Demonstrating Lexical Competence in Language Use

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Abstract
Lexical competence is that aspect of communicative competence that deals with knowledge of lexical or vocabulary items and their meaning and the ability to use them appropriately. It is generally well known that without grammatical accuracy, an utterance may be understood, but without precise vocabulary, it is indeed difficult. Lexis belongs to the level of language which concerns lexical items or content words in a language. Generally while grammar deals with closed word classes such as the preposition, pronoun, determiner, conjunction and the primary and modal auxiliaries, lexis involves the four open word classes which are the noun, adjective, lexical verb and adverb. Lexical word classes are known as open classes because new words can continually be added to them. In the field of science, technology, politics and economics, for instance, new expressions are being coined all the time for hitherto unknown concepts and inventions. In the area of politics new words are introduced in association with leaders and their policies. But many of these political expressions go out of circulation when the leaders are not around or when they fall from grace. In the world of food and drink, new exotic words appear so very often that it is almost impossible to keep track of all the new coinages. Acquiring lexical competence must be conceived as a relational process which requires learners to make friends with the words of the target language (Morgan and Rinvoluci, 1985: 5).

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1. Introduction
Learning how to use lexical items in a language which is not one’s native language “involves not only learning the meanings of the words, but also learning how these words are used appropriately in linguistic, sociolinguistic, and cultural contexts” (Thirumalai, 2002: 131). The acquisition of lexis needs to be done in a comprehensive manner. The target item has to be learnt to be used actively with all its attendant meaning, distribution, denotation, connotation, nuances, association, polysemy, collocation, religious sensitivities, sexist bias and relations of synonymy and antonymy. A wide vocabulary and the ability to use it comprehensively empower the user.

2. Form, meaning and distribution
There are three important aspects of vocabulary items:- their form, meaning and distribution. Lexical words have different forms or grammatical variants. For example, the base form of the verb eat can have no less than four different forms:

- the singular simple present tense form - beats
- the simple past tense form - beat
- the progressive aspect form - beating
- the past participle form - beaten
Meanings of words are not the same in all languages, they may vary from one language to another, especially between languages whose speakers do not share similar cultural practices, social and religious values. The words ‘brother’ and ‘sister’ are used among the African American people in the United States to imply solidarity among them. The two words, however, may be understood by most white Americans as natural siblings. In an Islamic environment it is normal to refer to men as ‘brothers’ and women as ‘sisters’ to indicate Islamic brotherhood and sisterhood respectively.

The speakers of a language know about the distribution of words and the restrictions in distribution – geographical, social, grammatical and level of formality. Some words have secondary meaning in addition to the primary meaning. The word ‘love’ as a noun, for example, may be used informally as an affectionate term of address by a British grocer to a customer whether the latter is a likable person or otherwise. The noun ‘love’ also means “the feeling of liking and caring for someone……” (Macmillan, 2002: 851). As a verb it is used in the sense of to have much desire for something very much as in ‘She loves chocolate’. The word can also be used as an adjective as in ‘a love child’ to refer to a child born out of wedlock. The word ‘snake’ can be used in its primary meaning to refer to a dangerous reptile. In the sentence ‘That woman is a snake’, the secondary meaning of ‘treacherous’, or ‘deceitful’ is used.

3. Denotation and connotation
In choosing appropriate lexical items for language use, a learner has to be aware of many things, including having to know the denotation and connotation of lexical words. The word ‘chicken’, for instance denotes or indicates in general that ‘chicken’ is a type of bird which people eat for its meat.

The connotation of a word is the additional meaning the particular word acquires. The word ‘chicken’ connotes timidity and cowardice. Thus we may have someone taunting another person who is not very brave as ‘a chicken’. Connotations are not always universal, they are culturally specified. The word ‘buffalo’ among Tamil language speakers is used to describe a person as being stupid. The item ‘lady’, for instance, refers not to just any woman, but rather “a woman who behaves politely in a way that was traditionally considered suitable for a woman” (Macmillan, 2002: 795). A female ‘social escort’ may mean different things.

4. Word association
Learners need to know the core words associated with a particular lexical item to demonstrate their vocabulary knowledge. It must be emphasized that lexical items are “not learnt mechanically as little packets of meaning, but associatively” (Maley, 1986: 3). A learner has to use all the relevant words which are associated with a key word or concept. If they are going to discuss a topic such as tourism, they need to introduce into their discussion words such as tourists, budget hotels, accommodation, sightseeing, facilities, transportation, foreign exchange, and beaches. The word ‘handsome’ collocates interestingly with the following items: man, woman, salary, donation and price.

5. Euphemistic expressions
To demonstrate lexical competence users of a language need to be aware of euphemisms. Euphemistic expressions are often used instead of labeling or naming certain things or people in a way that is direct and straightforward. This is very likely to cause offence or discomfort. The speaker’s culture determines as to which words are likely to cause unpleasanntness or offence. When a person dies, euphemisms are used variously, with or without religious expressions. A neutral euphemistic expression is – passed away. A Christian might say: X has gone to be with the Lord. A Malay Muslim may say: X telah kembali ke Rahmatullah (X has gone to be with Allah). People’s occupations which are considered as not being of high status also have euphemisms. A ‘barber’ may be described as a ‘hair stylist’ or ‘hairdresser’. A
‘traveling sales person’ may sometimes be referred to as ‘marketing’ or ‘sales executive’ in order to bestow more dignity to the hardworking man or woman.

Mahatma Gandhi was one of the early initiators of political correctness when he introduced the word *harijan* meaning ‘children of God’ to the supposedly ‘lowest’ class of Hindus in the Hindu social caste system. Today they are known as *dalit*. People of African roots are today known as African Americans in the United States. Feminists are not comfortable with expressions like ‘the fair sex’ or ‘the weaker sex’ to refer to women. The former is patronizing, the latter sexist. When we use euphemistic language we try to avoid expressions which may be seen as judgmental or derogatory. It projects a positive image of the users. People with disabilities are described in a very careful way so as not to sound insensitive. A person who cannot hear very well is described as a ‘hearing impaired person’. ‘Ugly’ is a horrible word to refer to a ‘beauty-disadvantaged’ person. A guest relations officer works in places like pubs and bars in Malaysia. What she does is not unfamiliar to many people.

6. Sense relations

Learners have to demonstrate their familiarity with sense relations or semantic relations. They have to display their knowledge of synonyms or words of similar meaning so as not to repeat the same word in various parts of their spoken or written discourse. Learners need to use a wide range of vocabulary expressions. This is not easy unless they read and listen widely to authentic language. It is very common for some students to overuse multipurpose words such as *great, nice, fine* which may be used synonymously in many cases.

When using synonymous expressions, the users ought to be aware of the selectional restrictions. The word ‘rich’ for instance has many synonyms. But they need to be used appropriately. The synonyms may sometimes be interchangeable, but sometimes they are not. For example: *The local lad made it big in the city and became rich/wealthy*. In the example ‘rich’ and ‘wealthy’ are synonyms and may be used interchangeably. But in the sentence: *Oranges are rich in vitamin C*, the word ‘rich’ cannot be replaced with ‘wealthy’. Similarly, when we say, ‘Goa has a rich history’, we may replace ‘rich’ with ‘exciting’, not ‘wealthy’.

Besides synonymy, language users need to be familiar with antonymic sense relations – complementarity, converseness, incompatibility and gradable opposite words. The lexical relationship of complementarity, converseness and incompatibility involves words which are opposite in meaning in a non-gradable way. For example, in the relationship of complementarity, “the presence of one sense component excludes another” (Carter, 1987: 9). Pairs like *living and dead, single and married* and *male and female* are semantically exclusive. A person cannot be both of the above.

Converseness refers to a kind of “contrastive lexical relation where there is a kind of logical reciprocity” (Carter, 1987:19). This relationship may be exemplified by pairs like *father and son, employer and employee* and *bought and sold*. There is a relational opposition between the words involved (see Palmer, 1981).

Incompatibility is a relationship of exclusion. The presence of one lexical item excludes and precludes another. According to Lyons it is “a lexical relation like opposition… based on contrast within similarity ….” (1977: 288). So, when we discuss incompatibility we deal with similarities which have an oppositional relationship, for example, the ‘evening’ in the greeting *Good evening* excludes the following: *morning, afternoon* and *night*. When a woman gives birth to a boy, the child is definitely not a female. When an underachieving student gets remedial attention from his or her teacher, a student is not the one who does the teaching.

The term ‘antonymy’ is used in a restricted sense to refer to gradable opposites although the term ‘antonyms’ generally is used to refer to words of opposite meaning. *Smart and stupid* are antonyms. So are *rich and poor*. But there is a gradation from *smart to stupid*. A person who is not smart is not automatically stupid. Similarly when I say *I am not rich*, I am not exactly poor. Antonyms used in this
way can be used in the comparative and superlative degrees of comparison, for example, rich, richer, richest, and beautiful, more beautiful and most beautiful. While the other antonymous expressions may involve word classes such as nouns, verbs and adjectives, gradable opposites represented by the term ‘antonymy’ are adjectives.

Hyponymy is a sense relation involving a relationship of inclusion. In hyponymy specific and general lexical items are related in a way that the meaning of a particular item is included in and by the meaning of the less specific or general item. The general item is known as the hyperonym or superordinate. The specific item is called the hyponym and related specific items are co-hyponyms. For example: vehicle – hyperonym (general term) bicycle, motor cycle, car, bus, truck – hyponyms (specific terms). All the above lexical items which are in relation to each other are co-hyponyms included in and by the meaning of vehicle. A lorry is a type of vehicle, and so is a bus. Condominium, apartment, townhouse and bungalow are co-hyponyms of the very general item ‘house’.

Meronymy refers to part-whole sense relations. In meronymy too we have superordinates, but the specific words are part of the superordinates. The particular lexical item is not a type or example of the general item as in hyponymy. For example, the item ‘car’ is a general word. Parts of the car are window, door, boot, bonnet, radiator, shock absorber, etc. The items exemplified are not types of cars, but they are parts of the car and are known as meronyms. A tree is a superordinate word, and parts of a tree such as trunk, roots, leaves and branches are the meronyms. They are related to each other as co-meronyms. Language users need to be able to use all the sense relations in their productive use to show their competence of vocabulary items.

7. Collocation
Learners of a language need to be able to know which words collocate or co-occur frequently and to some extent with less frequency. When appropriate words go together the combination is effective. We very often hear and read the phrase pretty girls. Are there are also pretty boys? The latter collocation is unusual, and may even be offensive, but it might warrant the existence of the collocation. How may one drink one’s tea? There is a wide choice of green, herbal, iced, lemon, hot, strong, weak, Chinese, etc. A language user needs to be able to choose the right words to go together to produce the desired effect. Reading leisure materials will add to one’s rich use of collocational terms. ‘Sexy’ not only co-occurs with men and women, but also cars, clothes, voice, etc.

8. Religious aspect
Religious sentiments need to be accommodated as certain vocabulary items may cause some discomfort. For example, Muslim users of a language may find it necessary to be careful with vocabulary items whose original or primary meanings are not compatible with their religious conviction. Words such as god, goddess and idol, should be sensitively used in appropriate contexts. Islam is a monotheistic religion and therefore words such as those mentioned here need to be used with care when conversing with Muslim speakers. Christian users of English will probably be offended by the use of the word ‘bible’ to refer to an authoritative book, and ‘Jesus’ when used as a slang to express shock or annoyance. Both Christians and Muslims may be uncomfortable with the expression- goddamn. Words with religious associations ought not to be used in a trivial or informal manner when interacting with people who are religiously inclined so as not to appear insensitive, for example, Karl Marx is the prophet of communist philosophy.

9. Idioms
Language users should learn to use suitable idiomatic expressions as and when appropriate in their creative writing as well as during normal conversations. Idioms help to enliven language, but should be
used sparingly. Some idiomatic expressions have gone out of circulation and some may be culture specific, for example, *carry coals to Newcastle, build castles in the air and every Tom, Dick and Harry.* Therefore learners need to know when and where specific idioms would be appropriate and not misunderstood (see McCarthy and Carter, 1994). They also have to know the structure governing the use of such language expressions. Some idioms need to be used in a formal way whereas some are rather casually and even hurtfully used. So the level of formality and decency has to be maintained. Certain idiomatic expressions such as ‘I cross my heart’ or ‘This is a cross you have to bear’ have religious associations and therefore need to be used appropriately with those who share the same religious beliefs or have some basic understanding of the religion.

10. Awareness of offensive vocabulary

It is very important for speakers of a language to avoid using obscene, profane and vulgar language in interpersonal, intrasocietal and intercultural communication (see Haja Mohideen, 2009). Our young people should be advised to refrain from using words such as ‘bastard’, ‘bitch’, ‘shit’, ‘ass’ and other vulgar expressions which can commonly be heard in conversations among themselves. Those who are spoken to and have to listen to these words may react unfavorably. Uncensored entertainment programs are also very likely to have many obscene words. Our young learners need to be strongly urged to avoid such expressions and employ polite language in their speech.

11. Inappropriate use of lexical items

Inappropriate use of a lexical item can be broadly attributed to stylistic, syntactic, collocational and semantic factors.

Stylistically inappropriate use of lexical items is due to choosing the wrong levels of formality. There are single words and phrases which indicate different levels of formality – formal and informal. A person who introduces himself to a colleague is more likely to say “I live in Klang” rather than “I reside in Klang”. A visiting minister has an ‘audience’ rather than a ‘meeting’ with the king or queen of the host country. The word ‘slumber’ to mean ‘sleep’ is more often used in literary works rather than in normal speech. The wife of an ordinary person is not a ‘consort’, nor is she referred to as a ‘spouse’ in normal contexts.

Syntactic errors occur when the users of a language are not aware of the structural patterns that follow synonymous items. The word ‘argue’ is one of the synonyms of ‘discuss’, but the syntactic patterns vary. While ‘argue’ is followed by the preposition ‘about’, ‘discuss’ is not. The words ‘insist’ and ‘persist’ are synonyms. However the former takes a *that* – clause whereas the latter does not. The following exemplify: 1 *The mayor insisted that the councilors were giving their best.* 2. *If she persists in wanting a separation, let her have it.* When learners are not aware of the grammatical restrictions with regard to certain synonymous expressions, they are likely to encounter difficulties with their syntax.

Inappropriate collocational expressions refer to co-occurrences of words which are remote or rare and therefore treated as errors. In English, lexical co-occurrence of words sometimes appears arbitrary. Then again many learners of the language do not come across rare combinations of words frequently enough to be able to understand and demarcate the range of words. Even teachers may have some difficulty in explaining to their students why certain collocations are unacceptable. ‘Fat’ and ‘obese’ are synonymous, we can describe a person as fat or obese. ‘Fat’ and ‘wallet’ can go together as a single expression, but not ‘obese wallet’. ‘Beautiful’ goes with ‘women’, but it does not normally go with ‘men’ to describe their physical appearance. It can however go with ‘men’ in the sense of being ‘very kind’ as in ‘My husband is a beautiful man’. Collocational knowledge is essential for overall lexical competence. It is not a problem for native speakers as they can select appropriate collocations by
intuition, but not so for non-native speakers who may not be able to intuitively select the acceptable collocation (Baruah, 1992).

Semantic factors pose a lot of problems for learners when they do not realize the selectional restrictions pertaining to certain words and are also unable to differentiate between synonymous vocabulary items where their use is concerned. For example, ‘sink’ and ‘drown’ are words of similar meaning. However, ‘sink’ collocates with inanimate items such as ‘ship’, ‘boat’, etc, whereas ‘drown’ co-occurs with animate items like ‘child’ and ‘kitten’. Similarly, inanimate objects such as cars get damaged in an accident, while the passengers get injured. Both ‘damaged’ and ‘injured’ are synonyms, but they cannot be used interchangeably.

Synonymous words sometimes have slightly different shades of meaning. For instance a pretty girl and a beautiful girl are not equally attractive. The latter is supposed to be superior in looks. According to Macmillan, a woman or girl who is pretty is “good looking in a fairly ordinary way…” (2002:115). A beautiful girl or woman, by contrast is “unusually attractive and has perfect good looks” (115). Since ‘beautiful’ has become overused, some writers go on to use expressions such as ‘incredibly’ and ‘stunningly beautiful’.

12. Conclusion

Lexical competence as we have discussed thus far, is acquired in various ways. Learners have to be aware of how vocabulary is acquired and used. A comprehensive approach is needed for effective vocabulary acquisition. Lexis is an open area unlike grammar which is considered a closed one.

New expressions enter the area of lexis in an ongoing way. Learners ought to be up-to-date in this area. The word classes which are considered open and the lexical phrases which can be generated have the potential to give the user much language command at his / her disposal. Such command can only serve to benefit the language user in both the spoken and written medium. Our choice of appropriate vocabulary and use can have a telling effect on our audience.

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References

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