

BESPRECHUNGEN

Michael Hoey. *Lexical Priming: A New Theory of Words and Language*. London/New York: Routledge, 2005, xiii + 202 pp., £ 19.99.

Michael Hoey has long made himself a name as a keen promoter of a lexical approach to text analysis and text linguistics in general. Deeply inspired by Eugene Winter and M. A. K. Halliday, but gradually developing his own characteristic approach, Hoey has produced a number of influential publications in this area, most notably perhaps *Patterns of Lexis in Text* published in 1991. A second important facet of Hoey's previous work is his long-standing interest and involvement in the study of collocations by means of computerized corpora as represented by the Birmingham school founded by the late John Sinclair. In many ways, the book under review is a natural outcome of the combination of these two strands. What Hoey shows in this book is that not only the lexical but also the grammatical and textual organization of sentences and texts rely on the very principle of expectancy, or predictability, underlying the Firthian idea of collocation.

The central notion of Hoey's original approach is that of *priming*. Known as a basic psychological effect exploited by psycholinguists in so-called priming tasks, *priming* is understood in the book as the property of words (and larger linguistic units) to provoke in the minds of language users a particular target word or construction or textual organization. As proposed by Hoey, collocation is just the prime example of the more general principle of priming in language. Accordingly, collocation is conceived of in such a way that the knowledge of every word "includes the fact that it co-occurs with certain other words in certain kinds of context" (8). The ambitious overall argument of Hoey's book is "that priming is the driving force behind language use, language structure and language change" (12).

Having made this clear in the first chapter, Hoey devotes the larger part of the book to showing that words are not only primed for occurrence with other individual words, but also with semantically similar sets of words and certain pragmatic functions or moves (ch.2), with grammatical constructions (ch. 3), as well as with textual structures (chs. 6 and 7). Chapters 4 and 5 deal with paradigmatic relations and polysemy respectively; chapters 8 and 9 look at how grammatical and other kinds of creativity are accommodated by the theory proposed, while chapter 10 gives a brief discussion of some additional theoretical aspects and links the ideas to language teaching.

The abstract noun *consequence*, whose priming properties are studied in great detail in different chapters, lends itself to an illustration of the approach. According to Hoey, it is primed in the minds of language users for associations with adjectives

from the semantic sets of 'logic' (*logical, inevitable, probable consequence*), 'evaluation' (*doleful, disastrous, ludicrous*), 'seriousness' (*important, serious, significant*) and 'unexpectedness' (*unforeseen, curious, surprising*). With regard to grammar, i. e. its *colligations* (a term taken over from Firth and Sinclair), *consequence* is primed to favour the adjunct function in the clause, and to avoid the object function, a case of *negative priming*; within the noun phrases in which it occurs it is strongly primed to occur as head (rather than modifier). Thematically, the noun is primed to occur as part of a thematized adjunct, and this is seen as a part of its *textual colligations*. And its (fairly rare) sense of 'importance' (as in *some people were of no great consequence*) is pragmatically primed for association with denials. If this sounds like just a slightly sexed-up version of a simple distributional description very much along the lines favoured by American Structuralists, it is only half the story. The underlying assumption of the priming idea is that the distributional patterns are stored in the language users' minds like "a mental concordance [...] that has been richly glossed for social, physical, discursual, generic and interpersonal context" (11). So this is not simply a distributional profile, but taken to be an account of linguistic information stored in speakers' long-term memories.

The priming profile of *consequence* proposed is the result of painstaking analyses of more than 1800 records of the noun culled from a 95 million word corpus of *Guardian* news and more than 3 million words from the British National Corpus. This corpus features prominently throughout the book as an invaluable resource for the numerous case studies presented; but in addition to simply constituting a body of language that facilitates statistical observations on the distribution of words and structures, the corpus also serves as a justification of the theory proposed by Hoey, since it contains ample evidence of the non-arbitrariness of the lexical, grammatical and textual patterns in which words are found. That said, it must be emphasized that Hoey is acutely aware of the inevitable non-representativity of all corpora and repeatedly stresses the fact that the primings found may indeed very likely be exemplary ones only, not realistically attributable to anyone but an idealized reader of the *Guardian* (who does not use language elsewhere). Indeed, Hoey is quite unequivocal in his claim that primings are not only individual, i. e. different from speaker to speaker within a speech community, but also domain-dependent, so that the priming inventories for, say, legal texts, advertising body copy and casual speech are likely to differ, too. The conventionality traditionally attributed to linguistic knowledge - that is the idea that speakers of a speech community share the same or similar expectations as to how a word can be used and what it means - is explained by two types of 'harmonizing' effects: self-reflexive, internal processes of trying to be in tune with the linguistic input one is presented with, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, external factors such as oral, literary and religious traditions, the media and of course institutionalized education.

More or less as a side-effect of the main thrust of the book, it emerges that synonyms are found to diverge with regard to their lexical, grammatical, pragmatic and textual priming properties, and that the same applies to the different meanings of polysemous lexemes. These findings as such may not be particularly original and new, but they fall into place neatly as fairly predictable properties of lexemes in Hoey's framework.

One overarching topic of the book is the special role attributed to the lexicon in the structure and organization of language, a role indeed more important than the

one played by grammar. Like Construction Grammar, Word Grammar, Pattern Grammar and other approaches that put more emphasis on items and chunks than on abstract rules, the theory of lexical priming has to grapple with the problem of if and how language users derive more general, rule-like schemata from their knowledge of individual instances. While Hoey is aware of this problem, the idea of "reflexive priming" (160) which he proposes to account for the creation and acquisition of patterns and lower-level schemata remains fairly vague and sketchy.

Somewhat disturbingly, at least to me, in chapters 8 and 9 Hoey decides to replace the word by the concept of "phonological string" (158 f.) as the pivotal source of priming, and explicitly states that "priming begins with the phonological string" (171). Apparently he makes this move because it allows him to include not only bound lexical and grammatical morphemes but even sound-symbolic elements like the classic *sl-* in the system of priming elements. This leads him to a fairly controversial notion of grammar, apparently phrased almost as if addressed to lay persons in order to avoid the bias inherent in established grammatical terminology: "What we count as grammar is the accumulation and interweaving of the primings of the most common sounds, syllables and words of the language. So grammar is, in such terms, the sum of the collocations, colligations and semantic associations of words like *is, was, the, a* and *of*, syllables like *ing, er* and *ly*, and sounds like [t] (at the end of syllables) and [s] and [z] (likewise at the end of syllables)" (159). To my mind, the price for Hoey's gambit is too high, because it denies the linguistic unit of words or lexemes the privileged psychological status that they undoubtedly have in more or less isolating languages like English. While I find it highly convincing that words are primed for collocations, grammatical colligations and even textual colligations as well as pragmatic associations, it is hard for me to see a priming relation between, for instance, a verbal root like *go* and the *-ing* morpheme, even if this verb happens to be found significantly more often in the progressive than in the simple form. To my mind, the abandoning of the word as central source or anchor of priming unnecessarily waters down the intriguing and compelling notion of lexical priming and reduces both the explanatory power and psychological plausibility of Hoey's theory.

There can be no doubt that *Lexical Priming* is an important and timely contribution to the current discussion on what psychologically realistic grammars should look like. One context for an appreciation of the book is its home base of the British contextualist tradition, since it shows what a wider and more 'cognitive' notion of collocation can reveal about the nature of language within the lexicon and way beyond. From this point of view, Hoey's book is an insightful and original complement to the work published by John Sinclair (e. g., 2004), Susan Hunston and Gill Francis (e. g., Hunston & Francis 2000). A second fruitful perspective on the book is the current interest in related issues in cognitive linguistics and psycholinguistics represented, among others, by Dąbrowska (2005), Goldberg (2006), and Tomasello (2003). What Hoey's book has in common with these is his aim to construct a usage-based model of grammar and language acquisition that relies on knowledge of chunks, patterns and generalized schemata or constructions and does away with lexically unfilled abstract rules and phrase structure trees. The cognitive and psycholinguistic grounding that Hoey's book may be lacking in comparison with these works is amply compensated for by his meticulous corpus analyses, which reflect his impressively narrow interpretation of the fashionable catchphrase *usage-based*.

Works Cited

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