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 lexikalized 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.

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.

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.

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.

Fig. 1: Noticing Chunks in an English Sentence

Fig. 2: Noticing Chunks in a Chinese Sentence

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

References

