VOCABULARY AND THE SYLLABUS

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Nowadays, more and more linguists are beginning to talk about the importance of vocabulary teaching and the neglect that vocabulary has suffered as a subject area in Applied Linguistics. This has come about largely because teachers realise that, even with a solid basis in structure and with the present-day addition of an attempt to teach communicative function, the learner is at a loss without a command of the hundreds of lexical items he encounters and is expected to 'learn'. Words are the biggest problem, and there are so many of them.

If as teachers we decide we need to do something about vocabulary, something systematic and with a sound linguistic basis, however, we are faced with problems: the area of linguistics which devotes itself to the study of vocabulary, lexicology, lags far behind other areas in terms of recent developments — attempts to relate grammatical structure and communicative function have not been repeated anything like as successfully in the study of lexis; we have not really got much further than the basic approaches to vocabulary (looking at collocations and sets, and selecting in terms of frequency and range, etc.) outlined by Halliday and Sinclair back in the 1960s. Equally, if we look to the leading works on syllabus design, those that attempt to construct notional/functional or communicative syllabuses, such as those of Wilkins and Munby, then we find that vocabulary is dismissed in just a few words; the feeling is that 'topics' or 'settings' will generate the vocabulary necessary to provide the syllabus with content.

This last point is usually as far as vocabulary teaching goes: the word list is arrived at by conventional means and the words in it are used as fillers for practising structures or functional formulae, such as 'Would you mind if I close the door/window, etc.' We are then left with a list of words whose internal consistency is not at all explored thoroughly; we do not handle vocabulary half as rigorously as we handle grammatical structure. If I say this, though, I seem to be committing myself to the belief that vocabulary **does** have some consistent internal organization, and that would need to be proved or at least demonstrated in principle. I think this is possible, and quite an important thing to do. If we can at least see **some** principles at work at the level of vocabulary, then we can begin to make some sense of the bewildering array of words our notional settings or needs analyses throw up.

It is very fascinating to look at general frequency lists and see what they can tell us about 'words we really need' and words people seem to use very frequently. Nowadays vast computer corpora such as those produced by the University of Birmingham in the U.K. and the joint British (Lancaster) and Norwegian (Oslo and Bergen) corpus (LOB), can give us fairly reliable and sometimes surprising insights into the frequency of words. Most language teachers are quite surprised when they hear that some 'lexical' words are more frequent than some grammatical items: the adjective *new* is of extremely high frequency and is more frequent than the pronoun *us* and the preposition *under* in the LOB corpus. Other extremely high frequency words are *way, good, now, made, first, see* and *know.* Perhaps surprisingly low in frequency are words such as *off, left, nothing, ever* and *ago.* I cannot help thinking that most of our beginners' text-books do not reflect these findings at all in their vocabulary lists, nor that the notional/functional or communicative principles of syllabus design would throw up word lists that reflect these indicators of use. So, what is going on? Why should an item like *new* be so frequent?

I think the answer lies in going right back to basics, and I believe that it is in the work of Halliday that we will get the best indication of why lexis seems to behave in this apparently curious way; in Halliday's work we will see the possibility of making sense out of apparently unstructured word lists. Halliday has always insisted that grammar and lexis operate at the same level in the linguistic system, that of **form**, and that they operate simultaneously; in fact, Halliday rarely refers to the grammatical level independently and prefers to talk consistently of the **lexico-grammatical** level. Lexis **does** exactly the same sorts of things that grammar does, but of course in a different

way; principally, grammar works by items of different classes entering into left-to-right patterns called structures, from which we can extract clear rules for the behaviour of word-classes; lexis has only items, and the left-to-right patterns are probable co-occurrences called collocations; words are seen to be related by being members of the same lexical **set** (a set is words grouped in terms of relations like sameness, oppositeness, inclusiveness, etc.). So in the Hallidayan view of language grammar and vocabulary are similar. Another feature of Halliday's view is that nothing in language exists without a **function**, without some social purpose. All language, says Halliday, serves principally three main functions: the **ideational** (**what** we are talking about in real-world terms), the **interpersonal** (how we express **our** position or attitude to those things in the world) and the **textual** (how we use language to organize itself into texts and conversations which are coherent and make sense). Halliday explains how the structures of grammar simultaneously fulfil all three functions (e.g. transitivity enables us to talk about actions and events and the participants in them — ideational use of language; modals and interrogatives enable us to express these facts tentatively, to place ourselves in the position of asker rather than teller — interpersonal use; front-placing of adverbs or objects, use of conjunctions etc. enable us to organize the information and to highlight information — textual use of language). If we look at language in this way — as fulfilling all the time these three functions, then it ought to be possible to talk about functions of the same kind for vocabulary items and the patterns we can see between vocabulary items when they are used together with one another.

The ideational patterns of vocabulary are the 'traditional' patterns of semantics and vocabulary teaching as it exists: relations of sameness, oppositeness, inclusiveness etc. in the real world — *big/small, flower* includes *tulip, rose,* etc., *lorry = truck*, etc. There are, however, relatively few items that can be related in this way (notice how semantics text-books work and re-work the same old tired examples). The number of items we can do this with may be as few as 2-300, which is tiny compared with the size of the vocabulary of a language like English. In the main, the ideational aspects of vocabulary will consist of explaining the 'meaning in the real world' of hundreds of items. The fact that relations like synonymy (sameness) and hyponymy (inclusiveness) are so limited in their application has probably put many language teachers off the idea of a systematic approach to vocabulary, but if we can find systematic relations appearing in the *other* functions of language, then it will enable us to expand our systematic approach to vocabulary considerably.

Let us take the interpersonal function: here we are dealing with the speaker's position or relationship to what he is going to say. In vocabulary terms we do indeed find some important distinctions. If we look at how adjectives behave, we roughly classify them as either being ideational (such as *circular, wooden, English,* etc.) which describe the world relatively objectively, and which are not normally found with words like *very* (we should be surprised at someone saying 'I'd like a very wooden table, please' in a shop), and those which we use to express our attitudes and relationship towards the world (like *beautiful, interesting, delicious,* etc.). Similarly, some adjectives, and adverbs (take *similarly*, for example) can be used to organize a text or a conversation, and to relate one chunk of language to another ('this is different', for example, in a discussion). So it is clear that vocabulary does have clear functions like grammar, but linguists have not really looked hard enough at them and have been missing interesting phenomena under their noses, mainly because they have been too singly interested in grammar. There are exceptions: Halliday and Hasan have examined what they call the class of general nouns (words like *thing, idea, creature*) and shown how they are used to bind sentences together (cohesion), and E.O. Winter has listed a whole class of words which are commonly used to relate chunks of information to one another (textual function). But when we really start to look at vocabulary, we see all sorts of interesting patterns that can be explained by a functional view, and we can start to talk about the potential of items for highlighting certain functions.

We could start, again, with the simple example of adjectives. We can actually signal to our listener that we are using an adjective interpersonally with an overlay of attitudinal meaning as well as its basic (ideational) meaning, by using it in the same way as we use purely evaluative words: 'He has very wooden movements', 'That's a rather circular argument', 'She's very English' are just some examples. Interestingly, here we might compare

'I'm going to buy a new *car*' with 'I'm going to buy a *new* car' where in context the first is likely to be the opposite of 'the one I have now' while the second is likely to be the opposite of 'a used car'. Some languages actually differentiate between these two meanings of *new*; in English there is no problem, as *new* has tremendously wide potential for fulfilling ideational, interpersonal and textual ('this is a new argument') functions. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that is is so frequent in frequency counts. When we understand its functioning in this three-fold way we can decide as teachers to give it a priority that accords with the indications given us by the frequency counts (it really is a useful word). Equally we can solve the old red-herring problems such as 'What is the opposite of *new*?' by referring the answer to functional criteria: *new* may be the opposite of *old* in all three functions, but the opposite of *old* in the ideational function may also be *young*, though not in the textual function (we don't say: 'That's a young argument'), and so on. This also goes a long way to explaining the sometimes baffling fact that high frequency words may be much, much more frequent than their (apparent) opposites (*new* more frequent than *used*, and possibly more frequent **textually** than *old*?). The point is that the functional view enables us to begin classifying adjectives according to their likelihood of fulfilling each of the three functions, for example:

	ideational	interpersonal	textual
new	x	xx	xx
delicious	x	xx	?
different	x	xx	xx
conical	x	x	?
first	x	x	xx

Such classifications are crude but offer the teacher at least a sensible pedagogical approach to an otherwise unordered list.

When we look at patterns of vocabulary in conversation we notice some fascinating interpersonal features of the sorts of relationships traditionally thought of as purely 'semantic' in the real world sense, but which are obviously saying something about my attitude or role or position I choose to adopt as speaker. We can effect agreement with statements in many ways, among them neutrally or purely 'grammatically':

A: Hot today!
B: Yes, it is.

We can also involve ourselves and our judgement by using vocabulary:

A: Hot today!
B: Sweltering!

Most language courses I know of train the learner in the first (grammatical) realization of the function; none I know of train the second (lexical) type of response, yet they are very common and fulfil important interpersonal functions by use of vocabulary relations such as synonymy and antonymy; in other words there is a lot more to synonymy, antonymy and so on than just ideational relations; at the interpersonal level, we can actually say things that seem to contradict traditional 'ideational' semantic views:

A: Were you angry?
B: Yes, I was furious.

compared with

A: Were you angry?
B: I wasn't angry, I was furious.

Similarly, Halliday and Hasan have shown how important synonymy, antonymy and hyponymy are in the textual function, creating cohesive links between sentences.

Adverbs also have some interesting features when we view them functionally. It is easy to see relations between adverbs such as *quickly/slowly, nearly = practically*, etc. in the **ideational** sense; it would be less easy to state a clear ideational relationship between, say, *kindly* and *gladly*, but once we consider **interpersonal** functions, the relationship can be precisely described in terms of speaker orientation. A recent advertisement for Malaysian Airlines illustrates this: the text informed readers that MAS would *'gladly'* send their brochure on request; the coupon to fill in and send for the brochure began: *'Kindly* send me your brochure ....' We can clearly see that these words are related, but can only best describe that relationship in terms of *gladly* being speaker-oriented and *kindly* being listener-oriented, or to put it simply, the listener (in this case the reader) could not ask: '*Gladly* send me your brochure ....' nor could the speaker (MAS) say 'We will *kindly* send you our brochure ....'. However, if the speaker is assuming a neutral, reporting interpersonal function, then both choices are open to him: 'The Airline *kindly/gladly* sent Mr Smith their brochure'. So a systematic relationship exists between this pair which can be directly exploited

in teaching. The three-fold interpersonal distinction of speaker-orientation, listener-orientation and neutral/reporting functions are something the **definition** or traditional dictionary meaning (i.e. the ideational meaning) does not include, but which is an important vocabulary relation. Many other adverbs behave in exactly the same way: *happily, willingly, sadly, angrily*, etc. and can be described accurately according to their interpersonal potential, just as adjectives can.

One could go on with many more examples of functional features of vocabulary. I have not said much about verbs, but they too have striking features, especially in some of their textual functions: some verbs may be exchanged with their hyponyms in first-mention position when they are not phonologically prominent:

A: Shall we | go / stroll | down to the pub?

while others may not:

A: Did you go to the exhibition?
B: Yes.
A: Did you | look / *stare | at the French tapestries?

Again, this sort of approach offers us the possibility of rigorously controlling vocabulary lists and gives us direct, systematic principles for teaching.

If we apply a functional view to vocabulary, we soon come to see that certain words, because of their multi-functional potential, their ability to describe the real world, to express something about the speaker's role or position in relation to what he is saying, and to organize bits of language into coherent texts are immensely useful for our learners. We come to understand why *new* is so high in frequency lists, because people use it in such a variety of useful ways, to fulfil the three principle language functions; as such it may be a better word to teach a beginner than, say, *chair*, or *paper*. But what the functional view gives us most of all is the possibility of getting away from the frustrations of the limitations of just looking at words ideationally and seeing all sorts of consistent relations between words that makes the introduction of a controlled, **vocabulary teaching** element into the syllabus a feasible task. We need no longer look at the word list and hope that our learners will 'pick them up as they go along'; we can offer the learner the support that he needs by showing how the words in the list may be systematically related, just as we do with the teaching of grammar. Vocabulary research of the kind I have described here is in its infancy but promises to yield good results over the next few years which should ultimately be translated into positive vocabulary teaching materials; till then, vocabulary is all round us; we just need to look harder at it and ask ourselves: 'What do we **do** with words?' and not just 'What do words mean?'

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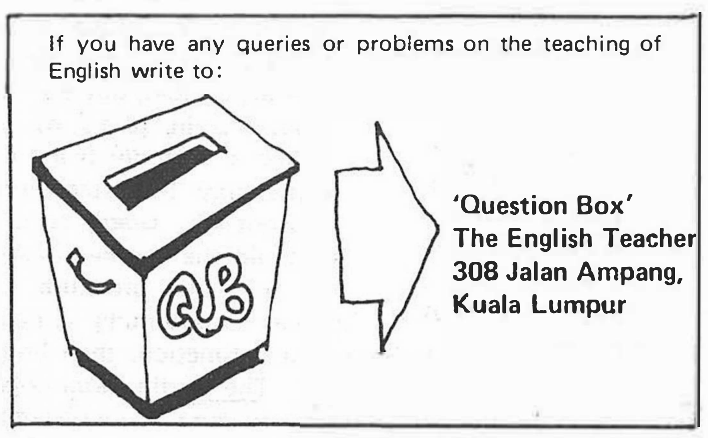

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