

Vocabulary and Applied Linguistics

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Introduction

PIERRE J.L. ARNAUD AND HENRI BÉJOINT

With the exception of research on word lists and lexical syllabuses, vocabulary was for a long time the poor relation in what has come to be called 'applied linguistics'. It was customary for those authors who specialised in the subject to deplore the scarcity of publications or the lack of interest on the part of the teaching community. Evidence of this situation is not lacking: for instance, a survey (Parize, 1990) of *Les Langues Modernes*, the journal of the French foreign-language teachers' association, between its inception in 1903 and its first thematic issue on vocabulary in 1985, turns up only a handful of relevant publications on vocabulary learning or teaching, with the notable exception of Michéa's work on word selection and available vocabulary. As late as 1977-79, a survey of ongoing research on language testing (Jones, 1980) included only 10 references concerned with vocabulary as against 73 on communicative competence. In typical fashion, Meara entitled his 1980 survey article 'Vocabulary acquisition: A neglected aspect of language learning'.

The situation has changed, as appears for instance in the number of books or collections of papers that have appeared in recent years, e.g. Wallace (1982), Allen (1983), Morgan and Rinvolucri (1986), Carter (1987), Carter and McCarthy (1988), Nation and Carter (1989), McCarthy (1990), Nation (1990), Taylor (1990), etc. The articles in the present collection, most of which were originally presented at the Vocabulary and Applied Linguistics International Symposium held at the Centre de Recherches en Terminologie et Traduction, Université Lumière, Lyon, France in September 1989, constitute evidence of the present research activity in the field of vocabulary. Their authors have devoted their efforts to what Carter (1989) calls 'the complementary distribution of energies between research into vocabulary description, vocabulary teaching and vocabulary learning.'

Vocabulary description is mainly the domain of lexicology and its 'applied' branch, lexicography. If we are to understand the processes of the acquisition of a foreign vocabulary, it is indeed necessary to be able to rely on descriptions of the units that make

up the lexicon and on analyses of their characteristics in discourse. One of the big problems of lexicography, with obvious consequences in language learning and teaching, is the identification of the basic lexical unit. Cowie compares two newspaper articles on the same subject, one a news item and the other an editorial: he notices that the news item uses well-established collocations whereas the editorial is rich in unexpected word associations. This has far-reaching consequences for language teaching: it justifies the teaching of ready-made units at a certain, basic level of discourse, leaving for later stages the creativity that many theoreticians might tend to foster too early. Moon examines a composite set of fixed formulae and shows that they can be classified according to the role they play in discourse. She recommends that more research be carried out on the subject, so that eventually the discursive behaviour of fixed formulae can be indicated in dictionaries. Verstraten also deals with fixed formulae, although from a metalexicographical point of view. She examines the problems of the dictionary user with respect to multiword lexical units and concludes that they should be regarded, whenever possible, as independent units, and therefore treated in separate dictionary articles, rather than included in the entry of one of their components. Finally, bilingual lexicography entails not only the description of two lexicons, but also that of their connections. Winter also takes up the user's viewpoint and examines some of the pitfalls of traditional bilingual dictionaries. Of course, 'criticism is easy, art is difficult' (to 'translate' a French proverb), but both Verstraten's and Winter's papers are the sort of research that is essential to the improvement of existing dictionaries. Also relevant to the field of multiword lexical entities are Biskup's and Descamps's papers, to which we shall return below.

Vocabulary learning is a mental activity which, like all mental phenomena, can be viewed from many angles. How do foreign words and other lexical units find their way into the learner's mind and how are they organised there? One of the possible research angles is represented here by Wode, who adduces a series of lexical considerations in support of a 'universal theory of language acquisition' according to which the mechanisms that underlie language acquisition are fundamentally the same, whatever the learner and the learning circumstances. Observable differences are due to different maturational stages; for instance, lexical acquisition by children is influenced by phonological development,

cognitive maturation and the appearance of grammatical categories. Meara and Aitchison examine aspects of the learner's mental lexicon. In his article, Meara presents an innovative approach of word associations based on graph theory. His comparison of English and Spanish associations and subjects yields surprising results. Aitchison shows how children organise their lexis little by little until they reach 'adult' prototypical categorisation by the age of 14. She concludes that learners should be helped by appropriate exercises to identify and analyse the prototypes, one of the big problems being that categorisations are different in different languages. A good example of the interest of prototype theory in applied linguistics is the fact that one of the authors of the present introduction, who has been studying English for some thirty years, realised with some surprise only a few years ago that in English *birds* or *snakes* are not categorised as animals (Cruse, 1986). This is probably representative of the problems encountered by L2 learners, and Aitchison's proposals deserve careful consideration. Transfer of prototype structure is one of the many ways the L1 influences L2 acquisition, and Biskup's article deals with another aspect of interlingual connections. Biskup examines the way German and Polish learners of English translate L1 collocations into English. The differences reflect the different teaching habits of Germany and Poland, but also, more fundamentally, different strategies in establishing L1/L2 connections.

A rather different question is that of the lexical behaviour of learners when confronted with texts, and in particular the way they infer the meanings of unknown words. Schouten-van Parren has observed the attempts of unsuccessful young learners in that respect and found that they make incompetent use of contextual and word-form clues. Bensoussan's findings are related: analysing the translation attempts of more advanced learners in a comprehension task, she found that the words trigger off preconceived ideas (wrong schemata) which lead to wrong translations even when the context should have precluded them. These observations are not encouraging, but they point at the need for specific inference training. In addition, lexical inference, being a discovery approach, as opposed to a confirmatory one (see Takala, 1984: 74 for a review of the question) may lead to incidental learning. Hulstijn's experiments confirm that when learners have to infer meanings and thus make a mental effort, their retention is better than when they are given the meanings. He cautions, however,

that incidental learning is low when only single encounters with the target items take place. Some of his didactic conclusions will be returned to below.

Most of the current interest in lexical inference is linked with reading research. This link also appears in Laufer's study. Laufer investigates the correlation between individual vocabulary size, as measured by tests, and scores on a reading comprehension task. Her most interesting finding is that there seems to be a qualitative threshold at the 3,000-word level, beyond which the learner can become a competent reader. Arnaud also follows a quantitative approach and explores the vocabulary richness of learners' written productions, as well as their grammatical complexity. His product-oriented study also takes up the vexing question of the validity of discrete point, separate component tests.

All of the aforementioned papers are concerned with the acquisition of a second language. The originality of Meijers's study is that it takes a look at L3 acquisition: comparing the achievements of young monolingual and bilingual learners, he finds that bilingualism does not constitute an obstacle in the acquisition of a foreign language.

The third direction mentioned by Carter, i.e. *vocabulary teaching*, is present in nearly all of the papers gathered in this volume. For instance, Aitchison points at the need for the teaching of categories in prototypical terms. Hulstijn finds that multiple-choice cues are conducive to learning, but that they involve risks of erroneous acquisition which make guidance by a teacher desirable. Neuner takes up a more directly pedagogical approach: he contends that vocabulary teaching could be made more efficient if the choice of lexical units to be taught was based on the learner's personal experience. Descamps presents a family of contextual dictionaries in which contexts are ordered by types of co-occurents. The various possible exploitations he mentions result in active discovery and hopefully in better memorisation by the learners.

Finally, one of the basic questions in lexical studies is: 'What does it mean to know an L2 lexical unit?' We have already mentioned in passing some possible answers, in terms of categorisation or lexical networks, knowledge of co-occurents, etc. Another inescapable answer is that it is necessary to know the phonic *signifiant*. Deschamps presents here the essentials of English graphematics. Graphematics is a complex subject, particularly in the case of English and French, but the progressive mastery of

spelling > pronunciation rules will enable the learner to store correct forms corresponding to words encountered in writing only, which is probably the most common situation in institutional settings in a country where the language is not spoken.

Of course, the articles in this collection cannot claim to cover the whole ground of lexical applied linguistics: for instance, to mention but a few possibilities, the crucial subject of rote learning or the notoriously underresearched area of the relationship between active and passive vocabulary are not represented. However, with authors from six countries and more than ten L1/L2 pairs, these articles provide a fair picture of the present research activity in the applied linguistics of vocabulary description, learning and teaching.

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1

Multiword Lexical Units and Communicative Language Teaching

ANTHONY P. COWIE

1. INTRODUCTION

Some small-scale but intensive studies that I have made recently of lexical patterning in 'quality' daily and Sunday newspapers support the view that journalistic prose draws very heavily on verb-noun collocations that are already well-established and widely known.¹ In up-to-the-minute news reporting especially, there is little evidence of lexical originality: even mildly adventurous matchings of verb and noun, such as *ride out a criticism* (cf. *ride out the storm*) or *recoup the ground lost* (cf. *recoup one's losses*) are extremely rare. Neither, for the most part, do news writers use idioms in the strict sense (i.e. word-combinations that are semantically opaque as well as formally fixed). To a remarkable extent, they select collocations in which the sense of the verb, long established as a figurative extension of some primary sense, is now moribund or dead: *solve a problem*, for example, or *abandon one's principles*, or *call for action*. The high incidence of such familiar expressions in news coverage suggests that the professional skill of reporters owes less to verbal inventiveness than to the memorisation and re-use of existing locutions.

I stress the central part played in effective reporting by a body of lexical *knowledge*, conscious that advocates of a communicative approach to language teaching place the main emphasis on the ability of language users to adapt the lexical means at their disposal to changing circumstances and needs. One leading proponent of such views has been Christopher Brumfit. While acknowledging that particular meaning associations can become 'embedded and frozen' in the language (1980: 171), Brumfit has made clear that in his view vocabulary resources are essentially plastic and

manipulable. In a passage that sets the language user's creative management of these resources above his simple knowledge of them, Brumfit states:

It is important to emphasise that people use language rather than have language, and it is important to emphasise that as they use it they create new things from it, as the craftsman does with clay. (1980: 171)

Yet the sheer pervasiveness of familiar word-combinations in the performance of mature native speakers shows that this view is at best an oversimplification. In a much-quoted study of so-called 'memorised sequences' in conversational data, Pawley and Syder (1983) attribute the skilful speaker's ability to encode whole clauses at a time, thus achieving great fluency, to his or her knowledge of many thousands of memorised sequences and a much larger stock of 'lexicalised units' (i.e. those which would call for inclusion in a collocational dictionary, and which I am chiefly concerned with here). In a paper which stressed stability of form and meaning as highly characteristic of vocabulary use (Cowie, 1988a: 132), I suggested that the evolution of idioms (in the strict sense) was a result of memory storage of multiword units and their constant re-use in a stable form. Repetition of invariable units had the effect, in time, of draining away meaning from the constituent words and transferring it to the composite as a whole.

2. MULTIWORD LEXICAL UNITS IN NEWSPAPER ARTICLES

Pawley and Syder confined themselves in their 1983 study to conversational data. In fact they warned against taking written text 'as representative of the spoken language, either in regard to syntactic structure or . . . to the frequency of standard collocations as opposed to nonce forms' (1983: 214). No doubt written language differs from spoken language (and various written and spoken styles differ from each other) with respect to the type, frequency and distribution of the multiword units which they contain. But we should not assume that large numbers of such units cannot occur in at least some forms of written English. In an earlier analysis of newspaper language (Cowie, 1988b), I asked whether in the quality daily and Sunday press, the need to compose under the tight

time constraints of editorial deadlines might not lead to the use of a high proportion of collocations that were both familiar and lexicalised (that is, partially fixed in form and semantically specialised in part or in whole).

That paper drew on an analysis of 236 verb-noun collocations (thus, *hold a meeting*, *obey an injunction*) found in seven lead stories and background features. It revealed very few 'pure' idioms, but a high proportion (up to 50 per cent of all verb-noun collocations in some stories) of 'restricted collocations' (Aisenstadt, 1979; Cowie, 1981). The present study is narrower but more detailed. It compares, again with respect to verb-noun collocations, a single news item and an editorial written on the same subject: an address by Mr Gorbachev in June 1988 proposing sweeping political and economic reforms in the Soviet Union. My aim was to determine whether two pieces composed on the same day, for the same newspaper (*The Times*), but under different conditions and with different communicative functions, would differ in their use of familiar stable collocations. I was also interested in discovering whether pressures of time were the only explanation for any differences I might find, or whether there were other unexplored factors. Another difference between the studies lies in the scope of the units abstracted. Here, I aimed to indicate not simply the verb + object-noun collocations (thus: *deliver an address*) but also any adjectives and prepositions which may co-occur with them (compare: *deliver his keynote address to (someone)*). In the earlier study, I had often uprooted verb-object collocations from their wider lexical contexts. Finally, I wished to draw out some of the implications of this analysis for language teaching within a communicative perspective.

Beginning with the news story, and having isolated 48 verb + object-noun combinations, and their various expansions (Table 1.1), I had to decide which of the sequences were lexicalised composites. Many of my examples are no doubt recognisable by mature native readers of English as familiar collocations: *make proposals*, for instance, or *call for action*. But a judgement of familiarity is no guarantee that the item is a stable unit in the lexicon. Consider *govern the Soviet Union*. This has no doubt been made familiar through recurrent use, but it can be composed according to co-occurrence restrictions of the verb *govern*. *Govern the Soviet Union*, though no doubt commonplace and possibly reproducible from memory, manifests the working of the language system

Table 1.1 All collocations of transitive verb (+ adjective) + object noun
(+ preposition + NP) in clause contexts

1. NP make sweeping proposals
2. NP deliver his keynote address to the . . . conference
3. NP reiterate his commitment to radical . . . reform
4. NP restate his intention of making . . .
5. NP outline a series of changes to the . . . structure
6. NP transform the way
7. NP govern the Soviet Union
8. NP do away with the Supreme Soviet
9. NP replace it [the Supreme Soviet] with a . . . smaller body
10. NP have a president
11. NP decide [the body's] precise powers
12. NP outline [the body's] powers
13. NP give overall guidance in drafting
14. NP draft legislation
15. NP have a deciding vote in . . . policy
16. NP nominate members of the government
17. NP abandon one of the cherished principles of the . . . revolution
18. NP elect people by secret ballot
19. NP chair the local government soviet
20. NP overrule the elected organs of local government
21. NP release a powerful flood of emotions and truth
22. NP make progress in restructuring . . .
23. NP restructure the economy
24. NP facing the Soviet Union
25. NP enact reform measures
26. NP blame the sequence of . . . methods
27. NP give figures
28. NP run a budget deficit
29. NP cause inflation
30. NP destabilise the rouble
31. NP call for urgent action
32. NP solve the food and housing problem
33. NP lease agricultural land
34. NP affect living standards
35. NP emphasise the need for a complete reformulation of
36. NP include the presumption of the defendant's innocence
37. NP try the case
38. NP respect their freedom of conscience
39. NP enshrine freedom of conscience in a new law
40. NP hold a special session
41. NP discuss the question of nationalism
42. NP have difficulty getting . . .
43. NP get many of his proposals through
44. NP describe [his] speech as a huge step forward
45. NP address a press conference

Table 1.1 continued

46. NP dismiss any suggestion that . . .
47. NP unite the party behind [his] proposals
48. NP approve the speech

Source: From Mary Dejewsky, 'Gorbachov's new revolution', *The Times*, 29 June 1988 (page 1 lead story reporting events of the previous day).

(Hausmann, 1979: 191). In fact, one could only be certain that a combination was part of *langue* if it exhibited a measure of frozenness and some degree of semantic specialisation – of the whole or of one of the parts (Verstraten, this volume).

To determine whether those characteristics were present, I applied various tests, noting verb meanings and manipulating examples to show potential variation (cf. Aisenstadt, 1979; Cowie, 1981). The properties of restricted collocations are interdependent. Thus, one element (in verb-object collocations this is generally the verb) is semantically specialised, but the choice of that element in that sense is governed by its context (here the object noun) (see tests (a) and (b) below). Given the noun *suggestion*, for instance, and the sense 'treat as not worth serious attention', the choice of verb is *dismiss* (though *repudiate* is also possible). To be regarded as 'restricted' here, verb-object collocations had to meet at least the semantic criterion (test (a) below). That requirement yielded a subset of 21 restricted collocations (see Table 1.2).

- (a) The first test has to do with semantic specialisation of the verb. The verb may be 'delexical', as *make* is in *make proposals* (Moon, 1988: 109). The unity of the whole collocation in such cases may be demonstrated by the fact that there is an equivalent verb (here, *propose*). Or the special feature may be the figurative sense of the verb, now so well-worn as to have lost most of its analogical force. Consider *abandon a principle* and *dismiss the suggestion*, for instance. Or again, the verb may be used in a technical or semi-technical sense (as in *enact measures*, or *draft the legislation*).
- (b) The second test is a commutation test designed to show whether the verb, viewed from the standpoint of the given noun, is the only one that can be used in the appropriate sense

Table 1.2 Restricted collocations

A. With a 'delexical' verb

1. *make (sweeping) proposals/plans/recommendations (for NP)* (→ PROPOSE)

make, present, put forward (BBI, SEC); ? put forth (BBI); put up, submit, come forward with/up with, ? offer, set out (SEC)

13. *give (overall) guidance/direction/leadership (to NP)*

(→ GUIDE)

15. *have a (deciding) voice/say in NP*

22. *make progress/headway (in doing) NP make (BBI, SEC); ? accomplish, achieve (SEC)*

(→ PROGRESS)

42. *have difficulty/trouble ((in) getting NP) have (SEC); also: experience*

B. With the verb in a figurative sense

2. *deliver his (keynote) address/speech/lecture (to NP) deliver, give (BBI, SEC)*

17. *abandon a (cherished) principle, belief, doctrine, rule, etc. abandon, ? cast off (SEC); also: give up*

23. *restructure the economy, industry, political system, etc. restructure (SEC)*

28. *run a (budget) deficit/surplus run (SEC)*

31. *call for (urgent) action, measures, changes, efforts, etc. call for (SEC); also: demand*

32. *solve the (food and housing) problem/shortage/crisis solve, resolve (BBI, SEC); settle (BBI); ? conquer, ? master, overcome, sort out (SEC)*

35. *emphasise the need for NP emphasise (SEC); also: underline, stress*

40. *hold a (special) session/meeting/gathering hold (BBI, SEC); convene (SEC)*

43. *get a proposal, bill, law, reform, etc. through*

46. *dismiss the suggestion, idea, thought, notion, etc. (that . . .) dismiss, repudiate (SEC)*

C. With the verb in a technical or semi-technical sense

14. *draft the legislation, bill, law, resolution, etc. draft (BBI, SEC); prepare (SEC)*

16. *nominate a member/officer/official*

19. *chair the soviet, assembly, meeting, session, etc. chair (BBI); also: preside over*

25. *enact measures, law, resolution, statute, etc. enact (SEC)*

30. *destabilise the currency, rouble, pound, etc.*

37. *try a case try, hear (BBI, SEC); judge, decide (SEC)*

BBI = *The BBI Combinatory Dictionary of English* (see Bibliography).

SEC = *Selected English Collocations* (see Bibliography).

(i.e. is uniquely determined), or whether it is one of a short set of synonyms. Compare *abandon/give up a cherished principle* (verb commutable) with *run a deficit* (verb not commutable).

- (c) The third test is to ask whether the noun, in relation to the verb, is the sole choice, or one of a short set of related items, or one of a more open set. In this respect, compare *have a voice/say in something* with *chair the soviet/meeting/session*, etc.

Turning now to the results of the analysis, we are again reminded that in news reports the number of idioms tends to be small: here it is limited to a (minimally modified) dead metaphor *release a powerful flood of emotions and truth* (Table 1.1, no. 21). But there is much wider evidence of a lack of lexical innovation. As we have seen, 21 examples, almost half the total of 48, have verbs whose senses fall into one of the categories delexical, figurative or technical (i.e. pass test (a)). Now, I find that eight of those verbs have no synonym, while a further nine have only one, as in *have/experience difficulty* (test (b)). In other words, the nouns constrain verb choice to a marked degree. I have checked my own intuitions against entries for the 21 noun components in two well-known collocational dictionaries (*BBI Combinatory Dictionary*, 1986; *Selected English Collocations*, 1982), considering that if the combinations were recognised as restricted in precisely the form in which they occur in the news report, their status would be further confirmed.² I have found:

- (a) that seven of the verb collocates appearing in the report are given in both dictionaries and eight in one;
(b) that only in four cases (nos. 1, 22, 32, 37) do the dictionaries (taken together) record more than one synonym alongside the verb actually chosen by the journalist. (Details from the collocational dictionaries, identified as BBI and SEC, are entered below the numbered examples in Table 1.2. Choices not listed in the dictionaries appear thus: 'also: demand'.)

With regard to test (c), we find that the delexical group especially is associated with a narrow choice of object nouns (limited choice being shown in Table 1.2 thus: *have difficulty/trouble . . .*). It is noticeable, too, that all five collocations with a delexical verb have a fixed or highly predictable preposition as complement: *give guidance to . . .*, *have a voice in . . .*, and so forth. Finally, it is highly significant that a number of verb-object collocations themselves

incorporate a familiar modifying adjective: *sweeping proposals, deciding voice, cherished principle, urgent action*. In cases where the verb has a technical sense, there are wide differences in the range of acceptable noun collocates, though a problem would remain for a foreign writer: that of hitting on exactly the right choice of verb. We say *nominate an official*, not *name an official*, *destabilise the currency*, not *unsettle the currency*.

The impression conveyed by this piece of news reporting, which is typical of many appearing in the quality dailies, is of a lexical and stylistic evenness unrelieved by the coining of a single fresh metaphor. In contrast, the first leader (allusively entitled 'Mikhail's dream'), which appears in the same issue, creates a whole range of striking effects by a variety of lexical means, many of them collocational. But first an important point of similarity. It is a remarkable fact that the editorial, pondered and worked over at greater leisure, though within the same overall timespan, contains many examples of the various types of collocation identified in the page 1 news item. It includes, for instance, a combination containing a delexical verb (*take a big gamble*) and several whose verbs are used in a metaphorical sense (*meet with marked success, put forward a programme, view his proposals with alarm, call for fundamental changes*).

The noteworthy point, though, is not so much the simple inclusion of so many restricted collocations as the remarkable stylistic use that is made of them by the leader writer. Let us go back a little. We noted that in the news item there was one dead metaphor and no instance of figurative invention. In the leading article, we find a number of effects which depend specifically on word-combinations. The effect may turn on a newly-created figure being matched with a well-worn metaphor whose sense the former ingeniously shifts, as for instance in:

... a plan which would unravel the fabric of Soviet government and establish a new pattern for its future.

Or the trick may be to introduce a dead metaphor within a familiar collocation first (say, *replace the old guard*), and then recall the literal sense afterwards by means of a figurative idiom (*prepare the ground*) for which a military sense has to be supplied. Here is the full context:

The swift efficiency with which he replaced most of the old guard in the

Kremlin ... confirms the impression of a leader who prepares his ground before advancing.

An even more remarkable example of the creative use of existing phraseology is this:

... take a billhook to the Soviet party edifice and prune away the privileges at local level.

The ingenuity lies in the way an existing dead metaphor (*take an axe to something*) is adapted and a fresh collocation (*prune away the privileges*) is coined to match the adaptation.

Another salient feature of the editorial, which comments with a mixture of approval and scepticism on the sudden turn of political events in the Soviet Union, is the abrupt switching from one level of formality to another. These effects are also often achieved with the help of stable collocations and idioms. For instance, the dignified rigidities of the past are suggested by:

an honorary post now held by the elderly Mr Andre Gromyko

while the brisk reforming zeal of his possible (and eventual) successor is conveyed by:

a Western-style executive – whose job might well be filled by Mr Gorbachev.

I said earlier that one reason for returning to the analysis of newspaper language, though this time with the more sharply focused aim of attempting a close comparative study of two discourse types, was dissatisfaction with the rather facile conclusions of my earlier paper. There I had assumed that the proliferation of familiar stable collocations in news reports was simply a product of the conditions under which they were normally composed. I am not now denying that these pressures are part of the explanation. They are unlikely, however, to be the whole explanation. We saw that while in the editorial the number of restricted collocations was quite high, the number of dead metaphors was considerably higher than in the news story. This suggests that far from seeking to exclude word-combinations altogether, the leader writer freely admits them but puts them to a different use. The normal function

of leading articles is the interpretation of major news events from the viewpoint of the newspaper's political stance. Such a purpose often calls for a measure of ironic or humorous word-play, to which as we have also seen the creative manipulation of established idioms and collocations makes a dominant contribution. Turning back to the page 1 news story, it also seems likely that the use in almost half the verb-noun examples of a semi-fixed expression, or of a verb with a well-worn figurative sense, should be designed to produce the level, unremarkable prose style which is best suited to the unadorned presentation of facts.

Since writing that paragraph, I have had independent confirmation from the author of the front page news story, Mary Dejevsky, now Foreign Leader Writer on *The Times* but in 1988 its Moscow correspondent, that there is some substance in both the explanations offered here. I am grateful to Ms Dejevsky for kindly agreeing to comment on my analysis, and for describing the circumstances in which she worked as a reporter in Moscow. She confirmed that the intense pressure under which copy had to be written and phoned in – she often had no more than two hours to compose her story from notes and telephone it to London – helps to explain the incidence of familiar ready-made expressions. But as a journalist with experience of writing both news stories and leaders she was also plainly aware of functional differences between the two, and agreed that these would help to account for marked contrasts of tone and style.

3. CONCLUSIONS

What are the implications of this small study for the language teacher? Clearly, the sheer density of ready-made units in various types of written text is a fact that any approach to the teaching of writing to foreign students has to come to terms with. It is impossible to perform at a level acceptable to native users, in writing or speech, without controlling an appropriate range of multiword units. Moreover, the demands of creative expression in the foreign language rests, as it does for native speakers and writers, on prior knowledge of a repertoire of such expressions. These are realities which communicative language teaching in particular has to accommodate itself to.

In a recent survey of communicative language teaching methodology, Keith Johnson (1987: 60) refers to the centrality within this approach of 'message focus', by which he understands concentration on meaning rather than the formal means by which meaning is expressed. Indeed, Johnson contrasts the current emphasis on content with an earlier concern with formal accuracy, stating that communicative exercises 'have the prime aim of conveying information from one [person] to the other rather than of practising given language forms'. As to how the learner is to gain access to the language forms themselves, Johnson's view is that it is paramount to place students in a position where they wish to say something, only afterwards (if necessary) providing them with the means of saying it. In his contribution to the Hornby volume (1978), Brumfit had written in a similar vein, reversing the traditional sequence of 'present practice produce' and setting up a three-stage process in which the student would first 'communicate with available resources' and only then receive from the teacher 'items shown to be necessary'. By 1980, the year of the paper quoted from earlier, he had clearly moved beyond that position, believing that existing form-meaning pairings are renegotiated as part of the process of communication itself, with the consequences for methodology which that shift entails.

I find Johnson's view and the more recent position taken up by Brumfit equally untenable, the former because in theory and in practical teaching terms it creates an unnatural gulf between lexical form and meaning, the latter because it underplays, or ignores altogether, the central role of ready-made complex units in spoken and written communication. In contrast, I would contend that in language teaching practice expressive needs and expressive means should be brought together, though this is not the place to discuss in detail how this might be achieved. I am convinced, too, that we should allow for the ready-made as well as the innovative in vocabulary use (Cowie, 1988a). Unnatural imbalances and distortions in language teaching are part of the high price we pay for an insistence that the learner's communicative needs are always paramount, and for a still dominant tendency to place the development of creative procedures before secure knowledge of precisely those ready-made units on which the exercise of creativity so often depends.

Notes

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2. I am grateful to Susan Roggen of the National Institute for Translators and Interpreters, Maastricht, for her help with compiling this data.

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2

Textual Aspects of Fixed Expressions in Learners' Dictionaries

ROSAMUND MOON

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper considers fixed expressions, in particular the fixed expressions of English, in terms of their behaviour in text, and the implications of this for lexicography. The very nature of a dictionary means that lexical items, whether these items consist of one word or of more than one word, are treated in isolation from one another. Textual aspects of items are for the most part neglected in favour of the representation of their meaning, and, in the case of learners' dictionaries, detailed grammatical or collocational information. This may seem both inevitable and to some extent irrelevant: the pragmatics of language use has never been part of the lexicographical scheme of things, since lexicography is concerned with the generalisable rather than the instantial. However, it is the argument of this paper that fixed expressions have significant and generalisable functions in text, as well as instantial ones, and that the description of these functions should be part of their lexicographical exposition.

It is conventional to begin with terms. *Fixed expression* is a reasonably transparent term, but the set of fixed expressions is an open one, according to how lexical fixedness is judged or determined, and the extent to which a lexically fixed collocation must be considered semantically opaque in order to count as a 'fixed expression'. The class or subset of idioms is even more problematic. One of the key issues addressed in the literature of idiomatology is the distinction between idiom and non-idiom: what an idiom actually is. Yet little or no agreement can be found, except for a weak consensus notion that an idiom is not the sum of its parts (Verstraten, this volume). This notion itself depends on the highly

questionable idea that words have stable meanings which may be isolated from their contexts. It is certainly true that there is a cline in strength of lexical association, from fixed or fossilised multiword units at one end of the cline to looser lexicalised sentence-stems and semi-restricted collocations at the other. The latter group, which forms the subject of Cowie's paper (this volume), is probably of greater significance for the language learner. They enable faster decoding and encoding of text, as work by Pawley and Syder (1983), Peters (1983) and Sinclair (1987) suggests. Yet the set of such units is impossible to define, and they are difficult to present lexicographically. They are untidy, and dictionaries can only successfully handle the tidier aspects of language.

Fixed expressions may be divided into three main groups. First, there are anomalous collocations. These are collocations which may be considered aberrant with respect to the lexicon as a whole: either because they are grammatically ill-formed (for example, *at large*, *by and large*, *through thick and thin*, *see you*) or because they are 'cranberry' idioms (Makkai, 1972: 43 and *passim*) in the sense that one component word is fossilised within that particular collocation and no longer found outside it (for example, *kith and kin* and *from afar*, where *kith* and *afar* are the fossilised elements).¹ Secondly, there are formulae such as proverbs, slogans, quotations, catchphrases, gambits and closed-set turns: institutionalised or conventionalised stretches of language which are almost certainly stored and produced holistically, and which can be decoded compositionally, word by word, but which may be considered idiomatic because of a mismatch between their compositional values and their overall pragmatic function. Examples include *Half a loaf is better than none*, *You've never had it so good*, *Shut your mouth!*, and so on. Thirdly, there is the group of fossilised or frozen metaphors, the so-called pure idioms (Fernando and Flavell, 1981: *passim*; Cowie, 1988: 133). The metaphor may be retrievable, as in the case of *skate on thin ice*, or completely opaque, as in the case of *kick the bucket* (= 'die') or *spill the beans* (= 'reveal a secret'). Such metaphorical expressions can be seen as cultural schemata, as shorthand ways of describing particular sorts of experiences or of conveying particular evaluations. They are like proverbs in this respect: not simply fusions of individual words, but also fusions of words with outlooks and opinions which are institutionalised in both language and culture.

It is, of course, dangerous to talk of metaphor in relation to

idioms because the metaphors are fossilised: the expressions are sufficiently institutionalised for decoding, at any rate on the part of the native speaker, to go straight to the speaker's meaning rather than via some hypothetical literal interpretation and subsequent analogising (see Searle, 1979). Further, psycholinguistic experiments have shown that the so-called idiomatic meaning of an expression is processed prior to and in preference to literal or compositional meaning. For example, the work of Gibbs (1986) suggests, amongst other things, that there is no evidence that processing of the literal meanings ever in fact takes place. This does not mean, however, that speakers never examine or make reference to the conventional meanings of the component words. The exploitation of fixed expressions is a recurrent phenomenon. Consider, for example, the way in which an idiom is demetaphorised by means of a word such as *literally*:

Haggerty marched him to the door, literally threw him out and returned.

Her belief that it was the female hominids who first stood up because they discovered that to retreat into sea and lakes was their best method of protecting themselves and their infants and they had literally to keep their heads above water . . .

Certainly all the election manifestos promise the earth (quite literally the earth – all imply that the land will return to the blacks without saying how, when or to whom).²

Similarly, fixed expressions are regularly remetaphorised by speakers punning or developing the idea which underlies the fossilised metaphor, thus revitalising and foregrounding compositional meaning:

No skeletons in Matthew Taylor's cupboard, they all say. Well, a small door did open behind the Liberal candidate for Truro yesterday and a minor pile of bones was heard to clatter out.

(The Guardian, 24 February 1987: 36)

After nearly 20 years in university teaching, I have finally realised why universities are known as ivory towers. It must be because we are hanging on by the skin of our teeth.

(The Guardian, 24 February 1987: 15)

Or consider the way in which, when a television news reporter asked President Bush 'But did this summit bury the hatchet?', Bush replied 'There is no hatchet', thus investing *hatchet* with a special significance or meaning, almost divorced from its idiomatic context.

2. DICTIONARIES AND FIXED EXPRESSIONS

Before continuing to explore cultural and textual aspects of fixed expressions, it would perhaps be useful to look briefly at some lexicographical aspects. General dictionaries simply do not have much space to devote to fixed expressions, and concentrate largely on explaining their meaning. Specialist dictionaries of fixed expressions have more space, but they also have to cover a much larger number of items, and the extra space is also used for examples which are less commonly found in the general dictionaries. It is certainly the case that dictionaries are better at providing decoding information for lower levels of language, rather than higher ones, and the treatment of fixed expressions is no exception to this, yet it is perhaps at higher levels of language that some of the most glaring mistakes are made which may lead to misinterpretation of a whole utterance or stretch of text. For example, a French speaker may use *on the contrary* to introduce a contrasting point into an argument, by analogy with *au contraire*, but he or she will have signalled to the hearer to expect a contradiction of the previous point, not merely a contrast. Similarly, the more metaphorical expressions may be used in entirely the wrong situational contexts, or with the wrong evaluative content, thus confusing the hearer, even if they are used with more or less the right meaning. It would not do to assume that language learners can and do acquire a complete and native-like competence with fixed expressions from a dictionary. As Béjoint remarks (1988: 139),

Dictionaries are not normally used for the systematic acquisition of linguistic knowledge; they are used for finding an *ad hoc* solution to a particular problem of comprehension or production.

Nonetheless, it stands to reason that dictionaries which give guidance as to the way in which word use fits into higher levels of

discourse are providing a better service than ones which do not (Verstraten, this volume).

What information do L2 dictionary users expect to find concerning fixed expressions? Certainly, information concerning lexical fixedness and inflectional potential: perhaps some guidance as to the syntactic behaviour of the unit. Yet this information is undoubtedly oriented towards decoding, and the lack of information concerning usage contributes to a general wariness of encoding. While it is desirable for the L2 speaker to absorb and store fixed expressions as *gestalts*, it may also be desirable for them to perceive and appreciate the metaphoricality of a fixed expression. The fact that there is some form of metaphor in operation is underlined arbitrarily by the very placement of an expression under one of its lexical components. L1 monolingual dictionaries explain meanings and sometimes explain history or origin; L2 monolinguals need to explain usage as well as meaning to the same extent that they do for other kinds of lexical item. With bilingual dictionaries, fixed expressions are mainly treated either by giving a translation equivalent or by paraphrase: little more information is given. In all cases, there is a general impression that fixed expressions are nuisances, cluttering up a neat exposition of the headword under which it is placed. Metaphorical fixed expressions and proverbs in particular – that is anything which embodies the unusual and incongruent – are presented as curiosities and cultural baubles, rather like the fact that Inuktitut has a larger than average number of words for snow compared with other languages, although no one could claim that this fact is anything but unsurprising. Bilingual dictionaries of fixed expressions tend to concentrate on the curiosity element, and some specifically set out to highlight and exploit the more bizarre items of each language, or to point up cases where the two languages both have expressions which are parallel semantically but which are strikingly dissimilar lexically. It is worth looking at cultural aspects in more detail.

3. CULTURAL ASPECTS OF FIXED EXPRESSIONS

The tracing of parallel fixed expressions in different languages is a superficial exercise. If 'tilt at windmills' is found in a number of languages, this is fairly predictable, given its literary origins in Cervantes' *Don Quixote*. French speakers *get up with the cock*,

Germans and Russian speakers *get up with the hens*, and English speakers *get up with the lark*. The idea is the same, the precise bird mentioned differs. As far as cultural aspects are concerned, all that can really be said is that there is an agricultural flavour to the first two expressions, and that it is surprising that English speakers persist in referring to larks, although the majority of them would not recognise a lark and have never heard one. Let us consider some further parallels between the more metaphorical and colourful fixed expressions of different languages:

English : *kill two birds with one stone*
 French : *faire d'une pierre deux coups*
 Russian: 'kill two hares with one shot'

English : *take a sledgehammer to crack a nut* (and variants)
 French : *écraser une mouche avec un marteau*
 Russian: 'fire a cannon at sparrows'

English : *make a mountain out of a molehill*
 French : *faire une montagne d'un rien*
 Russian: 'make an elephant out of a fly'

English : *out of the frying-pan into the fire*
 French : *tomber de Charybde en Scylla*
 Malay : 'escape from the jaws of a crocodile into the tiger's mouth'

English : *You can't have your cake and eat it*
 French : *On ne peut pas avoir le beurre et l'argent du beurre*
 Russian: 'You can't eat one pirog twice'

The similarities and dissimilarities are obvious. But these equivalent expressions are also misleading: they are *faux amis*. Although it may seem easier for learners to acquire closely parallel expressions before ones which are less so, there is no doubt that in most cases even those expressions which are very close lexically and semantically have different connotations and different distributions. It is simply not safe to assume that an equivalent is a good translation.

Examples such as those listed above – and many, many more could be produced – allow fairly trite conclusions to be drawn

concerning, on the one hand, the universality of some human situations, and, on the other hand, cultural specificity: the differences, that is, which are highlighted between a pair or trio of cultures. But this perhaps masks a crucial point, the fact that the situations are cultural constants or cultural universals, and that only the precise metaphors realising them differ. The real cultural importance is not the lexis or metaphor in use, but the situation for which a shorthand mode of reference has been developed, and the fact that such shorthand references have developed at all.

The most important cultural aspects of fixed expressions are the contexts of situation in which they are used, and the evaluative stance from which they are used. The direction of recent work in idiomatology reinforces this. For example, Strassler (1982) explores the pragmatics of the use of fixed expressions in spoken discourse. Lattey (1986: 220ff.) produces a schematic and pragmatic classification of fixed expressions, according to the orientation with which they are used. She has four main groupings: I include her examples to clarify them.

- (a) expressions focusing on the interaction of individuals – e.g. *lend someone a helping hand, be hard on someone's heels*;
- (b) expressions focusing on the interaction of individuals and the world – e.g. *take up arms for something, burn your bridges behind you*;
- (c) expressions focusing on an individual – e.g. *keep a stiff upper lip, throw in the towel*;
- (d) expressions focusing on the world – e.g. *go down the drain, be touch and go*.

These groupings can be further refined according to whether they evaluate positively, negatively or neutrally. The main thrust of this work is important, as it firmly situates fixed expressions in real discourse and real situation.

Fixed expressions, especially idioms and formulae, are selected as lexical items for communicative reasons. They have crucial roles with respect to maintaining the interaction between speaker/writer and hearer/reader: Leech (1983: 145–7) sees the use of hyperbole and idioms – which violate Gricean maxims of relevance and truth – as evidence of an Interest Principle, the strategy of adding interest to a text. They also have crucial roles in conveying the attitude and evaluations of the speaker/writer in a very special indirect way. This indirectness may be considered in relation to the