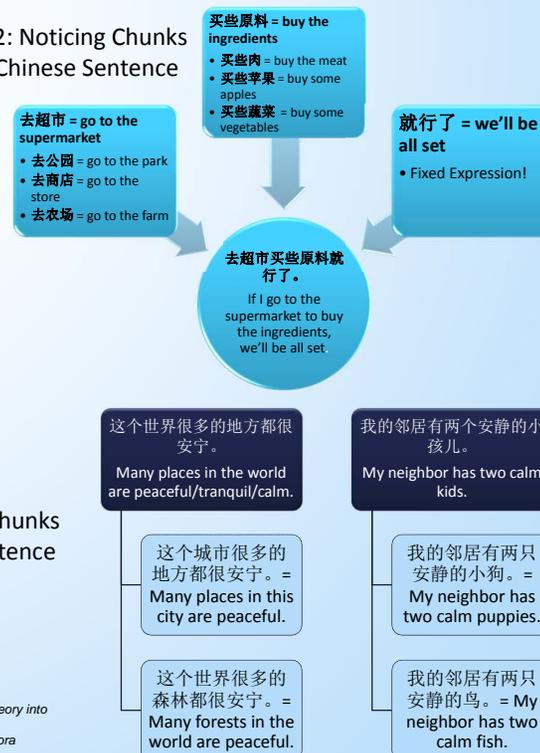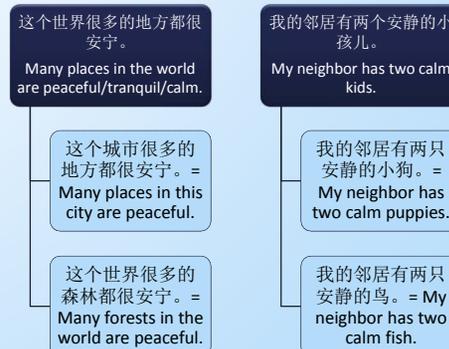- 我的邻居有两只安静的鸟。= My neighbor has two calm fish.

Fig. 3: Using Semi-Fixed Expressions to learn Chinese synonyms

References

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