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The language graduate who never reads a learned journal and participates only minimally, if at all, in professional meetings, will stagnate. There is an onus on the profession in all areas to upgrade and keep abreast of current development in the field.

— Peter Heffernan

Mario Cardona, Maria Cecilia Luise

The Lexical Approach:
Foundations and Perspectives
for Teaching Italian[1]

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ABSTRACT: The Lexical Approach (Lewis 1993, 1997a) originated in the last decades of the last century and was established as a very interesting research proposal in the field of language education. It is a well-structured and coherent teaching proposal based on a reconsideration of language as a uniform lexis-grammar organism by overcoming the dichotomy between lexis and grammar, in a lexis-grammar concept in which the focus shifts from grammar to lexis. Therefore, in this paper we propose to reconsider the theoretical-practical of Lexical Approach bases by presenting an articulate description of its theoretical framework as an exploration of all the possible practical and methodological applications in the development of learners' lexical competence.

KEYWORDS: Lexical Approach; lexical competence; language education

1. Introduction

Vocabulary has long been ignored by language education. The revival of interest in this fundamental aspect of language, its nature and its teaching dates back to the 1970s-1980s. In 1980, Meara published the essay *Vocabulary Acquisition: A Neglected Aspect of Language Learning*, in which he argues:

> Vocabulary acquisition is part of the psychology of second language learning that has received short shrift from applied linguistics, and has been very largely neglected by recent developments in research. (1980: 121).

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[1] This contribution is the result of a joint collaboration between the authors. Specifically, Mario Cardona is responsible for the drafting of paragraphs 3 and 4 and Maria Cecilia Luise is responsible for the drafting of paragraphs 1 and 2. Both the authors are responsible for the drafting of paragraph 5.

Similarly, a few years later, Morgan and Rinvolucri (1986: 3) observe:

> It is curious to reflect that so little importance has been given to vocabulary in modern language teaching. Both the behaviourist/structural model and the functional/communicative model have, in their different ways, consistently underplayed it

In Italian language education, the situation was no different; Balboni (1998: 112) perfectly stigmatises the situation at that time:

> The language teaching problem related to vocabulary [...] represents one of the major cases of suppression by scholars, textbooks and multimedia authors, and teachers (1998: 112, our translation).

Undoubtedly, many things have changed since then and the vast literature on vocabulary and its role in language teaching shows how it has taken on an importance unknown in those years. In Anglo-Saxon circles, since the 1980s there have been many publications dedicated to vocabulary and its teaching, which have quickly filled the void of the previous years. In Italian language education, too, reflection on vocabulary has been the focus of research and publications over the last forty years, including: Zegrebelsky (1988), Ambroso, Stefancich (1993), Porcelli (2004), Cardona (2004), Barni, Troncarelli, Bagna (2008), Lo Duca, Fratter (2008), Casadei, Basile (2019), Cardona, De Iaco (2020) and Carla Marello's studies on dictionaries, lexicons, and corpora for language education (including Marello 1996, Corda, Marello 2004, Corino, Marello 2017).

However, very little space is devoted to the Lexical Approach in Italy, even though it constitutes a comprehensive and articulate methodological approach from both a theoretical and practical point of view.

2. From the Grammar-Translation approach to the Lexical Approach

Until the major changes in the field of language teaching in the 1970s, with the communicative and sociolinguistic aspect prevailing, learning a language meant knowing its grammar, while very little interest was paid to lexis and socio-pragmatic uses involved in the communicative event. Knowledge of the language system was limited to a set of morphosyntactic rules that determined the logical-sequential paradigms according to which words were juxtaposed on the syntagmatic level to form grammatically correct sentences. Moreover, neo-behaviourist approaches, still widespread in those years, theorised language education based on the *PPP*

path *Presentation/Practice/Production.* A rule was presented by the teacher to the students, who were required to learn it through practice, often limited to repetitive exercises (pattern drills), until it was memorized, followed by moments of language production, in which the aim was to prove the ability to apply the learned rule, while the content and context was of secondary importance. As a result, not only has vocabulary been an aspect long ignored by language education, but a dichotomous view of language has been imposed: grammar (the rules) on the one hand, words (use) on the other one, where the former enjoyed almost total attention in the teaching pathway.

However, precisely during the 1970s, a profound change took place at both the teaching and psycho-pedagogical levels. Hymes (1972) introduced the concept of communicative competence (in which linguistic competence becomes one of the fundamental components, but not the only one), focusing on sociolinguistic and pragma linguistic aspects related to the functional aspect of language in various communicative contexts.

In the last decades of past century, therefore, language teaching has increasingly shifted towards the centrality of the use and functional aspect of language, and forms, morphosyntactic rules, are of interest when they fulfil communicative functions in context (Larsen-Freeman 1986: 131):

> Communicative competence involves being able to use the language to a given social context. To do this, students need knowledge of the linguistic forms, meanings and functions. They need to know that many different forms can be used to perform a function and that a single form can often serve a variety of functions.

Cognitivism deeply refutes neo-behaviorist theories of learning. The mind is no longer a 'black box' whose processes are impossible to know, but these very processes (memory, perception, attention, etc.) become the privileged aspects of research in psychology. The mind is active and the strategies through which it learns are the foundation of a new language teaching concept.

In the latter part of the 20th century there is an intense critical reflection on grammar and its role in language curricula: at that time, the concept of grammar seen as a set of morphosyntactic rules to be learnt and applied passively evolves into that of linguistic reflection, a process where students discover the regularity of the

language with which they come into contact, giving priority to an inductive rather than deductive approach.

The learner is therefore at the center of the learning process, and the *Presentation/Practice/Production* paradigm is now replaced by the *OHE Observe/Hypothesis/Experience* pathway, which will become one of the epistemological bases of the *Lexical Approach* (Lewis 1993: vii). Starting from linguistic input, it is the learner, through observation and verification strategies, who will create hypotheses on the functioning of the language system, testing the new knowledge within linguistic acts whose purpose is to achieve a communicative goal.

Learners, consequently, must be able to communicate their ideas, their thoughts, in linguistic interaction and not only demonstrate their morphosyntactic competence in decontextualised performances. And yet, despite these deep innovations, research on vocabulary, on its nature and on its teaching and learning, remained unseen until the 1980s. It is therefore only in the last forty years that publications and conferences on lexis have been thriving, and it is only since the 1990s that an approach openly focused on lexis, and no longer on grammar, has been proposed in the Anglo-Saxon area: the *Lexical Approach* (Lewis 1993, 1997a).

The *Lexical Approach* is in the field of communicative approaches and has the merit of being, to all intents and purposes, an approach: it involves, in fact, all levels of the pedagogical process. As Lewis himself observes (1993: 2-3), the *Lexical Approach* concerns both *what* to teach, *i.e.*, the content and thus the syllabus, and how, i.e. the methodological path, but above all it reflects on *why*, *i.e.* the epistemological foundations underlying the theoretical framework of the approach. Therefore, the *Lexical Approach* represents the first organic and articulated language teaching proposal focusing on lexis.[2] It should also be noted that it does not propose any teaching revolution; in this sense, it does not have the characteristics of certain humanistic approaches or methods born at the end of the 20th century that, while acceptable in their theoretical framework, are difficult to apply in teaching practice.

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[2] While Lewis' is the first articulated language teaching proposal, it should be noted that in 1990 Willis published *The Lexical Syllabus: A New Approach to Language Teaching.*

The *Lexical Approach*, on the other hand, proposes a series of focus shifts that are easy to implement and extremely effective didactically, as Lewis remarks:

> Implementing the Lexical approach in your classes does not mean a radical upheaval, likely to upset colleagues, parents and learners. On the contrary, if introduced with thought and sensitivity, its introduction will be almost invisible, involving perhaps 20 or even 50 small changes in every lesson, each in itself unremarkable, but the cumulative effect will be more effective teaching and more efficient learning (1997a: 3).

Similarly, one should not think that the *Lexical Approach*, being focused on lexis, wants to eliminate grammar, as in some methodological approximations in the communicative field during the 1970s. For Lewis, it is a question of reconsidering language as a uniform lexis-grammar organism by overcoming the dichotomy between lexis and grammar, in a lexis-grammar concept in which the focus shifts from grammar to lexis. It is obvious that grammar plays a less central role in this approach. On the other hand: *emphasising lexis necessarily reduces the role of grammar* (Lewis 1997a: 15), but there is no question of demonising grammar and its teaching. In this regard Lewis, referring to his 1993 essay, is very explicit:

> Is a gross misreading of the text to pretend that asserting the pedagogic value of lexis is in any way to deny the pedagogic value of grammar […] I totally dissociate myself from any suggestion that the Lexical approach denies the value of grammar (1997a: 41).

And again (1997a: 41):

> The Lexical approach suggests the content and role of grammar in language courses needs to be radically revised but the Approach in no way denies the value of grammar, nor its unique role in language. While the Lexical Approach emphasises probable language, based on observation of "used" language, it recognises clearly that lexis is not enough and that courses which totally discard grammar are doing learners a serious disservice.

Ultimately, therefore, it is a matter of developing – in teachers and learners – a metalinguistic awareness that enables the effective implementation of the methodological changes necessary for the correct application of the *Lexical Approach* in the teaching process, considering that:

> Any approach to language teaching which emphasises lexis and de-emphasises grammar represent not a revolution, but a change of emphasis (1993: 133).

Based on these general premises, the following paragraphs will describe and comment on the main features of the *Lexical Approach* from both a theoretical and an application perspective.

3. Theoretical Foundations of the Lexical Approach

In the opening of *The Lexical Approach* (1993: vi-vii), Lewis proposes a guide of methodological and linguistic aspects that essentially presents all the founding principles of the approach, describes its conception of language and its teaching, and highlights the factors of continuity or innovation with respect to the contemporary language teaching scene. Hereafter, the most significant statements of this guide will be examined in two different sections; the first brings together Lewis's considerations with respect to language, the second, related to the first, refers to methodological aspects.

3.1. Linguistic Aspects

• *Language consists of grammaticalized lexis, not lexicalised grammar.*

• *The grammar/vocabulary dichotomy is invalid; much language consists of multi-word 'chunks'.*

• *The central metaphor of language is holistic-an organism; not atomistic-a machine.*

• *Grammar as structure is subordinate to lexis.*

These first points include the essential elements on the concept of language proposed by the *Lexical Approach*. On the other hand, Lewis himself observes:

> The lexical approach can be summarised in a few words: language consists not of traditional grammar and vocabulary but often of multi-word prefabricated chunks (1997a: 5).

Chunks thus represent segments consisting of two or more words that co-occur as lexical units with a certain frequency. As Lindstronberg and Boers observe:

> What we call a chunk of language is a sequence of words which native speakers feel is the natural and preferred way of expressing a particular idea or purpose. Frequently there are various combinations of different words that can convey a certain message. Typically, though, only one or two of these combinations have become accepted as normal and natural (Lindstronberg, Boers: 7).

Language is thus not seen as a building in which grammar

serves as the supporting structure and vocabulary consists of the individual bricks that clad the structure (Serra Borneto 1998). Language is a uniform organism that cannot be broken down into its parts atomistically, as intended by the founding theory of Bloomfield's structuralist approach, centred on the syntactic form of language. Such an organism consists of complex lexical units, organised segments, structured groups of words (defined as *chunks* by Lewis) which impose the overcoming of the dichotomy between lexis and grammar in favour of a concept of language as a grammar- lexis.

Moreover, it should be noted how vocabulary and grammar are often discussed in education without any serious reflection on what grammar and vocabulary really are. Often, in fact, grammar is seen simply as a set of rules to be applied to obtain a correct sentence, at least from a syntactic point of view, while vocabulary is represented as a set of arbitrary meanings that can be learnt separately. However, psycholinguistics has widely demonstrated how words do not live alone in our mental lexis but organise themselves into semantic networks and associate with other words based on various semantic and morphosyntactic characteristics and information. Didactics, paying attention to the natural psycholinguistic processes of language learning and memorisation, should question itself more about teaching methodology: trying to respect the normal functioning of the mind, a more 'ecological' educational pathway should be favoured, ensuring a stable and profound acquisition of the foreign language.

Let us now consider the following additional definitions of language proposed by Lewis:

- *Language is recognised as a personal resource, not an abstract idealisation.*
- *Successful language is a wider concept than accurate language.*
- *Socio-linguistic competence-communicative power-precedes and is the basis, not the product, of grammatical competence.*

These statements contribute to clearly situating the *Lexical Approach* within the communicative view of language, showing particular attention to the sociolinguistic and pragmatic dimension related to communication and interaction in meaningful communicative contexts. Over the years, language teaching has been more sensitive to the formal aspects of language as well as to, the aspects of use.

These dichotomous aspects have in turn been defined differently. Saussure had already proposed a fundamental distinction between *langue* as a system of language and *parole*, a term that refers to the individual's ability to realise, through language, the potential of *langue*. Later, Chomsky proposed a fundamental distinction between *competence*, the set of implicit and unconscious knowledge of the rules that organise language, and *performance*, referring to the ability to apply this competence. However, in order to be able to identify the deep syntactic structures of *competence*, Chomsky imagined an ideal speaker in possession of an abstract cognitive ability, not taking into account aspects relating to the individual's linguistic communication in the actual world and thus the use of language in everyday communicative reality. From the definitions of *langue/parole* and of *competence/performance* comes a long reflection on language education. In 1972, Hymes defined the concept of *communicative competence* by reiterating the need to bring Chomsky's *competence* out of the earthly paradise and into the sociolinguistic dimension of the communicative dimension.

As Rivers observes,

it is all very well for theorists like Chomsky to say that in performance terms language is a chaos and that it is not worth studying. The teacher replies: Yes, it is the chaos into which our students must plunge (Rivers in Lewis 1993: 11).

Since the 1970s, language education has claimed the importance of socio-pragmatic linguistic competence as an essential element of the communicative dimension. It is not enough to know the language and know how to manipulate its structures to produce morph-syntactically correct sentences, it is imperative to develop competence in use in meaningful contexts. Widdowson (1978) describes this aspect with the dichotomy between the terms *usage* and *use*. The former describes context-independent norms indicating whether a sentence is acceptable or not in a certain language, while the latter term refers to the appropriateness of a sentence with respect to the context, and thus to the pragmatic and illocutionary value of the communicative act. As we can see, the *Lexical Approach* is set in this second aspect of language, *i.e.* in the functional and aspect proper to a communicative approach.

It is therefore a matter of establishing a *continuum* between a denoted, de-contextualised meaning (*signification*) proper to the *sentence* and the contextualised communicative *value* (and thus

with the connotative, affective, figurative, and metaphorical aspects) proper to the *utterance*. Clearly, both aspects are important, but what should be aimed at in language teaching is the education of competent speakers able to communicate their ideas and manage themselves in meaningful communicative contexts. As Lewis observes, it is language and communicative needs that drive individuals to develop and improve their language competence, and not the other way around.

3.2. Methodological Aspects

The linguistic aspects described above require consistent methodological options. With respect to methodological aspects, Lewis' suggestions are also very explicit:

> a central element of language teaching is raising students' awareness of and developing their ability to 'chunk' language successfully (1993: VI).

It has been observed that language is largely constructed from *multi-word prefabricated chunks*. Consequently, much of the teaching activity will focus on developing a metalinguistic competence that enables the learner to recognise, memorise, and use such chunks in the productive phase. As Lewis observes:

> The Lexical Approach can be summarised in a few words: language consists not of traditional grammar and vocabulary but often of multi-words prefabricated chunks. Teachers using the lexical approach will, instead of analysing language whenever possible, be more inclined to direct learners' attention to chunks which are as large as possible (1997b: 3).

A methodology focused on *chunks* necessarily imposes a different type of teaching progression. A syllabus focusing on grammar progression will in fact be characterised by a progression *from the easiest to the most difficult*, whereas in the case of the *Lexical Approach* it will rather be *from the most useful to the least useful* and *from the most frequent to the least frequent*.

• *Collocation is integrated as an organising principle within syllabuses.*

Collocations are complex lexical units – *chunks* – of two or more words that form high-frequency co-occurrences. They are extremely common in languages and often differ from one language to another, thus presenting some degree of difficulty for learners. Surprisingly, despite their frequency, they have been

totally ignored by modern language teaching. In fact, the formation of collocations is part of the paradigmatic dimension of language, they have mainly a semantic origin and are linked to use. They therefore have no rule of grammar to explain them, and it is perhaps for this reason, due to their lexical nature, that they have been so long ignored. For the *Lexical Approach*, on the other hand, collocations represent an important part of the language that not only cannot be ignored, but, on the contrary, must be placed at the centre of the teaching process, to the point of integrating them into the syllabus, becoming the content to be taught.

Referring further to methodological aspects, Lewis notes that:

- *The primacy of speech over the writing is recognised; writing is acknowledged as a secondary encodement, with a radically different grammar from that of the spoken language.*
- *Receptive skills, particularly listening, are given enhanced status.*

The *Lexical Approach* supports the development of oral skills. Very often, in teaching practice we rely on the textbook and, as a result, even if the book is set up in a communicative manner, we end up favouring the written code, as if it were considered 'more correct' than the oral code. However, written language is not spoken language on a sheet of paper. Written code and oral code are not two alternatives of the same message, but two different means of communication with different rules.

An in-depth reflection on the grammar of speech has long been lacking in language teaching. Within the receptive skills, the *Lexical Approach*, at least in its early stages, places great emphasis on listening, a receptive activity considered anything but passive. The development of metalinguistic awareness and of the monitor cannot be separated from the activity of listening, which encourages observation, essential for comprehension. It is well known how much language teaching literature supports the need to reduce *Teaching Talking Time* (TTT) in favour of *Student Talking Time* (STT). However, in the initial stages, learners must be able to receive a lot of input in the listening phase and, consequently, the role of teachers is important as they are an essential source of listening and useful feedback for the assumptions made about the language by learners.

Let us now describe the last points of Lewis' guide, which are

of particular importance for the methodological implications they contain:

- *The Present-Practice-Produce paradigm is rejected, in favour of a paradigm based on the Observe-Hypothesise-Experiment cycle*
- *It is the co-textual rather than situational elements of context which are of primary importance for language teaching.*
- *Task and process, rather than exercise and product, are emphasized.*

Balboni (2002: 117-118) offers a synthesis of two different methodological paths, the first focused on the teaching of grammar, the second based on reflection on language.

	Teaching Grammar	Think about Grammar
When	Beginning	End
Who	Teacher	Student
How	Deduction	Introduction
Why	Application	Discovering
What	Result	Process

Table 1. (Our Translation)

In the first case, we are faced with a traditional course in which the teacher presents a specific grammar topic at the beginning of the lesson and then, generally through repetition and reinforcement techniques, asks the students to learn the rule and apply it. In the second case, on the other hand, the didactic path focuses on the learner reflecting on the linguistic phenomenon, observing it and creating hypotheses on the possible mechanisms that govern it. In the first case, the general rule - presented by the teacher – is applied by students to sentences containing it; in the second case, students observe a certain amount of linguistic input and, based on what they observe, create hypotheses about the general rule.

Now, for reflection to take place, there are two requirements. Firstly, there must be sufficient 'clues' to be able to hypothesise the rule and therefore the minimum unit for teaching activities is the text with its bond and coherence mechanisms, and not the individual sentences to be transformed, as in the grammar-centred tradition. Secondly, it is necessary for reflection to take place at the end of the teaching process and not at the beginning.

We are thus faced with two different paths of reasoning: deductive and inductive. The *Lexical Approach* favours an inductive path. Learning *chunks*, recognising them, and analysing their nature depends largely on a path of discovery and not application. In this sense, in the *Lexical Approach* we can catch glimpses of elements that belong to a humanistic language education model. Reflection on language must start from the text, and in the text, elements relating to co-text as well as context are of particular interest. It is indeed in the co-textual dimension that important linguistic phenomena such as collocations and other types of *chunks* are identified.

Finally, because of the methodological approach described above, the *Lexical Approach* favours task-oriented teaching, rather than focusing on the exercises of traditional teaching, where exercises involve applying the rules through a certain amount of repetition and focus on the result, the product. If the sentence is correct, it means that the rule has been learnt. In the case of *tasks*, language must be used to achieve certain goals, to accomplish a certain activity, and in this case more work is done on the process and not so much on the product.

3.3. The nature of lexis

Lewis identifies four basic categories of lexical units:

- *a) words*
- *b) polywords*
- *collocations*
- *institutionalised utterances*
- *sentence frames or heads*

The first two categories concern referential meaning, while the other two concern pragmatic meaning.

- *Words and polywords*

These are words taken as independent units. Generally, when we think of vocabulary teaching in traditional approaches, we refer to the teaching and memorisation of these individual words, often presented within lists with their translation. Changing these units will also change the meaning of the sentence, as in the following example: *Scusa, mi presteresti la matita/la penna/il disco/il libro, etc.* In this case, the *Lexical Approach* would operate by identifying the

chunk: scusa, mi presteresti … plus the single term that completes the sentence. Single lexical units are also words such as *basta!, certo!, prego, volentieri, aperto/chiuso, etc.* The terms of the professional scientific micro-languages also belong to this category.

Polywords, on the other hand, are phrases usually composed of two or three words, such as the expressions *a proposito, d'altra parte, comunque sia, ad ogni modo, né più né meno*, etc. Such locutions can be learnt and memorised as individual lexical units with different functions within the discourse. Let's consider prepositional phrases such as *dal punto di vista di, a seconda di, in proporzione a, a favore di, allo scopo di,* etc.; or subjunctive phrases such as *in modo che, di tal sorta che,* etc.: these are expressions that recur with some frequency, but which traditional education has generally not considered in a systematic way. *Polywords* are an example of grammaticalised vocabulary: they are fixed expressions, prepositional or adverbial phrases/syntagmas to be taken as simple lexical units.

- *Collocations*

These are pairs of words (but sometimes more than two) that attract each other in a particular way and that recur with high frequency, giving rise to co-occurrences, more or less fixed, on the syntagmatic level. In fact, some fixed collocations can be taken as polylexical expressions:

> Fixed collocations are one kind of polyword. Free collocations are, by definition, entirely novel and therefore lie towards the creative, grammatical competence-based pole of language. (Lewis 1993: 92).

However, the words that form this type of *chunk* do not attract each other in the same way. For example, in Italian, a person is said to have *capelli castani*, but never *capelli marroni*; the adjective attracts the noun more strongly than the opposite case. This leads to the possibility of identifying within a given collocation a 'keyword' on which the collocation rests.

In the *Lexical Approach*, collocations play a central role. According to Lewis, part of the teaching activities should be devoted to them, both to develop metalinguistic reflection and so that they can be learnt as individual lexical units. It is possible that semantic memory organises language, precisely by grouping it into *chunks*, and therefore learning the foreign language through such structures would make them easier to retrieve later.

In Italian, collocations can be of a different nature. See the following examples:

- Noun + adj.

  Giornata storta

- Adj. + noun.

  Vecchio amico, gran baccano

- Noun + noun

  Temperatura ambiente, spazio eventi, punto vendita

- Verb + noun + adj.

  Fare man bassa, fare piazza pulita

- Verb + adv.

  Dormire profondamente

- Verb + prep. + noun

  Essere in tempo

- Adj. + prep. + adv.

  Persona per bene

In some cases, collocations can take on an idiomatic value. In fact, it is possible to hypothesise a *continuum* from the simplest collocations to more complex idiomatic forms.

- *Institutionalised utterances*

Chunks of pragmatic use that belong to the oral code fall into this category. Such chunks, which are much more numerous than one might suppose, may also consist of entire sentences, often identifiable as routinised forms within a given context. Expressions such as *c'è una telefonata per te, apro io*, are expressions that can be taken as single units within a discourse and can be learnt as such. Many of these fixed expressions are routinised politeness phrases that should be present in dialogues which highlight their context. The *Lexical Approach* focuses on semi-fixed expressions that fit into a pragmatic or functional structure like: *ho l'impressione che …*; or *quello che mi ha sorpreso è stato che …*; *quello che mi sorprende è che …*; *trovo incredibile che …* In this category, Lewis also includes expressions such as *se fossi in te, se fossi al tuo posto*, etc. These are expressions that involve the use of tenses in the hypothetical period, but it is possible to learn them as chunks without necessarily

starting with the grammatical explanation that can occur later:

> […] those sentences that are fully institutionalised utterances can be learned and used as wholes, without analysis, thereby forming the basis, not the product, of grammatical competence (Lewis 1997: 257).

- *Sentence frames or heads*

These are established forms that belong to the written code and are used to structure texts of a certain length. They are expressions in Italian such as *in primo luogo…*; *in secondo luogo…*; *infine…*; or: *passeremo ora ad analizzare una serie di punti…*; *innanzitutto bisogna sottolineare che ….* They are useful expressions for organising long written passages, but can also be found in spoken language, e.g., in academic language.

Obviously, the lexical categories indicated by Lewis, and the *chunks* that make them up, have, as their basis, the rules of word formation found in each language. To develop awareness of the organisation of such *chunks*, it may be useful to reflect, from a metalinguistic point of view, on the mechanisms of word formation in the lexicon of a certain language and to consider their paradigmatic and syntagmatic relationships. The following aspects should be considered:

- *Neologisms*

A language is never static or crystallised. It is a living organism that renews its vocabulary based on new needs. Neology is a phenomenon inherent in the very nature of language, in man's constant need to describe the world through it and the technical-scientific, social, and cultural changes that are constantly taking place, imposing new communication needs. Sometimes, some neologisms are unlucky and do not find a permanent place in the language, while in other cases, a neologism enters the lexicon permanently to the point of becoming an irreplaceable word or locution that can, in turn, generate new neologisms over time.

Loans and foreignisms that enter a language can also be considered neologisms, but generally the process of neology refers to words that are formed based on lemmas already present in the language. There are combinatory and semantic neologisms (Beccarla 1994). The former derives essentially from processes of suffixation and derivation, or are syntagms formed through the union of two or more words that are permanently linked and can

give rise to high-frequency co-occurrences, lexical *chunks* such as *spazio vendita, servizio clienti, mani pulite, area videosorvegliata* (in the latter, there is a further word formation through the suffix *video-*). The latter, on the other hand, consist of lemmas already existing in the language that vary their polysemous valence, taking on new meanings (and possibly losing others) from time to time. In Italian, the word 'espresso' once indicated a kind of train, a magazine, a kind of letter and coffee. Today, *espresso* trains have practically disappeared, replaced by suffixed expressions such as *inter-* and *euro-* plus the loan's *city* and *night* in the expressions *'intercity'* and *'euronight'*. Similarly, one no longer sends a letter *espresso*, but uses the new diremation expression *posta prioritaria*. The lemma *espresso* therefore presents a contraction of its polysemic value, while other words can expand their polysemy to describe new references. The word *'velina'* originally indicated, in addition to the sheet of tissue paper, a kind of official communication sent by institutions to the press for information purposes, while since the 1980s, it has come to mean a beautiful girl appearing in television programs in a co-starring role.

- *Derivation*

The formation of new words can occur through derivation, i.e., through a process of affixation. Concerning distribution, affixes are defined as *prefixes*, *suffixes*, and *infixes* according to the position they take in relation to the word root. When suffixing, the suffix can be attached to nouns, adjectives and verbs, making it possible to move from one syntactic category to another, as well as to derive words within the same category. New formations derived from a noun are called nominal (*senato > senatore*); those derived from an adjective are called adjectival (*possibile > impossibile*); and those derived from a verb are called verbal (*partire > partenza*). According to the derivative rules, the most commonly used suffixes are:

- from noun to noun: *-aio, -ario, -ista, -ano, -ino, -eria, -ificio, -ale, -ata, -eto, -aglia, -ame, -ina, -atura*
- from noun to adjective: *-ato, -uto, -are, -evole, -ile, -ino, -aneo, -esco*
- from adjective to noun: *-ezza, -izia, -ura, -ia, -itudine, -ione, -aggine, -eria*
- from noun or adjective to verb: *-are, -eggiare, -izzare* da verbo a nome: *-(a-i)zione, -anza, -enza, -(a-i)mento, -uta, -ita, -(at)ura, -sione, -(a-i)tore, -sore, -ino, -eria*

- from verb to adjective: *-(a-i)tore, -sore, -(a-i)bile*

Each suffix can also imply different meanings, e.g. the suffix *-aio* can indicate someone who sells newspapers (*giornalaio*) as well as a place intended to contain something (*vivaio*). However, it is possible for a word to change category without resorting to a suffixation process, as in the case of *svegliare/sveglia*; *lavoro/lavorare*; *guida/ guidare*, etc. In this case they are zero-suffix derivations.

Derivative rules can also include alteration through augmentative, diminutive, endearment, and derogatory suffixes. Unlike suffixation, prefixation does not imply category variations. Prefixes are, however, vehicles of specific meanings: e.g., the prefixes *in-*, *s-*, *de-*, *a-* may attribute negative or privative character to the word (*inutile, scortese, deridere, disattento, asociale*). The prefix *in-* can also indicate movement to put something in a place (*im-mettere, im-bucare*); the prefix *de-* may indicate motion from place, displacement (*de-portare*); and again, the prefix *ri-* can indicate repetition (*ri-fare*) as well as give intensive value (*ri-cercare, ri-pulire*).

The main prefixes used in the formation of new words are: *ante-, post-, cis-, meta-, intra-, anti-, peri-, oltre-, extra-, entro-, co-, trans-, arci-, sub-, iper-, vice-, bene-, re-, tri-, a-, dis-, s-, inter-, super-, sovra-, sotto-, para-, semi-, mal(e)-, ri-, bis-, contro-, de-, in-*.

- *Composition*

Composition is the process of combining two or more words that, when put together, take on a different meaning from their component words (*asciugamano, apriscatole, manomettere, sottopassaggio, attaccapanni,* etc.). Composition differs from the process of derivation in that words that are joined possess their own semantic autonomy, whereas affixes cannot be isolated as independent lexical units. In contemporary Italian, the formation of new words depends more on composition than on suffixation. There are associations of words called conglomerates such as *saliscendi, viavai, fuggifuggi*, which through use have been consolidated into single lexical units.

The process of composition can involve both words belonging to the same grammatical category:

- nouns (*capotreno, fondotinta, cassapanca*)
- adjectives (*pianoforte, grigioverde*)
- verbs (*viavai, fuggifuggi*)

- adverbs (*malvolentieri, sottosopra*)

Or they may originate from different categories, mainly:
- verb + noun (*attaccapanni, scendiletto, portafoglio, passaporto*)
- noun + verb (*terracotta, manomettere, nullatenente*)
- noun + adjective (*palcoscenico, terraferma*)
- adjective + noun (*bassorilievo, mezzogiorno*)
- adverb + noun (*sottobosco*)

Words can also give form to polyrhematic lexical units formed by two words that do not join. This is the case with *word phrases* such as *temperatura ambiente, busta paga, treno merci, divano letto*, etc. Such lexical units are referred to as *word phrases* since they replace an entire sentence: e.g., *divano letto* summarises the sentence *divano che può anche svolgere le funzioni di letto*. Today, these expressions are widely used as they are concise and direct, like for example *punto vendita, spazio eventi, servizio clienti*, etc. In other cases, higher lexical units consisting of two nouns and a preposition can be created, as in the case of *carta d'identità, lista d'attesa, sacco a pelo, punto d'incontro, posto di blocco, avviso di garanzia*, etc.

On the other hand, '*macedonia*' words are defined as those expressions obtained by merging the initial part of a word with another word or with the final part of it: *cartolibreria o inflazione*.

- *Learned compounds*

The so-called learned compounds are instead lexical units in which at least one of the constituents is of classical, Greek, or Latin origin. These elements play a similar role in the formation of the compound word as prefixes and suffixes, being called prefixes and suffixes. Such suffixes are often present in specific languages and micro-languages, and thanks to their classical origin, they allow an internationalisation of the scientific term, which is often present in a similar way in different languages. With use, in some cases the prefixes take on a different meaning from its original one. *Telefono, telescopio* and *televisione* originate from the same prefixes *tele-* (which in Greek meant *far away*). However, precisely because of television, subsequently composed words have a meaning derived mainly from the medium of television, essentially becoming an abbreviation of it in expressions such as *telegiornale, telecomando*, etc.

- *Foreignisms*

Foreignisms represent an important lexical source. They can be grouped into two distinct categories: borrowings and loan words. Borrowing occurs when linguistic elements that are alloglot or lemmas belonging to other languages are used within a language. Often, this is done because of the prestige that a certain language acquires in certain historical ages or out of communicative need (think of the widespread anglicisms in the age of computers and information technology). For example, the formation of neologisms because of exogenous processes is an important aspect of advertising, which in recent years shows a strong tendency towards the use of Anglophone expressions. Every language is used in advertising because it conveys a particular meaning not only on a semantic level, but also on the level of cultural stereotypes. There are different types of borrowings:

- acclimated or non-acclimated: according to the degree to which they have definitively become part of the lexical heritage of a language. *Bar, équipe, manager* are acclimated terms in Italian.

- fitting or not fitting: whether or not they have conformed to the graphemic or phonetic structures of the receiving language (*bistecca* from English *beefsteak*). In Italian, borrowings (especially from English) are very common, to the point that sometimes even false borrowings have been created. For example, *beauty farm* is an exogenous neologism absent from the English lexicon.

Loan words are a particular category of foreignisms consisting of alloglot terms that are translated with lemmas already existing in the adopting language, which, however, are given a different meaning. They too can be classified according to certain specific characteristics:

- Semantic loan words: these concern an extension of the meaning of an already existing word induced by a foreign model (e.g., *vertice*, in expressions such as *incontro al vertice* is a semantic loan word of the English *summit*, just as the verb *realizzare*, in the sense of *comprendere, rendersi conto*, is a semantic loan word of the English *to realise*).

- Structural loan words (or translations) occur when a word or phrase of a language is literally translated using words that

already exist in the receiving language (like in *week-end*, *fine settimana*, or compound words such as *skyscraper*, *grattacielo*, in which, however, the syntactic order in Italian is different and forms a neologism, or like *multinazionale* from *multinational*)

• Partial loan words: only a part is borrowed from another language. For example, the expression *volo charter*, *effetto glamour* or *spazio storage*.

4. Lexical Chunks and Processing Levels

In the classical representation of how memory works, information temporarily processed by short-term memory is transferred through repetition (*rehearsal*) into long-term memory. However, this process is based on a sequential view (see Atkinson and Shiffrin's modal model of 1968) that envisages a process in successive stages, in which the transfer of information from short-term to long-term memory is primarily a function of rehearsal, and thus its permanence in short-term memory. In other words, according to this model, the longer the *item* remains in short-term memory, the more guarantees there are that it will be transferred into long-term memory.

Craik and Lockhart (1972) proposed a different model based on a functional view, the *-depth coding hypothesis*. In this perspective, information processing takes place along a *continuum*, rather than through a series of discrete stages, and should be distributed along a path from the most superficial levels of encoding, characterised by the analysis of sensory and physical traits, towards a deep processing of the input at a semantic level, with a higher associative degree.

According to the principle of processing levels, repetition is not sufficient to guarantee the formation of a stable trace, but the central factor becomes the level of its depth of encoding. Deeper processing gives rise to a more stable memory because it is more connected at the level of semantic networks.

A second essential point of Craik and Lockhart's model concerns the information storage process. If deep acquisition depends on the level of processing, it will only be a *processing review of the item* that allows it to stay and not a *retention review*, where the information is repeated without further processing. The first kind of review allows access to deep processing levels, reinforcing semantic associations,

while the second allows short-term retention of the item during the storage process. In other words, *retention review* is a retention system that does not have the characteristics of learning, as it only has the function of activating a representation already existing in memory, whereas *processing review* presides over the reorganisation of knowledge.

Based on these observations, it must be assumed that the more an assigned task relates to the semantic characteristics of the item, the greater the chances of retention increase. It thus seems clear that the memory trace in its encoding, retention and retrieval phases requires semantic processing to become a stable trace in semantic and long-term memory.

From the perspective of language teaching, this implies that the more attention is paid to the semantic characteristics of the language material, the more stable its learning will be, and it agrees with the assumption that the more one focuses on the content of an utterance, the better one can understand its structure. However, for this to happen, it becomes essential to consider the text as the minimum unit of meaning. Indeed, only in a text can we find all the linguistic and extralinguistic elements contributing to the deep understanding of meaning.

Some points of convergence emerge between the methodological proposal of the *Lexical Approach* and memory processes from these data. Lexical *chunks*, which the *Lexical Approach* places at the center of its methodological proposal, seem to mirror the *chunking* activity of short-term memory. Providing teaching activities that favour the learning of structured lexical units is, therefore, an *ecological* methodology as it respects the physiological functioning of human memory.

Another interesting point of convergence concerns the length of chunks and the span of short-term memory. As Lewis observes:

> Several linguists who have studied and classified expressions have come to the conclusion that they consist of between two and seven words and, most interestingly, they do not normally exceed seven words […] Research on short term memory bears out this limit, which remains speculative, on the length of individual lexical items (1997a: 33-34).

The relationship between *chunk* structure and memory span thus confirms the interest in a teaching methodology based on the

Lexical Approach. The new *chunks* that learners form from already acquired and memorised lexical units possess a linguistic structure that is perfectly consistent with the span of short-term memory, and consequently can be memorised naturally.

A further confirmation of the consistency of Lewis' methodological proposal with memory processes concerns the depth of encoding and levels of processing. In the key points at the opening of *The Lexical Approach* Lewis emphasises that:

> The Present-Practice-Produce paradigm is rejected, in favour of a paradigm based on the Observe-Hypothesise-Experiment cycle (1993: VII).

The first paradigm emphasises the role of maintenance review, but not of processing review. This is a methodological model that, considering the subject as a passive mind that learns through repetition, does not favour processing the input at a deep, i.e. semantic, level. A methodology based on observation and the formulation of hypotheses on the functioning of the language system, such as that proposed by the *Lexical Approach*, on the other hand, allows for a more stable input memorisation and is the most suitable procedure for understanding the formation and structure of lexical *chunks.*

5. Practical Applications of the Lexical Approach

Based on the characteristics of lexis described by Lewis, in this section we propose some teaching activities as methodological examples of the *Lexical Approach* applied to the teaching of Italian as a foreign language or L2.

• *Units consisting of several words or* polywords

As already mentioned, there are pairs of words or phrases that can be acquired as single lexical units and memorised as such. However, these expressions follow a precise order: in Italian, for example, we say *avanti e indietro* and not the other way around. The first technique consists of recognising and associating word pairs in the correct order and then reusing them within some mini dialogues:

a) *Associa le espressioni seguenti formando dei chunks. Osserva l'esempio:*
all'altro
avanti
da un momento
né più
in largo
indietro
spesso
volentieri
in lungo
né meno

né più   ***né meno***

_____   _____
_____   _____
_____   _____
_____   _____

b) *Con le espressioni ottenute completa i mini-dialoghi seguenti:*
Es.: Laura mi ha ripetuto ***né più né meno*** quello che mi avevi detto tu
ieri al telefono.
1 Giorgio ti ha detto che veniva subito?
   Si, ormai dovrebbe essere qui _____
2 Maria, ti vedi ancora tutti i giorni con Claudio?
   Tutti i giorni no, però ci vediamo _____
3 Allora, avete trovato il negozio che cercavate?
   No, abbiamo girato il centro _____ senza riuscire a ricordarci dov'era.
4 Francesca, è tutto il giorno che cammini _____ senza
   concludere nulla.
Lo so, ma oggi non riesco a concentrarmi per studiare

• *Collocations*

It is useful to set up techniques that help learners reflect on high-frequency relationships between words. You can use worksheets such as those in the following examples, which can be completed individually or in pairs and then discussed with the whole class.

Es. 1:

Finding five verbs that according to you establish priviliged relationships with the assigned

Verbs	Noun (keyword)
_____ _____ _____ _____ _____	*Tempo*

Es. 2:

verbs	Adverbs
parlare	_____ _____ _____ _____ _____

Es. 3:

Keyword	Adjective	Verb
abbonamento	*scaduto*	*rinnovare*
lettera	_____	_____
lavoro	_____	_____
biglietto	_____	_____

Another type of activity may concern the recognition of collocations formed, for example, by verbs and nouns presented in a list:

Connecting verbs with the listed words that according to you attract each other much more (a noun can connect with two verbs too). Look at the example.

	Aiuto, atto, fastidio, freddo, parte, promessa, ragione, retta, silenzio, sonno, tempo
Fare	*una promessa* _____ _____ _____ _____
Dare	_____ _____ _____ _____ _____
Prendere	_____ _____

Or grids can be used. For example:

	Leggero/a	Forte	Grosso/a	Alto/a	sottile
pioggia					
Vento					
mare					
neve					

Learners must complete the grid by associating the noun with the adjective. In this way they realise that the sea can be *grosso*, but it cannot be *sottile*, whereas rain can be *sottile*, but not *grossa* and so on. With this type of activity, students also reflect on the connotative aspects of language.

• *Fixed and semi-fixed expressions*

Some techniques can be set up to work on fixed expressions or established phrases. See the following example.

In the following sentences one expression is wrong. Find it and rewrite the sentence with the correct expression.

> 1. Cerca di vedere le cose dalla mia linea di vista.
> 2. Non sono molto soddisfatto della giacca che ho comprato,
>   d'altro lato era l'unica rimasta della mia taglia.
> 3. Comprami il giornale che preferisci, tanto uno vale questo.

Once the correct lexical units have been identified (*punto di vista, d'altra parte, uno vale l'altro*), learners can be asked to identify a corresponding expression in their mother tongue (from a methodological point of view, the *Lexical Approach* does not exclude reference to the mother tongue) or to reintroduce the learned locutions within new discursive contexts in the target language.

Another technique involves a *matching* activity between a verb in the first column and one of the groups of fixed or semi-fixed expressions in the second.

Example:

cerco	Poco bene
	In piena forma
	A mio agio
	Chiamato in causa
Faccio	Dove l'ho già visto
	Chi sia
	Se sia il caso
	Se sia capace/in grado di
Mi sento	quello che posso
	come se non fosse successo niente
	finta di niente
	una cosa alla volta
Mi chiedo	di stare/di tirarmi su
	di non pensarci
	di concentrarmi
	un'altra soluzione

Each verb can associate with all the expressions included in a group, but in different contexts. Once the verb has been associated with the corresponding group of expressions, learners can try to use each phrase within short dialogues in class.

Other techniques that may be used:

• *Crossword Puzzles*

Puzzle techniques are often present in teaching materials and classroom activities. However, they are often based upon single words that need to be identified and inserted, usually based on related semantic fields and iconic references (cartoons, images). Students must retrieve, from semantic memory, the name corresponding to the indicated object and insert it in the diagram according to the boxes corresponding to the spelling characteristics of the lemma. However, crosswords can be set up where one is asked to enter not a single word, but a chunk based on a sentence to be completed. This is an excellent technique for memorising lexical units consisting of more than one word.

• *Sorting Techniques*

Short dialogues, containing many fixed or semi-fixed routines and expressions, where lines are not in the right order, can also be presented. Learners must reconstruct the dialogue. This is an activity that develops pragmatic competence and helps to use the various lexical items in context.

• *Creating a Story*

The teacher provides the learners, who work in small groups, with several lexical units consisting of fixed or semi-fixed expressions. On this basis, the students must write a short story with a set number of words.

• *Cloze*

The *cloze* procedure generally involves completing a text in which every seventh word has been deleted. A variation could be a targeted *cloze*, in which lexical *chunks* of various types have been deleted from the text. These *chunks* should be put at the bottom and learners should recognise them and insert them in the corresponding blank space in the text.
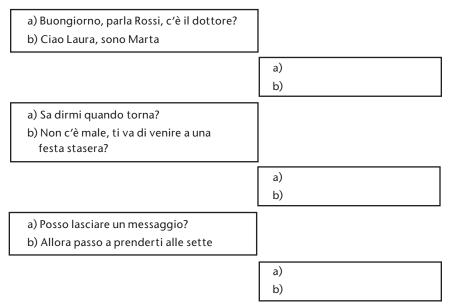
• *Draft dialogue*

You can create a diagram in which to insert, for example, a telephone dialogue between two speakers. Students work in pairs

and must complete the dialogue based on the outline provided by the teacher. In a second phase, the dialogues are presented to the whole class, and students reflect together on expressions that may constitute lexical *chunks.*

Example:

Complete the dialogue. You can choose a formal or an informal call.

a) Buongiorno, parla Rossi, c'è il dottore?
b) Ciao Laura, sono Marta

a)
b)

a) Sa dirmi quando torna?
b) Non c'è male, ti va di venire a una festa stasera?

a)
b)

a) Posso lasciare un messaggio?
b) Allora passo a prenderti alle sette

a)
b)

6. Conclusion

The Lexical Approach presents itself as a communicative, scientifically well-founded educational approach focusing on the role of lexis in language learning. At the same time, as Porcelli (2004) also notes, it proposes a reflection of a linguistic and psycho-pedagogical nature that retrieves contemporary language education principles in order to convert them into teaching techniques, i.e. into precise proposals of activities to be carried out and materials to be used in the classroom.

It is precisely this dual focus – on the theoretical and scientific level and on that of operational proposals – that makes it of particular interest and usefulness to both the scholar and the language teacher and that we have sought to represent in this essay.

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