

# *Using Verb Patterns in English Language Teaching*

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# What is the purpose of language?

People use language mainly:

- to make meanings (meaningful statements);
- to ask questions.
  
- How do they do this?
- How does language work?
- How can a student learn a second language?

# Digression: How to form questions in English

Every English speaker has mastered the illogical, bizarre word order of auxiliary and modal verbs to form questions in English:

- Is it a bird? Is it a plane?
- Could it be Superman?
- What did he say? What could he have said?
- Did he say anything? Does he want to ask a question?

BUT NOT: \**Do I may ask a question?*

# How to make statements in English (1)

- A task so basic and obvious that nobody studies how it is done.
- Until recently, questions about how to make meanings have been neglected by linguistic researchers.
- It is now becoming clear that logicians, computational linguists, and AIers have wasted billions of dollars (pounds, Euros, yen) barking up the wrong tree.
- This is (partly) because of confusion over the relationship between logic and natural language.

# Barking up the wrong tree

- The wrong tree (one of them) is the belief that words have meaning.
- They don't. They have meaning potential.

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- Different facets of a word's meaning potential are activated by different contexts.

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- “Many, if not most, meanings depend upon the presence of more than one word.” – John Sinclair
- If words don't have meaning, the whole program of “word sense disambiguation” (WSD) crumbles into dust.

# Start with the verb

- People make meanings by constructing clauses.
- The verb is the pivot of the clause.
- Clauses are based on patterns -- recurrent phraseology.
- Words are profoundly ambiguous; patterns -- phraseological patterns -- are unambiguous.
- People store patterns in their heads (their subconscious minds).
- Storing linguistic patterns is a lifelong process.
- People use patterns to make meaning in two ways:
  - (1) by conforming to the phraseology of a stored pattern.
  - (2) by exploiting the phraseology of a stored pattern.

# Teaching language (specifically, EFL): always start with a verb

- Get the meaning of the verb right (= get the right pattern), and the meaning (= role at a general level), of the nouns will start to fall into place.
- There are hundreds of thousands of nouns and noun phrases in English – many of them domain-specific -- but only around 6000 verbs.

# Corpus pattern analysis

Recent research in corpus linguistics has shown that ordinary usage is very highly patterned – more highly patterned than most people had previously imagined.

Such research bears out the pre-corpus insights of people like Firth (1952) and Sinclair (1986).

- “You shall know a word by the company it keeps.”  
– J.R. Firth
- “We must separate from the mush of general goings-on [in language] those features of repeated events which appear to be part of a patterned process.” – J.R. Firth
- “Most meanings require the presence of more than one word for their normal realization.” – John Sinclair



# Why is corups evidence needed: “Wipe”

What’s the meaning of *wipe*?

Surely it is “to clean a surface with a cloth”?

This is indeed one of the meanings of *wipe* – but it turns out not to be the most frequent meaning.

- Over 55% of the sentences containing uses of the verb *wipe* are built around the phraseological pattern *wipe something out / something was wiped out* (phrasal verb).
- nothing to do with cleaning surfaces with a cloth.

This discrepancy between expected meaning and actual usage is by no means unusual.

# CPA results for “wipe”

- 10 different patterns for wipe were identified. The following are worthy of comment:
- Pattern 1: [[Human]] wipe [Surface | Physical Object | Body Part]: 12% OF SAMPLE.
- COGNITIVELY SALIENT
- Pattern 5: [[Eventuality | Entity 1]] wipe [[Entity 2]] **out**: 55% OF SAMPLE
- PHRASAL VERB, SOCIALLY SALIENT
- Pattern 6: [[Human]] wipe [[Stuff]] **up**: 0.3% OF SAMPLE
- PHRASAL VERB, COGNITIVELY SALIENT BUT RARE

# Social salience and cognitive salience

- It is important to distinguish between **social salience** and **cognitive salience**.
  - social salience = frequency.
  - cognitive salience = memorableness and ease of recall.

# Another example: what's the meaning of 'sweep'?

Dictionaries say that it is a transitive verb meaning 'use a brush to remove dirt and debris from a surface'.

– *He sweeps the kitchen floor every morning.*

That is the cognitively salient use and meaning of this verb, but it is not the most frequent use.

• More frequent are intransitive uses with a prepositional phrase, as a verb of movement:

– *She swept into the room.*

– *A tornado swept across Texas.*

# Philosophical background

- H. P. Grice (1957) posited (or implied) that meanings are not just in the head.
  - they are events; interactions between people:
  - between speaker (S) and hearer (H);
  - (and with displacement in time) between writer and reader
- S and H must share a body of linguistic conventions having the same meanings.
- Grice did not specify what these conventions are.
  - He left that task to linguists and lexicographers
  - So far, we have let him down.

# Implications of all this

- Meanings in language are associated with words in prototypical phraseological patterns (not words in isolation).
- Meanings in text are interpreted by pattern matching – mapping bit of text onto the patterns in our heads.
  - The patterns in our heads come from ‘lexical priming’ (Hoey 2005)
  - Members of a language community share primed patterns.
- Some uses match well onto patterns; these are ‘norms’
- Some uses seem surprising; these are ‘exploitations of norms’ [or mistakes].
- For each language, a corpus-driven lexical database will identify the normal phraseology associated with each word
- A set of exploitation rules is needed to explain creative usage.