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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.

Since we assume that collocations are central to language production and that language functions can be learned through the chunks, we have integrated them alongside other standardised expressions in LSP teaching, especially at A1-A2 level, in order to foster learners' autonomy.

Our methodology also relies –although to a lesser extent– on the Social-Interactionist Approach, which aims at creating opportunities for language learners to engage in meaningful and structured interaction with proficient speakers of their target language as the best way to enhance performance. This has led us to promote the creation of a VinoLingua eTandem Network in order to foster interaction, autonomy, cooperation and cultural awareness among wine-growers in Europe. In Vygotskian terms, language learning is intrinsically a social process and online collaboration with native students provides learners with the scaffold to compose both meaning and form while progressing through their "zone of proximal development" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86), thereby mitigating the consequences of the plain and simple implementation of a Lexical Approach.

3. Implementing the Lexical Approach into the VinoLingua Curriculum

Let me go briefly over the way we implemented the Lexical Approach. First of all, we identified chunks related to wine language occurring in 2 different corpora compiled by ourselves, an oral corpus created from video recordings and a written corpus based on the wine language present in brochures, ads and wine magazines.

Fig. 1 below illustrates how we started transcribing and parsing –tentatively, at first– a wine tasting event back in 2010.

- **Esto es un 2009**, ¿sí?
 - Y **pasamos a la boca**, ¿no? Tú puede catar también, ¿sí?
 - **Hablamos de 12-12,5°, 5.5 g/l, de acidez total**. Como hay técnicos, pues, también pueden controlar más o menos. Entonces, esto **es una variedad de poca estructura**, fresca, ligera, y luego, muy, muy, muy **fácil de beber**.

Chunks
 Esto es un 2009.
 Pasamos a la boca.
 Hablamos de XX° de acidez total.
 Es una variedad... de poca estructura.
 Es una variedad... fresca/ fácil de beber/ligera.

- **This is a 2009 (white/red...)**, right?
 - We'll start by tasting it in our mouth, right? You may also taste it, right?
 - **We are looking at 12-12.5°, 5.5 g/l, total acidity**. As there are some experts among us, well, they must surely know about this. Well, **this is a variety without proper structure**, fresh, smooth, and then, very, very, very easy to drink.

Chunks
 This is a 2009 (white, red...)
 We start by tasting it in our mouth.
 We are looking at XX° total acidity.
 This is a variety... (without proper structure)
 This is a... (fresh/easy to drink/smooth) variety/wine.

Fig. 1. Transcript of a wine tasting event.

Much to our surprise, in most aspects there seemed to be no great difference between oral registers and written ones in wine language. As a *matter of fact*, we may come across utterances such as *Es una variedad muy delicada, muy sensible a la oxidación y no muy aromática* (This is a very delicate, sensitive to oxidation, not quite aromatic variety) in either of them.

Since the corpora we were handling were not as large as desired, no concordancing program was used in order to count the frequency of words and chunks and rank them from most to least frequent, as there could be some issues regarding the representativeness of the texts as well as concerns about the "observer's paradox" (Labov, 1970, p. 32), which claims that by observing someone, we change their natural behaviour. As a *matter of fact*, we realised that our informants –aware that their speech was being recorded and would eventually be analysed– were adapting their speech and trying to use a higher register.

We also discarded using a very sophisticated "tagset" –that is, a set of symbols representing various parts of speech– in order to annotate texts with markup that specifies different features (semantic, morphological, grammatical...) of every corpus entry. Instead, we had to rely on wine-growers' expertise for the extraction of the specific lexis (*poner las varas a <dos> yemas* –to tie two-bud spurs–; *la labor de arada* –ploughing–) and to ensure the accuracy of the information extracted.

Alongside the most technical terms, the chunks which were searched for in those corpora would fall into the categories described by Lewis (1993; 1997), namely:

- Polywords: por favor (please); ¿de verdad? (really?)
- Collocations: vino <tinto> (<red> wine); correr con los gastos de <envío> (to bear the <shipping> costs)
- Institutionalised expressions: ¿Conoce los vinos de <España>? (Are you acquainted with <Spanish> wines?); este vino va bien con <las carnes rojas> (this wine goes well with <red meat> dishes); and
- Sentence frames and heads: en primer lugar (first of all); a propósito (by the way).

Once those chunks were analysed and classified they lay at the foundation of 20 self-study lessons covering **topics such as "wine tasting" or "selling wine at a wine fair"**. **Certain key language structures and lexical chunks** were presented through the lessons' introductory dialogues –giving learners an overall vision of the topic and fostering the acquisition of knowledge– and then used as a basis for pattern drilling.

Chunks were selected according to three criteria: "relevance, frequency and simplicity" (Lavric, 2013, p. 16); and then practiced through a variety of drills and quizzes in order to enhance accuracy, as can be seen in Fig. 2.

- ¿Cómo es el vino de <Toro>?		
- Es un vino _____		
	algo/un poco	
	bastante	
	muy	
		seco
		equilibrado
		elegante
		potente
- What are <Toro> wines like?		
- They are _____		wines.
	a little	
	quite	
	very	
		dry
		balanced
		elegant
		powerful

Fig. 2. Sample drills.

Besides, a selection of the most useful lexical chunks and meaningful strings of words from every lesson was put down onto "cheat sheets" which wine-growers may customise and use as a quick reference card, as shown on Fig. 3.

Ficha personalizada: «tus condiciones de pago y tus precios»

Tenemos un producto muy competitivo: _____ (producto) por _____ (precio) €.

El envío se hará a través de _____.

**Correos/el servicio postal
una empresa de mensajería (por ejemplo, UPS)**

El tiempo de envío estimado será de _____ días/meses.

Es necesario pagar _____.

**a 15/30/60 días (desde la fecha de factura)
en efectivo
a contra reembolso**

Quick reference form (Payment conditions and prices)

We have very competitive prices: _____ (product) at € _____ (price).

The shipping will be made through _____.

**The Royal Mail/The Postal Service
a courier company (e.g. UPS)**

The estimated delivery time will be _____ days/months.

It's necessary to pay _____.

**within 15/30/60 days of date of invoice
cash
cash on delivery**

Fig. 3. Sample "cheat sheet"

Learners are encouraged to learn the fixed part of expressions such as *¿Qué quiere decir <una bodega familiar>?* (What does <a family cellar> mean?), so that they realise they are structures which can be varied and used in different situations. In addition, in order to demonstrate variability (*Buenos días* –Good Morning– vs. *Buenas noches* –Good night–), a group of interchangeable lexical elements and morphological adjustments "for contextual fit" (Sinclair, 1991, p. 110) were eventually shown as possible alternatives, as in the example above.

Furthermore, since the meaning of every individual word may change depending on the other words it is chunked together with (*hacer frío* –to be cold–, whereas *hacer la vendimia* –to grape harvest–), we found it most convenient –synthesis preceding analysis– to group together those chunks (*hace frío/calor/viento/buen tiempo/mal tiempo* –to be cold/hot/windy/nice and warm/terrible–) which could help students generalise about language usage as well as generate the most useful chunks within this specific language domain. The same stands for those collocations including words such as *hacer* (to do), *hacienda* (doing), *hace* (he does), which were presented as variable forms of the lemma *hac-* (do).

4. Conclusion

In this paper, the case has been made that it is possible to learn LSP from a beginners' level much more easily through chunks, which can be considered a useful addition to the existing literature.

First of all, we acknowledge the importance of developing such courses from a needs analysis which will allow us to design learning material better suited to meet the needs of the learner.

Besides, we believe that it is necessary to base our analysis of a specialised language on actual instances of speech and writing in order to provide a more adequate representation of the specific lexis and to gather a number of coherent texts which can be set as an example of this type of discourse, for words are "more effectively learned if they are presented systematically, in rich contexts rather than randomly" (Lewis, 1993, p. 103).

The advantage of using corpus-based chunks and dialogues lies in the fact that our learners have to deal with very technical language in a limited set of situations and topics where they could profit from using quite recurrent chunks. Wine-growers may not become native-like fluent but, if necessary, they may come up with a preconstructed expression quite appropriate for them to muddle through a stressful situation and communicate more effectively.

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