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Learning Spanish wine language through lexical chunks

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Abstract

This paper provides a window on the role of creating a self-study language course for wine-growers from a beginners' level, with the aim of gaining insights into the use of lexical chunks in language for specific purposes (LSP) teaching and learning. It focuses on describing the practical aspects, such as material design or chunk parsing, of a specific project named VinoLingua. But it also aims at going beyond our individual practice to set out the sources and grounds of the VinoLingua scientific framework and to examine the ideas about language and learning on which our approach is based: the importance of working with real language corpora and the use of standardised expressions and off-the-peg chunks of varying degrees of complexity for LSP teaching and learning. It may, therefore, serve as a model for any basic language courses designed for other professional groups.

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1. Introduction

My interest in researching into the potentiality of lexical chunks stems from my involvement in the VinoLingua Project. It was through my research as a member of the team in charge of developing language learning materials within this project that I came to acknowledge the value of multi-word prefabricated chunks for LSP teaching.

VinoLingua, which run between 2010 and 2013, was a Leonardo da Vinci Lifelong Language Study Programme aimed at a very specific group, the wine-growers from five highly reputed wine-growing regions (Burgundy, Tuscany, South Tirol, Lower Austria and Toro). Its main objective was to bring down language barriers for

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European wine-growers by producing wine language self-study learning material in the languages of those five wine regions, therefore increasing their competitiveness.

Thus, the learning material and resources (i.e. a reference database; a "survival kit"; podcasts...) developed by the VINOlingua Consortium –made up by several universities, wine schools and private companies from those wine regions– were intended solely for the practical use of this target group.

As for the lessons themselves, the presence of wine schools among its members ensured that all study material would be tested, in the first place, and then implemented into vocational education. But, prior to that, a comprehensive needs analysis –a defining characteristic of language for specific purposes– was conducted among 350 sample wine-growers from every wine region. They were asked about their learning preferences and skills and also about the kind of speech acts and vocabulary they would like to learn, for it is of utmost importance to "specify as closely as possible what exactly it is that students have to do through the medium" of their L2 (Robinson, 1991, p. 3).

Our findings showed that there are two types of situations where wine-growers face the need to communicate in a foreign language, namely: hosting foreigners at their vineyards and attending a wine fair. Later on, they described in further detail the kind of situations they must confront, such as guiding a winery tour, conducting a wine tasting, taking care of tourists/guests or presenting their wines.

The mostly monological character of the speech acts encountered in these situations –which makes it easier for beginners to start "delivering" in their target language– as well as the high frequency of certain sequences of words led us to adopt a more lexical approach and brought to our attention the existence of the so-called "chunks", term coined by Nattinger (1988, p. 75) and widely used in specialised literature to refer to a certain type of lexical phrases.

2. VINOlingua's theoretical framework: The Lexical Approach and the concept of "chunk"

Although vocabulary plays a key role in language acquisition –especially in the case of LSP students–, the focus of language teaching and learning has traditionally concentrated on grammatical competence to the detriment of lexis. Nonetheless, over the last few years there has been a gradual shift towards paying more attention to chunks, also known as "lexical clusters", "lexical bundles" and/or "collocations".

An article by Nattinger (1980) was among the first ones to raise awareness over the importance of chunks:

Perhaps we should base our teaching on the assumption that, for a great deal of the time anyway, language production consists of piecing together the ready-made units appropriate for a particular situation and that comprehension relies on knowing which of these patterns to predict in these situations. Our teaching, therefore, would center on these patterns and the ways they can be pieced together, along with the ways they vary and the situations in which they occur. (Nattinger, 1980, p. 341)

Building on his theory of lexical phrases, authors within the Lexical Approach state that "language consists not of traditional grammar and vocabulary but often of multi-word prefabricated chunks" (Lewis, 1997, p. 3), and also that the learning burden can be reduced by using formulaic chunks, which maximises communicative ability by providing "islands of reliability" (Ellis, 1994, p. 86).

While there is no standard definition of the term "chunk", it is generally agreed that it can be defined as any sequence of words found together in a predictable pattern, most commonly a recurring string of words (e.g. *por favor* –please–) which "is, or appears to be, prefabricated: that is, stored and retrieved whole from memory at the time of use" (Wray, 2000, p. 465). Its meaning tends to be non-compositional, i.e. it cannot be inferred from the individual meaning of its constituent parts.

For Erman & Warren (2000, p. 31), though, a chunk would consist of any "combination of at least two words favored by native speakers in preference to an alternative combination which could have been equivalent had there been no conventionalization." Hence we may also consider *En nariz, tiene aromas a...* (In my nose, it displays ... aromas) a chunk, despite the fact that its meaning can actually be inferred by any person not acquainted with wine language.

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