

Lexical Bundles: Identification and Distinguishing Features

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Abstract:

It is not often easy to identify a certain group of words as a lexical bundle, since the same set of words can be, in different situations, recognized as idiom, a collocation, a lexical phrase or a lexical bundle. That is, there are many cases where the overlap among the four types is plausible. Thus, it is important to extract the most identifiable and distinguishable characteristics with which a certain group of words, under certain conditions, can be recognized as a lexical bundle, and this is the task of this paper.

1. Introduction

It is an important fact that for a learner of any language to master a foreign language, he must learn as many vocabulary items as possible since vocabulary constitutes a vital factor in foreign language learning. Vocabulary system is often viewed as the heart of language- learning process without which proper language competence and performance is impossible. Yet, in the literature of EFL learning and teaching little attention has been given to the role of vocabulary as the means of communication by which a speaker often strives to transfer meaning to a listener who in turn decodes the message accurately by deciphering its meaning.

In fact, lexical items are the tools people use to think, to express ideas and feelings and to better learn about the world. But put in mind that the vocabulary of a language is not just a random collection of items, rather, the lexical items are mostly determined by well- defined rules and relations, often recognized on the three levels: syntactic, semantic and phonological. One of such lexical items is ascribed to a set of lexical items that have the ability to recur in natural texts, referred to as lexical bundles. The occurrence of such a group of words may spring from the fact that words, in a certain context, tend to occur in sequences. Each word within a lexical bundle interacts semantically with its neighbouring word to form the collective meaning of the whole bundle. The following bundles usually recur together as sets: as a result of, I don't think so , by the way, all of a sudden, etc⁽¹⁾.

2. Lexical Bundles Defined

Unfortunately, until very recently linguists have paid a great deal of attention to the study of recurrent word combinations in English, though such combinations constitute the core in language use. Lexical bundles, as one type of these combinations often exhibit different semantic, textual and pragmatic functions as they exist in various texts. The control of these multi-word expressions, (clusters, chunks, or bundles) contributes to the fluent linguistic production. In other words, their occurrence often helps to form certain type of meaning in specific contexts, and thus contributing to our understanding of a text. That is, our sense of coherence in a text (Tremblay, 2008).

Perhaps, the first operational definition of lexical bundles seems to be given by Biber *et al.* (1999: 999). They identify them as "recurrent expressions, regardless of their idiomaticity and regardless of their

structural status". They are simply sets of word forms that commonly go together in natural spoken and written discourse.

Further, they always come in sets of three or more words that are often together, yet these words are not freely go together. Consider three-word bundles:

- I don't think
- Would you mind
- In accordance with

However, a combination of four-, five-, or six- words is correspondingly less frequent in English texts. The following are illustrative examples:

- The end of this (four words)
- Go and have a look (five words)
- Do you want me to do (six words)⁽²⁾

In their investigation of the use of lexical bundles in conversation and academic prose, they (*ibid*) have found out that the existence of lexical bundles is determined by particular words and their functions within those classes, and functions rather than by their abstract classes and structures.

Expressed another way, producing natural language is not just a matter of constructing well- formed sentences, but of using well- tried lexical expressions in appropriate positions.

In some cases, lexical bundles can be seen as extended collocation as their components habitually show up together, forming a type of interrelated meaning that is often predictable from the company these

words keeps⁽³⁾. Because collocation partially involves "a group of words that belong together, either because they commonly occur together like take a chance they can be treated as lexical bundles, since they both can be defined as common occurrences of lexical items in natural texts (Nation, 2001: 317). In this respect, the multi-word sequences: present study, above example, and long time are often described as collocational items, yet in certain cases, they appear as lexical bundles that recur frequently in longer sequences (i.e., when extended into): in the present study , in the above example , for a long time.

Since lexical bundles are often presented as frequently recurrent expressions, in most cases, they must not be treated as idioms or other fixed lexical expressions. Nevertheless Biber, Conrad and Cortes (2004: 376-7) argue that "most lexical bundles, in general, are idiomatic in meaning". Conversely one can argue that stereotypical and trite idioms such as kick the bucket (= die) and a slap in the face (= affront) are rarely attested in natural speech and writing. Such idiomatic expressions are typically not frequent, and even when used, these fixed formulas happen in fiction rather than in real face- to- face conversation. In one of the studies concerning the frequency of the occurrence of idioms, it has been noticed that the above idioms only occur around 5 times per million in fiction (*ibid*).

Among the lexical bundles that Biber *et al.* (1999: 1007) have observed in their survey the types of lexical bundles in conversation, the following examples are relatively idiomatic:

- 1- Hang on a minute, you can have some of mine.

3. Distinguishing Features

It has been noted that the term "lexical bundles" is not clear-cut; it often overlaps with other related lexical phrases or chunks, such as collocations and idioms. To preclude such confusion and overlapping, there must be certain identifying and distinguishing characteristics with which a certain set of words can be identified and described as a lexical bundle.

The identification and characterization of these bundles will involve the syntactic, semantic, functional, textual and pragmatic behaviour of such bundles.

This section is an attempt at arriving at the defining characteristics, although there is surprisingly little agreement on them among linguists (Conrad and Cortes, 2004: 372). However, the following are the most outstanding features with which lexical bundles can be identified:

3.1 Structure

Since lexical bundles are apparently so frequent in natural discourse (spoken or written), they should be expressed in structurally simple constructions. That is, they are often introduced as incomplete structural units. The idea of incompleteness of the configurational structure of lexical bundles has already been demonstrated by Biber *et al.* (1999: 993-1000), when they have found out that only 15% of the lexical bundles in conversation represent complete structural units (phrases and clauses), whereas less than 5% of the bundles in academic prose can be considered complete structural units. In conversation, for example, the following bundles often bridge two clauses:

- I want to know [clause].
- Well that's what I [clause].

Yet, in academic prose, they often tend to bridge two phrases:

- In the case of [phrase].
- The base of the [phrase].

In both cases (spoken and prose), lexical bundles begin at a clause or phrase boundary, but the last words of the bundles are the beginning elements of a second structural unit (Biber & Barbieri, 2007: 270).

The underlined words represent the possible completion following the bundles I don't know what and one of the important in the following examples:

- I don't know what he did.
- One of the important factors was cultural dimension.

Moreover, Biber, Conrad and Cortes (2004: 382) have observed that "oral bundles, typical of conversation, are characterized by declarative and interrogative clause fragments while "literate "bundles typical of academic prose, contain noun phrases and prepositional phrases.":

- I thought that was... (Declarative).
- Do you want to (Interrogative).
- It was in the (Noun Phrase).
- In terms of (Prepositional Phrase).

3.2 Function

Lexical bundles serve various textual and pragmatic functions in different texts, and what justifies their occurrence in a text is their main functions in building up that text. They are often introduced as useful devices for the comprehension and construction of a discourse, and listeners'/ readers' failure to understand their textual and interpersonal role will surely affect their success in dealing with language situations (Biber & Conrad, 1999: 182- 3).

In general, lexical bundles are often exploited to serve the purpose of organizing dialogues and written prose. And in doing so, they provide cues to the listener/ reader about the flow of a text. The following lexical bundles offer cues to what follows in a conversation:

- What I'm trying to say is ...
- That's beside the point...

However, there are three main types of lexical bundles as far as their functional patterns are concerned: stance, discourse organizing and referential expressions.

A. Stance Bundles

They are utilized to convey "attitudes or assessments of certainty that frame some other propositions" (Biber, Conrad and Cortes, 2004: 384). They seem to function as utterance launchers, presenting a personal stance relative to the information in the following complement clauses:

- I don't think I could handle it.
- I don't want to hear this.

B. Discourse Organizing Bundles

They reflect relationships between prior and coming discourse. They serve "to indicate the overall discourse structure and signal the informational status of statements" (Biber & Barbieri, 2007: 271). Put it another way, they are usually used "to signal how the topic and/ or activity of the discourse in one part of a lecture is related to another" (Nesi & Basturkmen, 2006: 297). They are usually used to affect transition among units of a text; therefore, they involve items signaling the introduction of discourse that is roughly connected to previous discourse. Consider:

- What I want to do is quickly run through the exercise that we're going to do.
- Now, we want to talk about getting our sample...

C. Referential Bundles

They are intended "to perform an ideational function: they help writers structure their experience and determine their way of looking at things" (Cortes, 2004: 401). They identify an entity or specific parts of entities by making direct reference to physical or abstract entities, or to the textual context itself. That is, they identify an entity or single out some particular attribute of the entity as especially important (Biber & Barbieri, 2007: 270). The following example introduces a lexical bundle which identifies the group of students who are in focus:

- For those of you who came late I have the quiz.

But, the following example exploits the bundle or something like that to identify an imprecise additional reference of the same type:

- I think really we now have what about, six weeks left in class or something like that.

3.3 Frequency of Occurrence

Frequency of occurrence should be regarded as the most criterial feature of lexical bundles since by the very definition, they are identified as recurrent sequences of words, regardless of their idiomaticity and of their grammatical structure. For a certain combination of words to be seen as a lexical bundle, it has to occur at least over ten times in a million words in given registers. In a study carried out by Cortes (2004: 400), it has been noticed that the most frequent and common sequences of four words that statistically co-occur in academic prose are as a result of, on the other hand, in the case of and it is likely to.

In this connection, Biber, Conrad and Cortes, (2004: 376) maintain that other combinations of words that are often repeated within the span of a single discourse do not represent lexical bundles, since they are not widely across texts. In addition, locally repeated combinations that exhibit some variations in form are not also lexical bundles because they typically reflect the immediate topical concerns of the discourse.

3.4 Non- idiomaticity

Lexical bundles, right from the very beginning, are defined as non-idiomatic expressions in the sense that their meaning is relatively transparent, somehow deduced from the meanings of the individual words making up the bundle. For example, the meaning of the following bundles seems to be rather transparent:

as a result of, I want you, I think so.

Since lexical bundles are non idiomatic, they should be of a somewhat fixed form- like trite idioms *kick the bucket*. Lindstrombery (2003) supports this view stating that a lexical bundle "represents a combination of words which constitutes a grammatical unit of some kind that shows degree of "inflexibility". Some lexical bundles are often presented as fixed phrases, such as: by the way and have a nice day.

3.5 Extension

As mentioned earlier, three- and four- word bundles are often chosen over five- and six- word bundles, yet the latter bundles are formed through an extension or combination of one or more shorter bundles (the former). For example, the three- word bundle I don't know can be extended to form the four- word bundle I don't know what and I don't know why.

Likewise I don't think can be expanded into I don't think so and I don't think he.

Tremblay (2008) asserts that the purpose of this extension is that the addition of other words to the existing one is to complete the meaning and the grammar, as shown in the following example:

do you want ; you want me ; want me to ; me to do

3.6 Holistic Unit:

Since lexical bundles are context bound and high in frequency, they can be easily seen as wholes, and because of their recurrent association of form- context- function, they can be memorized without the need to know their internal constituents. Sperber and Wilson (1986: 49) endorse this fact and add that "all human beings aim at the most information

processing possible". Lexical bundles, in this respect, have a small processing cost, yet their contribution is significant. Memorizable lexical bundles include greeting formulas (e.g., how do you do?) back-channelling formulas (e.g., yes, I see) phrasal verbs (e.g., to show up), etc...

It is conceived that formulaic sequences including lexical bundles such as (by all means, all in all, all of a sudden) are processed more efficiently "because single memorized units, even though are composed of a sequence of individual words, can be processed more quickly and easily than the same sequences of words which are generated creatively" (Pawley and Syder, 1983). This may be owing to the fact that formulaic lexical bundles are often acquired and learned as somewhat complete phrasal units, not as a word-by- word phrase.

Nonetheless, Schmitt et al. (2004) in their investigation of the psychological basis of lexical bundles through an experimental design, have noticed that not all bundles are stored in the mind as formulaic sequences. In spite of this contrasting perspective viewing lexical bundles as being stored as wholes and being readily accessible is of great interest to researchers in the field of language learning and teaching.

This indicates that learners do not need to pay attention to grammar if they use these bundles. Instead learners will focus on features such as "relevance, coherence and appropriateness" and thus be able to "organize their speech at discourse level and maintain the flow of conversation" (Porto, 1998: 22).

4. Conclusion

In view of what has been discussed earlier, the following are the main findings:

- 1- Lexical bundles are those groups of words which frequently recur in spoken and written texts, regardless of their idiomatic meaning or structural consideration.
- 2- Their occurrence is often determined by their functions in a text rather than by their structural construction.
- 3- Longer bundles are formed by the process of extension of one or more shorter bundles.
- 4- Mostly, lexical bundles are non-idiomatic expressions- they are semantically transparent and formally regular, providing the building stocks of coherent discourse. Syntactically they span structural units.
- 5- On the basis of their frequent occurrences in different texts, lexical bundles are supposed to be stored and processed in the mind as holistic units rather than as productive grammatical constructions.

5. Notes

- (1) For more illustrative views on the importance of vocabulary in language learning and teaching, see Belyayev 1983: 143 ff; Johnson and Johnson, 1999: 36ff; Nation, 2001: 317 f; Thornbury, 2002: 5f.
- (2) It is necessary to note here that a six-word bundle is least frequent, and when happens it must be a phrasal rather than a clausal structure.
- (3) Collocation is defined as the habitual occurrence of a word with another word or other words. That is "the way words combine in a language to produce natural- sounding speech and writing" (Oxford, 2002: vii).

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