



Chunks: How do Native Speakers Speak so Fast?

In the traditional, structural view of linguistics, lexis and grammar were considered to be separate entities. According to that view, speakers produce language by matching items of vocabulary to appropriate grammatical slots, while listeners decode language by applying structural rules. However, there is now widespread acknowledgment, in both linguistics and second language acquisition, that lexis and grammar are not separate but instead exist on a continuum (Cowie, 1998; Ellis, 2001; Ellis, 2003; Lewis, 1996; Skehan, 1996; Widdowson, 1990).

In the new view, the lexico-grammatical continuum has words at one end and grammatical structures at the other. A range of lexical items lies in between: idioms, phrases, fixed expressions, polywords, routine formulae, composites, sentence heads, lexicalized sentence stems, sentence frames and collocations. In the context of English language teaching, Willis (2003) suggested that lexical items be grouped into four main categories: polywords, frames, sentences and sentence heads, and patterns. A polyword is defined as a phrase made up of a string of words that act as if they were a single word. Examples include phrasal verbs and adverbials such as “in fact” and “over there”. Polywords have little room for variation and are thus found near the word end of the continuum. Other lexical items vary in the degree of flexibility allowed in their form. Some, such as frames, may be altered considerably and resemble grammatical structures.

It is now recognised that a considerable amount of everyday conversation makes use of prefabricated lexical phrases, or **chunks**. This offers a clear benefit in that a chunk may be recalled from memory as a single lexical item, in the same way a word is. Thus the cognitive load required to produce stretches of language is reduced. Similarly, a chunk may be decoded as a single lexical item, without recourse to grammatical rules. Using prefabricated forms therefore allows native speakers to produce and decode language in real time without undue cognitive load (Ellis, 2003; Skehan, 1996).

There are occasions when it is necessary to produce (or decode) novel messages, and prefabricated chunks will not suffice. This may be the case when pilots are in an emergency situation they have not experienced before. At such times, the speaker (or listener) makes use of grammatical rules to generate (or decode) language. Accordingly, Skehan (1996) proposed a dual-mode system in which native speakers are able to call upon both a lexical mode and a structural mode, depending on the context and their needs.

The extent to which non-native speakers are able to make use of the lexical mode depends on their language proficiency and the amount of prefabricated phrases they have internalized. It follows that one of the aims of language training should be to help learners develop automaticity with prefabricated phrases in order to reduce their dependence on grammatical rules and the cognitive burden this imposes.

References

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