

Book Review

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Lexical Priming: A new theory of words and language.

M. Hoey

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Lexical Priming is, as its title boldly claims, a new theory; not because it prioritises lexis, but because it prioritises the individual's experience of language acquisition and use, taking lexis as a starting point. Priming is viewed here as a bottom-up process of lexical pattern-forming, expressed in terms of phraseology, not grammar. The rejection of grammar as an organising feature of language is also radical, and a matter that will not pass unchallenged, but Hoey provides a compelling argument, namely that "[t]here is not ... a single grammar to the language (indeed there is not a single language), but a multiplicity of overlapping grammars that are the product of the attempt to generalise out of primed collocations" (p. 47). If no single grammar can be identified, then, linguistics turns to lexis.

With this book Hoey is making a break with corpus linguistic tradition by placing the individual language user centre stage: "it is implicit in the notion of priming that the language user's experience of the language(s) they use is unique to them" (p. 30). This does not imply, however, that the armchair linguist can safely return to introspection. The analyses offered in this book provide ample demonstration of the qualitative differences between introspectively-derived language and that created with genuine communicative purpose. Yet if the focus is on the individual, a further question remains: where precisely do corpora fit in?

Several answers are put forward. One is that the linguistic experiences of individuals overlap considerably, a major source of which is exposure to the media. Hoey justifies his use of a corpus of *Guardian* news and features by suggesting that the habitual reading of a newspaper is likely to contribute to priming in a relatively large group of people. The same general principle applies to particular text genres (travel writing is examined several times), and the language used within particular discourse communities is also deemed to contribute to priming. Apart from making it possible to study specialised language, corpora can reveal patterns of usage at an organisational level, and this matter is central to the theory offered. Both introspection and manual analysis flounder when required to make statements at the level of text, let alone when confronted with the finest details of lexical use, such as preference for Theme, and paragraph-initial position, but aversion for text-initial position (c.f. p130). That said, "[p]rimings can be explored in ways other than corpus analysis" (p. 139), and the author bolsters his argument effectively with the use of experimental data, and emphasises the individual nature of priming through anecdote.

While the theory of lexical priming has grown out of the study of collocation, it attempts to address some of the questions that have not yet been answered satisfactorily by corpus

linguistics. What makes the approach outlined here genuinely novel – at least as far as corpus linguistics is concerned – is the move away from observing the behaviour of words, to focus instead on what the language user does with words. It is unfortunate therefore that while he acknowledges priming as a psychological phenomenon, Hoey makes little reference to the psycholinguistic literature which would feed into his argument.

Hoey sets out his ten “priming hypotheses” in chapter 1 (p. 13) and these are unpacked chapter by chapter. The terminology builds on Sinclair’s (1996) *extended unit of meaning*, modified where necessary to take account of the shift in focus towards the language user. Collocation is discussed before semantic association; colligation comes before lexical relations (synonymy and polysemy). These local, sentence-level phenomena are followed by their textual counterparts, namely textual collocation, textual semantic association, and textual colligation. After seven chapters of detailed analysis to lay the ground, Hoey embarks on more speculative matters regarding creativity, both in the Chomskian sense of generation of new sentences (Chomsky 1957), and in the production of ‘surprising’ language, and language acquisition. This detailed articulation is necessary: the hypotheses are progressively more complex, requiring considerable explanation and exemplification for them not only to be *understood*, but also to be *accepted* by the reader. It is upon this second matter that so much hangs, because, as with any radical proposal, *acceptance* is what is sought. Thus the argument must be plausible, demonstrable and, ideally, compelling.

Studies in corpus linguistics tend to favour a bottom-up approach, starting with a word and progressively building outwards in cotext (and abstraction). While this approach illuminates the study of lexis, it is less helpful in the study of discourse and text organisation, which also interests the theory proposed here. The necessary breadth and depth of analysis required before generalisations can be formulated is potentially mammoth. A book of this length cannot provide comprehensive illustrations of every theoretical point raised, so only a fraction of the analysis carried out has found its way into the text (pp. xii-xiii). However, empiricists will be pleased to find several fully-worked, replicable case studies, though they may wish for yet more thorough exemplification of all the major points raised. Other readers may find the rigorous analysis excessive and overwhelming, preferring the less detailed examples found throughout the text. Striking a balance between these two types of example is not a simple matter, and the results are not always satisfying. In particular, the reader may notice a petering out of the extensive, multi-level type of analysis towards the end of the book, as the author moves into a more speculative mode. This is unfortunate because many of the points raised in the later chapters would have benefited from more in-depth treatment, both to enable the reader to follow the proposed arguments, and to bolster them effectively.

Perhaps the most appealing aspect of this book is the way in which the author deals with naturalness in language. Naturalness has managed for a long time to evade description, with the result that it has often been ignored in favour of grammatical correctness. Yet if grammar is viewed as a result, not a cause, of lexical patterning, naturalness takes on considerable importance. Hoey begins his book by demonstrating how grammatical correctness plus semantic equivalence are not sufficient to guarantee naturalness. As the text unfolds, the reader is drawn into ever-more complex webs of detail as it is revealed not only how collocation contributes to naturalness, but also how the ‘typical’ use of words extends into such diverse linguistic levels as grammatical function, thematic role,

positioning within the phrase, sentence, and text. The analysis, predominantly corpus-based, is solid, making all the more remarkable the degree of complexity of linguistic knowledge implied by these findings.

This book has come out at a time when linguistics is witnessing a rapprochement between corpora and experimental data. By pulling together individual language use and that of the collective, Hoey offers an attractive and convincing theory which seems applicable to many levels of linguistic enquiry. *Lexical Priming* is interesting and stimulating reading; the theory is well developed and yet leaves opportunities for further investigation, verification and refinement of the many points raised. While resistance is inevitable when a scholar challenges the status quo – and Hoey does precisely this – such a comprehensive argument, supported with extensive data analysis, will provide even the most dyed-in-the-wool traditionalists with food for thought.

References

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