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Connected Words: Word Association and Second Language Vocabulary Acquisition

Paul Meara

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In *Connected Words: Word Association and Second Language Vocabulary Acquisition*, Paul Meara provides an overview of the progress of his studies, starting from the central contention that vocabulary creates a network. Meara and his colleagues also investigate how word-association data could be used in second language vocabulary acquisition research, specifically in the growth of vocabulary depth, productive lexical skills, and lexical association patterns in second language (L2) learners. While the book functions as a brief summary of current research dealing with lexical associations and progress in second language vocabulary growth, it also offers an overview of the evolution of Meara's own studies in this field, namely, word associations and second language vocabulary acquisition. The volume seems to be more like a handbook of research rather than an anthology.

The book is divided into eleven chapters under five main sections; each section starts with an introduction that sums up the ideas and research problems introduced in the studies that follow. Six of the eleven chapters result from papers published between 1978 and 2005, and Meara skillfully organizes and bridges these coherently with highly insightful remarks on their strengths and weaknesses. This retrospective approach allows him to place his and others' work with word associations within the area of second language vocabulary research, and more broadly, within the field of second language acquisition itself. He frankly admits the problems that persist, and the fact that progress in his own research process has been incremental rather than dramatic in nature. Meara also provides introductory comments for each of the sections that help readers trace the development of his thinking since the 1970s regarding various methods of gathering and analyzing word-association data from learners. This historical approach allows Meara to point out unsettled issues in word association and second language vocabulary research, and offers well-supported recommendations for future research. For example, he discusses throughout the book the methodological challenges he has encountered while following his goal of going beyond simplistic concepts (like a web of words or depth of vocabulary knowledge) to achieve a more in-depth view of the L2 lexicon through pure psycholinguistic research methods and computer modeling. As a signpost for the direction of

future research, in the third article in Section 3, Meara and his colleagues evaluate the virtues of using computer simulations in order to investigate different theoretical assumptions about the way that L2 lexicons operate and how they might enlarge over time.

Somewhat unexpectedly, Meara disagrees with many general research practices within applied linguistics, saying that it is “badly inflicted with band-wagon research” (p. ix), and observes that researchers follow a hot topic for a few years, then move on to another area. Meara points out that the people doing research in popular fields are likely to lack the background and long-term experience that is essential to cope with more delicate and difficult research questions, and that few people critically investigate the methodologies of such research. Meara also feels that there is a lack of quantitative research being carried out in the field of applied linguistics. This is, in fact, quite an astonishing comment given the traditional superiority of quantitative over qualitative research in the field of second language research, particularly the research highlighted by Firth and Wagner (1998), and since discussed and debated in numerous articles in response. Meara states that the papers that form most of the chapters in his book are “heavily influenced by the work of psycholinguists” who “use experimental and statistical methods which even now are used infrequently by applied linguists, who seem uncomfortable with quantitative approaches to research” (p. xiv). The work presented in Meara’s volume mirrors reflects a psycholinguistic influence, and the use of the graph theory (an abstract mathematical approach to the analysis of network structures to analyze L2 lexical items) contradicts Meara’s quantitative approach. The frequent mentioning of the graph theory is also another recurring element in the book, namely Meara’s own belief that vocabulary is a network, “an idea that seems so blindingly obvious” (p. xv).

The first section, “Early Work,” introduces two studies. Chapter 1, “Learners’ Word Associations in French,” analyzes how foreign words are saved in the mental lexicons of L2 learners and how they differ from native speakers’ lexicons. The study described in Chapter 2, titled “Word Associations in a Foreign Language,” discusses revising the methodologies of the studies in the first chapter.

In the second section, Meara discusses two studies done in 2000 and 2004 which demonstrate how association data, particularly those attained through a word-association task, can be employed to measure the learner’s productive vocabulary. Meara claims that this instrument has advantages over earlier techniques for assessing productive vocabulary. Chapter 3, “Lex30: An Improved Method of Assessing Productive Vocabulary in an L2,” explores a study that shows how the productive vocabulary of non-native speakers of English is tested through the Lex30 task. In Chapter 4, “Exploring the Validity of a Test of Productive Vocabulary,” he focuses on the validity and reliability characteristics of this tool.

“Word Association Networks” is the title of the next section, consisting of three chapters in which the concept of lexical networks is analyzed in greater detail. In Chapter 5, “Network Structures and Vocabulary Acquisition in a Foreign Language,” the author assesses how L2 learners’ knowledge of vocabulary is connected, and how it differs from the vocabulary networks of native speakers, basing his arguments on the graph theory and the connectionist models. In Chapter Six, “V_Links: Beyond Vocabulary Depth,” Meara discusses the issue of how to study vocabulary breadth and depth using V_Links (a computer-based solution that leads the task-taker to form lexical associations between pairs of words). In the last chapter of this section, “As a Further Note on Simulating Word Association Behavior in an L2,” Meara introduces a model that imitates a set of words, and demonstrates that the model’s output is similar to that of real L2 learners.

In the fourth section, “Bibliographical Resources for Word Associations in an L2,” which has just one chapter, Meara presents a list of an annotated bibliography of over 100 publications that report investigations in the area of word-association research, each reference followed by a short summary that introduces the aim of the study, its research design features, and the main findings.

Meara talks about the need to benefit from computers while doing language research, and introduces several computer-based assessment tools. The final section, “Software Applications,” introduces three program manuals: Chapter 9 gives a comprehensive but readable guide for Lex30. Chapter 10 includes a manual on V_Six, which is a development of the V_Links software that Meara describes in Section 3. Chapter 11 presents a manual for WA_Sorter, which allows the sorting and counting of word-association data, converting and presenting it in usable format. These all come directly from the Internet, and users do not need to download any software. The programs can be accessed, along with numerous other tests and research tools, from the author’s website (www.lognostics.co.uk). However, using these programs and interpreting the results requires careful reading, analysis, and digestion of this volume.

This book is a very useful resource for researchers interested in L2 learners’ vocabulary development process, and it shows how Meara’s hypotheses and methodologies have changed throughout his academic life. Meara offers a boon to the field with this easy-to-follow overview of key issues in word-association studies. To agree with Paul Nation’s endorsement (which appears on the back cover), Meara’s book is a “must read” for all researchers and students interested in second language vocabulary development.

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