

Highly polysemous words in Foreign Language Teaching: How to give learners a flying start

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1. Introduction

Since corpus linguistics has made it possible to approach language from a quantitative perspective and determine the probability of particular linguistic phenomena, several voices have been raised to defend the role of frequency in FLT (e.g. Sinclair & Renouf 1988). The reasoning behind this position is that learners should be taught what is most frequent in language, since it is what is of most use to them. While there is no denying that frequency is a decisive factor when teaching a foreign language, it is worth wondering at what stage the most common use of a word should be introduced. In this paper, it is argued that, when teaching highly polysemous words, it is not the most frequent sense that should be taught first, but the most “prototypical” one. Two arguments will be put forward to support this view, one contrastive and the other cognitive.

2. Frequency vs. prototypicality

Prototypicality refers to the belief that categories are organised around a prototype, which can be defined as “the best, clearest and most salient exemplar among the members of a category and [serving] as a kind of cognitive reference point with respect to which the surrounding, ‘poorer’ instances of the category are defined” (Radden 1992:519-20). After originating in the field of psychology, the concept of prototypicality was applied to linguistic domains of investigation, such as transitivity (Hopper & Thompson 1980) or past tense (Taylor 1989).

It is regularly assumed, among linguists, that frequency in language reflects salience in the mind and can therefore be used as evidence for prototypicality (see Schmid’s [2000] “From-Corpus-to-Cognition” principle). Several recent studies, however, suggest that linguistic frequency might not be a good indicator for cognitive salience (e.g. Roland & Jurafsky 2002; Nordquist 2004). Using the example of the highly polysemous verb *give*, it will be demonstrated that frequency as attested in corpora provides results which do not coincide with the prototype as established by means of experimental tests. The corpus data consist of 500 occurrences of the verb extracted from the FROWN corpus (written American English) and 500 occurrences from the Switchboard corpus (spoken American English). In order to test cognitive salience, two experiments were performed, one for production and one for reception. On the one hand, 40 native speakers of American English were asked to use the

verb *give* in the first sentence they could think of. On the other hand, 12 other informants, also native American, had to rank a number of sentences according to how typical they were of the uses of *give*. While the corpus data reveal a predominance of the delexical use (e.g. *give a smile, give a hug*), it transpires from the experiments that the sense of “handing” (e.g. *give somebody a cookie*) is the most salient one. Given such diverging results, it is necessary to choose between frequency and prototypicality as a criterion for introducing a new word. Put differently, the question is as follows: should learners be taught the most frequent sense first (e.g. delexical use of *give*) or the most prototypical one (e.g. *give* in the sense of “handing”)? Two arguments are presented in favour of the latter position.

3. Giving priority to the prototype

3.1. Contrastive evidence

One argument for teaching the most prototypical sense first, rather than the most frequent one, is that the prototype is more likely to have a direct equivalent in the learner’s mother tongue than derived senses. This idea was explored by examining concordances from a French-English parallel corpus, the PLECI corpus, and investigating how the occurrences of *give* were translated into French. It turns out that, in the prototypical sense of “handing”, *give* is translated in French by its direct equivalent, *donner*, in 54% of the cases, whereas the delexical use of *give* corresponds to *donner* in only 11% of its occurrences, a difference which is statistically significant ($X^2 = 11.95$, $p < 0.001$). By teaching the prototypical sense of a highly polysemous word first, one therefore starts with something that is already familiar to the learners in their mother tongue, which has the effect of increasing the learnability of the word.

3.2. Cognitive evidence

In addition, the prototype, thanks to its maximal salience, appeals to basic cognitive concepts and is therefore arguably easier to learn. In a well-known experiment, Mervis & Pani (1980) taught young children the names of different objects within artificial concrete categories. In some cases the category was introduced by its best example and in other cases the introduction was based on a poor example. The results of this study suggest that learning is more effective when exposure is through a typical, rather than atypical, item. It can reasonably be assumed that the same is true of second language acquisition.

4. Some caveats

What precedes should not be taken to mean that the information provided by corpora is irrelevant to FLT. In fact, this information is important in at least two respects. First, corpora give access to authentic examples. Even if teachers do not start with the most frequent use of a word, it is essential that they should use real examples (possibly slightly simplified so as to make them understandable to beginners), thus giving learners a sense of what the authentic language is like. Second, the prototypical sense of a highly polysemous word runs the risk of becoming what Hasselgren (1994) calls a “lexical teddy bear”. Quite soon after the

introduction of the most prototypical sense, the sense of the word most frequently attested in corpus data should therefore be presented to learners and gradually become more prominent in the language acquisition process than the prototype.

5. Conclusion

Using contrastive and cognitive evidence, it has been shown that the sense of a polysemous word that should be given priority in the first stage of FLT is not the most frequent one, as argued by several linguists, but the most prototypical one. This, however, does not deny the role of corpora in FLT, for corpora both give access to authentic examples and show which senses should become more prominent in the next stages of the language acquisition process.

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