



Review of “Lexical Priming: A New Theory of Words and Language”

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Hoey’s book “Lexical Priming: A new theory of words and language” discusses a new view of language, explaining the existence of combinations of words. Through the lens of native speakers, this view of language assumes that language users store words that they know in the context in which they have heard or read them before, be it spoken or written. They then build up a collection of these words and/or phrases in different contexts. Subconsciously, we notice that these contexts have some grammatical pattern to them.

The book is divided into ten chapters of varying length. In the first chapter, Hoey defines lexical priming and describes it briefly by arguing traditional methods of vocabulary acquisition. In Chapter 1, drawing data and evidence from language corpora, Hoey suggests that we acquire vocabulary not only from explicit learning, but mostly from contexts such as linguistic and contextual information and social interaction which we repeatedly encounter. Lexical priming refers to when we are primed (readied by our prior experience of words) to expect words to be in the units of other words (their collocations) and also expect words to appear in certain grammatical situations (grammatical colligations) and in certain positions in text and discourse (their textual colligations). From this definition, it is implied that lexical priming involves words that are primed to appear at the beginning, in the middle, or at the end of an utterance. In other words, every time we encounter a word or phrase, we store it along with all the words that accompanied it and with a note of the kind of context in which it was found. To prove his claim, a concordance program can be successfully used to identify the position of lexis, because collocation is seen to be closely related to the psychological phenomenon of priming that arises from a language user’s repeated encounters. A concept of productive priming (related to how we create our language use) and receptive priming (words that we expect from speakers) are also introduced.

Subsequently, in Chapter Two, Hoey suggests that because of some aspects of linguistic creativity in a language, semantic association as a word or word sequence associated in the mind of a language user with a semantic set or class contributes to word priming. In order to support this claim on the effects of priming on semantic association, Hoey uses statistical evidence of the priming of some words taken from a corpus of “The Guardian.” In this regard, this chapter is presented as a showcase, taking the word *consequence* (result) to illustrate the semantic set of

collocates that are associated with the word. From a comprehensive corpus analysis, as considered from a pragmatic perspective, four major types of association regarding the word *consequence* are offered. These include: 1) logical association (e.g. *logical, ineluctable, direct*), 2) negative evaluation (e.g. *awful, fire, appalling*), 3) seriousness of the consequence (e.g. *important, serious, significant*), and 4) unexpectedness of the consequence (e.g. *unforeseen, curious, surprising*).

Chapter Three is mostly devoted to priming and colligation (grammar and its position). Hoey uses the words *in winter* and *in the winter* as an example of the relationship of lexical priming and grammar. As supported by the corpus, *in winter* tends to go with the use of present tense, while past tense goes with *in the winter*. Hoey then takes the word *consequence* as an example to show that it has a tendency to occur as the head of a nominal group, but is rarely found as a pre- or post-modification. In order to prove his hypothesis about the priming of synonyms, similarities, and differences of priming positions, Hoey further takes the word *reason*, as a synonym of *consequence*, into his investigation. A phenomenon of colligation nesting of the word *reason* is very intriguing in two ways. That is, it was found that the nesting of *reason* + clause without connector is primed for the pragmatic association of affirmative purposes, whilst the nesting of *reason* + why clause primes for denial. A definition of colligation (the grammatical company a word or word sequence keeps (or avoids keeping) within its own group or at higher rank) is also offered.

Concerning the priming and lexical relation, including co-hyponymy, synonymy, and synonymous, Chapter Four, as demonstrated by a corpus, presents the relationship of words and their collocations, colligations, and semantic associations regarding shared priming, especially in a single letter morpheme (e.g. *round the world, around the world, all around the world, halfway a/round the world, etc.*). This finding suggests that priming tends to vary from word to word because priming is the word form and patterns of an individual word, rather than the meaning. In this regard, Hoey emphasises that “synonyms differ in respect of the way they are primed for collocations, colligations, semantic associations and pragmatic associations, and the differences in these primings represent differences in the uses to which we put our synonyms” (p. 79).

As far as polysemy and priming are concerned, Chapter Five presents three hypotheses on polysemy and patterns of lexical priming. The first hypothesis addressed by Hoey is that a polysemous word has a *common sense* and a *rare sense*. At this juncture, the rare sense tends to be primed to avoid the collocation, colligations, and semantic associations, compared to the common sense which is primed to favour certain collocations, semantic associations, and colligations. This leads to the second hypothesis that Hoey mentions that the patterns of a polysemous word overlap. The third hypothesis is that the effect of humour or ambiguity is intentionally created when the first two hypotheses are violated. As claimed by the findings of a corpus presented in the book, the results from the word *consequence* (result vs. importance), *reason* (cause vs. rationality) seem to support Hoey’s hypotheses. However, ambiguity sometimes emerges due to the relationship between local priming and a textual pattern in an interpretation of lexical priming.

Since textual patterns and local priming play a key role in successfully determining lexical priming in general, and for polysemous words in particular, in Chapter Six, Hoey takes a close look at lexical priming by going beyond lexical levels. Taking cohesive chains and combinations of lexical items into account, Hoey then concludes that some words tend to collocate in a larger textual environment, including textual collocation, textual semantic association, and textual colligation, compared to its nesting and cohesive chains shown by the use of software for concordancing and text analysis. Thus, this phenomenon suggests that textual cohesion is crucial in determining lexical priming, collocation, colligations, and their positions that might appear in texts.

With regard to the importance of discourse, Hoey’s third claim about lexical priming and text is presented in Chapter Seven. Hoey says that “every lexical item is capable of being primed positively or negatively to occur at the beginning or end of an indecently recognised ‘chunk’ of text” (p. 129). Using paragraphs in his investigation, Hoey demonstrates that the preference of a particular lexical item to either positive or negative priming is related to the item’s semantic relation at the discourse level (the organisation of the passage). As suggested by his corpus, Hoey

remarks that writing effectively involves using appropriate text and paragraph beginnings, and one can learn from the priming of cohesion of paragraphs.

Lexical priming and grammatical creativity are the main topics of Chapter Eight. With reference to language acquisition, Hoey repeats that in order to acquire, memorise, and use a word, the sound of a word will be primed at the beginning stage. Then, morphological syllabic combinations progress systematically from this priming syllable to form the complete word, to the lexical item, to grammatical priming, and ultimately to the larger unit or discourse, respectively.

As clearly seen in Chapter Seven, Hoey proposes that lexis and text are organised rather than structured, and that phonology, syntax, and interaction are structural systems acting as interfaces between phonic substance and lexis, between lexis and text, and between text and the extra-textual context. In this respect, a language model is put forward of the interlocking of three linguistic levels, namely phonic substance, lexical priming, and discourse needs in extra-textual features. Hoey’s model suggests that morphology serves as an interface between phonic substance and lexical priming, while text serves to connect lexical priming and the discourse needed in extra-textual context. The combination of phonological structure, grammatical structure, and discourse structure contributes to meaning and is a natural process when language users produce utterances.

Hoey further explains lexical priming and other kinds of linguistic creativity in Chapter Nine. He explains priming usually found in humour, magazines, literary creativity, and ambiguity. These activities, thus, are claimed to be an account of deliberate deviations from dominant priming of a lexical item. The last chapter of this book ends with some implications of Hoey’s lexical priming theory, mainly focusing on teaching and learning a second language. Hoey recommends that teachers use authentic data, where possible, when lexical priming is exercised regarding the pedagogical implications, because what is shown and realised in a corpus can be used to state the existence of lexical priming. Therefore, teachers should introduce lexical priming to learners.

The learners, in turn, should realise that priming is used when learning a language, and it is a single focused and generalising encounter. Therefore, learners should be exposed to priming as often as possible in order to promote mental concordance. At this juncture, Hoey draws the conclusion that deciding what a good corpus is is never an easy task. Also, the study of lexical priming remains inconclusive and further areas await exploration such as the early stages of a child’s acquisition of language, intonation, colligations, and understanding of language change.

As suggested by the title, “Lexical Priming: a new theory of words and language,” this book gives a comprehensive description of a new theory of word acquisition and language use. It offers a window onto an area of language acquisition often unfamiliar to applied linguists, especially those whose English is not their mother tongue. Based on the data taken from a corpus, Hoey sets out to convince the reader that learning a word happens through encountering words and phrases, and thus these words are primed in the brain of language users. From the perspective of second language acquisition, this claim can be applied to the explanation of how language users acquire new words and use them effectively in the right context, time, and in real situations. Psychologically, however, it seems that priming is not determined by specific rules. Since intuition is substantially needed in determining priming, we might have different interpretations from the data, because lexical priming is closely associated with the semantic association at the lexical level and pragmatic association at the discourse level. Intuition may sometimes be distorted by the needs of the researcher or by the education of the informant (Labov, 1975). Moreover, the notion of priming primarily depends on language user experience and how many linguistic and situation contexts they encounter. In short, it can be said that the relationship between intuition and priming is a complex one. Taking this into consideration, accurate interpretation from native speakers is substantially needed in order to determine lexical priming, and thus can be applied to learning a second language effectively.

Bearing the terms ‘native’ and ‘non-native’ speakers in mind, it is apparent that native speakers have acquired a large corpus of language examples of English words in their typical contexts and learning environments. Hence, they learn how the words are actually used. In sharp contrast, non-native speakers have been typically exposed to a narrow range of language and even the more

common words in actual use and have therefore had less opportunity to acquire the words which typically occur. It seems, therefore, unavoidable that this influential factor initially affects the way we are primed in English.

Indeed, this book on lexical priming offers a nuanced and insightful description regarding the importance of lexis in language use from psychological and linguistic perspectives. Its value for teachers and researchers in the field of applied linguistics and second language acquisition is immeasurable, as lexical priming is one of the most elucidating accounts of producing language by putting words which work together in predictable combinations. The book affords an excellent window into the challenges and complexities of language acquisition.

Specifically, the book would be of particular interest to materials developers and language teachers, as the findings and pedagogic descriptions bear a strong resemblance with current trends in English language teaching regarding vocabulary acquisition and the development of foreign language teaching materials. At present, a growing number of modern textbooks include linguistic means in chunks or multiword lexical items that can be acquired prior to grammar and form-focused instruction. The knowledge generated from this book can thus facilitate the systemic development and inclusion of both single-word and multiword items in textbooks. By extension, it is possible for multiword items to be taught in the English for Academic Purposes classroom, and it is supposed that Hoey's book would be useful for explicit instruction, vocabulary tests, and learning syllabus regarding multiword expressions.

References

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