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Phraseology in language learning and teaching: where to from here?

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This concluding section aims to take stock of the work devoted to phraseology in language learning and teaching and to identify major avenues for future theoretical and applied work in the field. A distinction will be made between what is known about phraseology and what still remains to be discovered, with teachers and learners taking centre stage.

Linguistic analysis has amply demonstrated the patterned nature of language, both lexically and grammatically, stressed the pervasiveness of phraseology in oral and written communication, and the difficulties that learners have in mastering native-like phraseology. Psycholinguistic research has also shown that language is, to a great extent, acquired, stored and processed in chunks. It would therefore not seem unreasonable to propose that phraseology should occupy a central and uncontroversial position in instructed second language acquisition¹.

To date however, although phraseology has received more attention, notably via pedagogical lexicography, it would be misleading to claim that there is some uncontroversial consensus about its role in pedagogy. Instead, the picture is one of contrasts.

To the layperson, language described in terms of ‘phrases’ (and not as single words) probably prompts the following images: Berlitz-like phrase books for tourists or businessmen and typically humorous books contrasting idioms in various languages. This said, the Berlitz-like books, initially looked down upon by teaching specialists, nevertheless constituted the first attempts to provide users with ready-made expressions in the target language. As for idioms, teachers and students alike seem to view them as phraseological teddy bears², probably not so much because they use them very often but because they are very popular with teachers and learners alike for the fascinating cultural window they open onto the target language. For trained teachers, phraseology is often associated with collocations (typically verbs or adjectives plus nouns collocations) or with pragmatically and communicatively useful phrases such as ‘how do you do?’, ‘nice to meet you’, or ‘what’s the weather like today?’ Concepts such as word grammar, colligations, collostructions and patterns probably do not rank very highly on teachers’ priority lists, which is perfectly understandable given the relative novelty of such concepts. As for learners, they very often consider³ a foreign language as a mix of grammar and lexis hopefully acquired through the practice of the four skills.

All in all, whilst concepts such as frequency, statistical co-occurrence, variability, idiomaticity, patterns and phraseology are becoming increasingly familiar to researchers addressing linguistically-related issues, they still have a long way to go to reach the classroom, even if only indirectly, and numerous challenges must be faced. One of those challenges is **dealing with learners’ attitudes and boosting their motivation**. Some may simply not be interested in learning multiword units when they consider that one word only is problematic enough to learn (see Coxhead, this volume); others may be afraid of being accused of plagiarism (ibidem), and yet others may give preponderance to communication rather than accuracy (although one could

argue that accuracy and effective communication often go hand in hand). One of the future challenges for teachers will be to help learners become aware of the pervasiveness of phraseology and its potential in promoting fluency in language (e.g. storage and retrieval facilities, improved receptive and productive communicative competence, see Wray and Fitzpatrick, this volume).

A second issue that should be addressed is the **availability of the phraseological information**. Teachers and learners should find the information they are looking for rapidly and easily, and here, the limits of paper and ink seem to have been reached. We believe that the phraseological (r)evolution in language learning and teaching will be electronic or will simply not be. Wible (this volume) has proposed ways of accounting for learners' needs and for empowering both learners and teachers with electronic literacy. In electronic dictionaries, the linear restrictions and unique access key of the paper dimension can be overcome via improved look-up processes and hypertext functionality. As for textbooks, it seems that only sound use of new literacies (online reading, hyperlinks, highlighting of salient aspects, exhaustive presentation of items, multiplicity of elaboration and rehearsal options) will foster the phraseological enterprise, without undermining other aspects such as focus on grammar or culture. Recourse to new technologies is one practical way of overcoming the thorny paradox that teachers face: because of time pressure, they need to generalize, to take shortcuts, which often involves making a complex reality appear simpler than it actually is, and find it hard to reconcile this need with the atomizing character of a phraseological approach to language, which presents every word as having its own meaning, collocations, colligations, etc depending on the context in which it is used (see Hoey, 1998). The point is well made by Cook (2003: 108): "Hardly surprisingly, the description of English which emerges from corpus analysis (...) is dauntingly complex and particular. But this description cannot be presented to students all at once. The issue still remains how to simplify and stage the language presented to learners, and to simplify the rules used to explain it, in a way which will enable them to come gradually closer to native speaker use (if that is their goal)."

But does the pervasiveness of phraseology in language mean, as Sinclair (2005) suggested in the very title of his plenary at the Louvain phraseology conference, that the new motto for ESL and EFL teachers should be: 'The phrase, the whole phrase and nothing but the phrase'? In other words, should the **centrality of the phrase in language** unquestionably lead to the **centrality of the phrase in teaching**? Statements on the importance of phraseology in language description and its potential for teaching abound: Sinclair (ibid) points that "the normal primary carrier of meaning is the phrase and not the word"; Porto (1998) states that lexical phrases are "an ideal unit for teaching" which "prove highly motivating by developing fluency at very early stages and thus promote a sense of achievement", and that lexical phrases are highly memorable for learners and easy to pick up". It should however be acknowledged that many of the claims made in the literature lack substantiation. Do lexical phrases really prove highly motivating for learners? Are these phrases really easily retrievable and highly accessible? Whilst a few studies are beginning to assess such claims (Coxhead, Wray & Fitzpatrick, this volume; and Eyckmans et al., 2005) and tend to demonstrate that phraseological units may be good candidates for teaching an L2, there is an urgent need for more empirical evidence of the actual impact of a phraseological approach to teaching and learning. The types of phrases that are worth teaching as wholes, the optimal length (if any) of such phrases, or the effects on short and long term retention are but a few of the questions that future research needs to address.

Another challenge that teachers and learners of an L2 face is how to deal with the **lexis-grammar interface**. Many proponents of a lexical/phraseological approach typically tend to present grammar and phraseology as opposed. Porto (1998) suggests that “some patterns which traditionally receive grammatical pedagogic treatment might indeed be best introduced as lexical phrases”. She gives the examples of first, second, and third conditionals; passive; reported speech; -ing form; past participle; *will*, *would*, and *going to*, and adds that “the concept of time may be (our underlining) most efficiently presented through lexis rather than tense”. Porto picks up Lewis’s idea that learners should explore grammar by themselves and that “[g]rammar is primarily receptive” (Lewis (1993: 149). A radically different view however is expressed by Lowe (2006), who claims that proposing a new and original way of teaching grammar does not guarantee its success:

“some post-modernists are arguing for a new way of teaching grammar, by not teaching it as such but by letting it emerge. They argue for drawing the learners’ attention to grammar in text holistically (...) [J]ust because this procedure is new and original, does it make it more efficient in learning terms than what went before, which as the pre-parceling of grammar into learnable ‘grammar items’ or ‘grammar units’?”

Our view of phraseology in language learning and teaching is in accordance with Lowe’s. Whilst we strongly believe in putting more emphasis on phrases in second/foreign language learning, we would consider it wrong to equate this emphasis with an absence of focus on grammar. Together with Harwood (2002: 153), we want to “simply call for the teaching of lexis to come higher up the agenda”. We also believe in **principled eclecticism** (as proposed by Meunier, in press) to help meet the needs of various types of learners thanks to the inclusion of more analytical, functional, data-driven or cognitive approaches in language learning. Options should also be provided for more refined collostructional analyses and extra corpus examples. We are of course well aware that it is not because something is frequent in the language that is necessarily worth teaching. What is taught should make sense to the learners, be useful for them and be adapted both to their areas of interests and to their level. We thus call for a harmonious combination of technology (corpora, statistical measures, etc), common sense and teachers’ experience in selecting relevant units for teaching.

Another challenge that must be addressed in the future is the danger of **extrapolating from L1 and second language learning to foreign language learning**. Here again, Lowe (2006) offers insightful comments and states that whilst it:

“can hardly be doubted now that L1 learners, children that is, engage some kind of in-built predisposition to ‘grow’ their language in an immersion environment through an unconscious internal process of meaning-mapping, chunking, and approximation, utilising the ever-present parental feedback [...] it can be doubted [...] that the majority of L2 learners will benefit from being expected to operate the same process – i.e. a process of absorbing language unconsciously – as the primary process in the L2 classroom.”

Instructed settings are typically considered as input-poor environments and the advantages of input-rich L1 and second language environments must be compensated

by different learning and teaching strategies such as increased awareness raising activities, more focus on form or forms, and more explicit and sometimes even intrusive approaches to learning. Given the limited number of hours devoted to foreign language teaching in schools, it would be utopian to expect grammar and phraseology to somehow take care of themselves. We therefore urgently need to identify the best ways to teach them using the various methodologies and data at our disposal (corpus data, cognitive approaches, elicitation techniques) and to promote interdisciplinary research into phraseology (see Granger and Meunier, in press, for an overview of the many faces of phraseology).

The next (dual) challenge lies in the hands of corpus linguists and NLP specialists: first, promoting constant **refinement of statistical measures and automatic procedures** to help uncover frequent multiword units that might be worth teaching, and secondly, creating **ready-made and user-friendly interfaces** to enable learners and teachers to access multiword units from a variety of genres and text types. Recent corpus-based research has demonstrated that the field of phraseology is wider than was previously thought and that compositional prefabricated units are more frequent and useful than the colourful, non-compositional idioms that are often focused on in teaching (cf. Siepmann this volume, Paquot 2007, De Cock 2004). Further research is needed to refine the methods and measures used to uncover relevant units and make them accessible to learners.

A final challenge lies in addressing the acute need for **pre- and in-service teacher training**. Awareness of phraseology in the wide sense should be promoted. Vocabulary teaching today is still too often exclusively word-based. Teachers (and particularly non-native teachers) should be made aware of the phraseological view of language and of the exercises and tools that research on phraseology has promoted, as they will undoubtedly help foster both teacher and learner empowerment.

Phraseology is a key factor in improving learners' reading and listening comprehension, alongside fluency and accuracy in production. However, its role in language learning largely remains to be explored and substantiated and it should therefore not be presented as the be-all and end-all of language teaching. Teachers have to do a "delicate balancing act" (Harwood 2002) which consists in exposing learners to a wide range of lexical strings while at the same time ensuring that they are not overloaded with them and are also able to abstract key concepts and useful rules of grammar. What is needed are teaching and learning practices which are informed by evidence from descriptive and theoretical linguistic analyses, second language acquisition research, psycholinguistics findings, and which are validated and assessed in the classroom.

Notes

¹ ISLA is used here as a cover term for second language acquisition and foreign language learning, but also for any approach to a non-native language which involves the use of pedagogical material, be it in tutored or self-instructed settings.

² In reference to Hasselgren's (1994) 'lexical teddy bears'

³ This view of language can be partly teaching-induced.

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