In cognitive linguistics, vocabulary has been studied from many perspectives. For instance, we can look at the role of *cognitive construals*, which is relevant for the study of idiomatic expressions created by means of metaphorical and metonymical procedures, cognitively-based constructions for new vocabulary, or the use of event schemas for creative expressions concerning grammatical categories. These facts, which show the razor-thin border between syntactic configurations and lexis are just some examples of the kind of phenomena that *construction grammar* (Langacker 1987, 1991; Goldberg 1995; Michaelis and Lambrecht 1995; Kay and Fillmore 1999; Croft 2001) helps to explain, phenomena in which the lexicon goes hand in hand with other grammatical areas. However, there are also other potentialities of vocabulary usage which could also be explored from a cognitive point of view. Two of these possibilities are the signalling of discourse structure and the signalling of pragmatic information.

1. Knowledge and the signalling of discourse structure

From psychology come the now well-established assumptions of so-called *schemata* theories (Bartlett 1932, Rumelhart 1980), according to which everything we know about the world is stored in large mental knowledge structures. Wierzbicka (1994, 1997) pointed to the existence of different 'scripts' for interaction in different cultures and has drawn attention to how words have usages and meanings highly dependent on culturally-shared knowledge structures. Culture is an important variable in the creation of lexical meaning: Wierzbicka (1997) showed how even isolated words, cultural *key words*, have strong cultural meanings. And we must accept the fact that we need a certain knowledge of the structure of external reality, based on bodily and sensory experience, to understand the lexicon of a language. This long-term knowledge of an experiential nature can be mapped onto linguistic knowledge about word classes and grammar categories (nouns, verbs, categories of number, person, tense, aspect, mood, modality, etc.).

The different types of mental storage (short-term memory, long-term memory, episodic memory, semantic memory) are also connected with different types of knowledge structures that may be required for text production and interpretation. One such structure is the organization of global topics that a text is about, what Van Dijk (1980, 1985) called *thematic structure*. Other structures refer to formal schemata used to describe the general form of a discourse (Van Dijk’s *superstructures*). However, there are oppositions concerning the knowledge that can be required for the correct understanding of a text, which may be of many other kinds as well, as Van Dijk (2002: 5) himself reminds us: *representational* (“knowing what”) vs. *procedural* (“knowing how”); *based on its social scope* (personal, interpersonal, social, cultural); *referential* (specific or particular facts vs. general events or states); *ontological* (real events, concrete events, abstract events, fictitious events, historical events, etc.); or *based on strength* (absolute vs. relative certainty).
In any piece of discourse, regardless of the manner in which the linguistic message is being developed in a temporal sequence, there is always knowledge that should be available to both the speaker and the addressee. This knowledge works both at a content level and at a formal level. Apart from procedures that may be present in a script (e.g. when talking about action that takes place in a restaurant we all know the different steps: making a reservation, taking a seat, ordering a meal, asking for the bill, paying for the meal, etc.) there are also procedures for presenting the information and interpreting it (e.g. a contract should be read differently than a letter from a friend). Socially shared knowledge may be in the message (e.g. the speaker may assume that the addressee knows certain information that derives from experiences they have shared) or in the presentation of the message (e.g. a technical writer may omit heading conventions in a text like ‘results’ and ‘discussion’ because the content is clear). Examples can also be found for the other kinds of knowledge, but when talking about knowledge and discourse we are in most cases dealing only with knowledge concerning content.

Let us now look at Van Dijk's distinction between personal, interpersonal, group and cultural knowledge. These categories are also relevant for discourse understanding. Personal knowledge cannot be presupposed but can be emphasized and asserted when relevant, and the other kinds of knowledge can be presupposed only when the message is to be used within the scope of its own domains (e.g. group knowledge is to be presupposed only within the group, not among groups). These oppositions often concern vocabulary, and this is especially the case with specialized terminology and slang. Interpersonal, group and cultural knowledge, however, can cover procedures and whole events (e.g. when delivering a text about everyday life in Franco’s Spain many things that do not need to be explained if the reader is a Spaniard who is old enough to have memories of those days). We have the same situation with different categories of knowledge according to reality and concreteness of reference (whether the events described are real, concrete, abstract, fictitious, historical, etc.). But here cultural and in-group keywords with their associated scripts come into play.

We may wonder whether we really need to use these categories for the representation of discourse. Certainly, for some languages, these categories may be useful for certain grammatical resources and certain alternative expressions of the linguistic message. This is particularly true, for instance, with languages that need a great deal of interpersonal information, like Chinese or Japanese.

Apart from that, knowledge in discourse is not fixed. It seems to change as the discourse develops. This process can be interpreted in different ways. From a productive point of view we can regard it as a process of ‘windowing’ through content. Gomez-Gonzalez (2004: 218) explains the dynamics of discourse from this point of view. For her, “[…] discourse involves a succession of attentional frames, each of which represents the scene being ‘viewed’ and acted on by S and A at any given instant, and it is this viewing process as perspectivized by S and A that determines the ‘camera angle’ or ‘camera movement’ of discourse, structuring it into separate attentional units or episodes”.

This view presupposes that the global content is already present and we only
need to move through it. As Gomez-Gonzalez (2004: 220) suggests, again there are changes in activation of different networks through discourse, and this is done through vocabulary. We need to activate the vocabulary entry points when we use single lexical items, but we also need to activate only a subset of the meanings available in the network. The same can be said of topics, which refer not to entries in ‘lexical’ networks but to entries in ‘encyclopaedic’ networks.

This dynamic approach to discourse is congruent with the tenets of cognitivism in language study and is supported by findings in psycholinguistics. Nevertheless, there is also a more static view of how discourse expresses meaning, which can be better associated with the reception process and with the written text, where both production and interpretation can move more freely through the linguistic message. Any discourse has a thematic structure (van Dijk’s term; see above) within which all the different themes or topics are hierarchically articulated. There is empirical evidence of the fact that this vertical structure influences oral text production (Schilperoord 1998). There are also theories that can cater to both the dynamic and the static qualities of discourse. One example of such a theory could well be Werth’s (1995) text world theory, based on the notion of conceptual space. Other theories that draw upon similar notions are Johnson-Laird’s (1983) mental models or Fauconnier’s (1985, 1994, 1997) mental spaces.

2. Knowledge and the signalling of pragmatic information

Relevant long-term knowledge can be knowledge about social interpersonal relationships at work in communicative situations. An example: Leech’s (1983: 123–127) scales. It is possible to identify an optionality scale (illocutions are ordered according to the amount of freedom given to the hearer by the speaker), an indirectness scale (illocutions are ordered according to whether the illocutionary goal is expressed more directly or not), an authority scale (concerned with the relative power of the speaker and the hearer), and a social distance scale (concerned with the degree of familiarity between speaker and hearer). Another example: For directive and commissive speech acts, which are essential to verbal interaction, it is also relevant to remember the five dimensions mentioned by Verschueren (1985): degree of directivity, social setting, goals of directing, directionality, and authority.

A third example: A more elaborated list of variables for an adequate handling of directive and commissive speech acts in any language, can be found in Perez (1999: 152): agent type, time of the action, degree of agent’s capability, degree of speaker’s will, degree of addressee’s will, degree of cost-benefit, degree of optionality, degree of mitigation, degree of power, degree of social distance, degree of formality of the context.

Such interactional variables influence linguistic choice, which differs considerably from language to language. We can see it in phenomena that take place in typologically similar languages, such as English and German. Directive speech acts are handled differently in German, where there is a tendency for less indirectness. But, more significantly, there are also grammatical resources for encoding social distance and power relations between the speaker and the addressee that cannot be found in English. One is the distinction between the second person
personal pronouns *Sie* (more formal) and *du* (less formal). A German speaker needs to handle information concerning the hierarchical relations and the social distance between himself/herself and the addressee, as well as the degree of formality of the communicative situation. In fact, this is also the case in other Indo-European languages, e.g. in Spanish (*usted* vs. *tu*) or in Russian (*вы* vs. *мы*).

There are still more complex situations once we leave the Indo-European linguistic area. If we take languages that are more concerned with the expression of social relationships within the linguistic message, we can see that the European layout in this respect is very simple, if compared with the situation of personal pronouns available in Japanese according to formality. In this language, there is a wide choice of different personal pronouns. Here we should take into account categories for honorific language (the speaker praises the addressee), humble language (the speaker humbles himself/herself) or even the gender of the speaker. We should also consider the fact that the use of personal pronouns is not always appropriate in Japanese. For instance, when talking to a person of a higher status, a speaker does not use the formal second person pronoun *anata*. Instead, he uses that person’s name plus an honorific title (*san*, *sama*, *choo*, etc.). Using the pronoun is regarded as impolite. This type of strategy is not used at all in English and other Indo-European languages, where the tendency is to use as many pronouns as possible. Furthermore, first person pronouns like *boku* and *ore* cannot be used at all in formal settings, even when the speaker uses humble language. *Watashi* is the unmarked form for first person singular, but *watakushi* is used if more formality is required. However, although women can use *watakushi* and *watashi*, they can also use *atashi*. Men cannot use *atashi*, but *boku* and *ore* are exclusively masculine; a woman would never use them.

This is just one example, but we can look for others. Japanese attaches a lot of importance to the perceived distance between the interlocutors, which relates to two different factors that work together: One factor is politeness, which is in turn related to a strong need to keep up one’s face, as well as the other person’s, in Japanese culture. The second one is the strength of hierarchical relations in a group-oriented culture. In Japanese, apart from the neutral “unmarked” register, there is a special register, which is called *keigo* and has three distinct subregisters, *sonkei-go* (respectful language), *kenjoo-go* (humble language), and *teinei-go* (honorific language). These special registers involve special choices in the vocabulary employed, but they also require changes in the construal of the situation that underlies many expressions. When we choose another register, we need a suitable construal for the representation of content.

Let us give an example. In *sonkei-go*, some verbs change. Instead of *taberu* ‘to eat’, or *nomu* ‘to drink’, Japanese speakers use the expression *meshi-agaru*, which literally means ‘to ascend food’. Instead of *miru* ‘to see, to look’, we have *goran ni naru* ‘to become a viewing’. In general, the expression *o + verb root + ni naru* can be used, so that we have, for instance, the form *o-kaki ni naru* ‘to become a writing’ instead of *kaku* ‘to write’. These forms are very lexicalized, but they still involve differences in their cognitive construal.
There are many expressions in *kei-go* that are different only lexically. We have the honorific prefixes *o-* and *go-* (e.g. *o-tomodachi* ‘his friend’ instead of *tomodachi* ‘friend’), alternative forms (e.g. *achira* instead of *asoko* ‘there’), and special words for the different kinds of *kei-go* (e.g. *iku* ‘go’ and *kuru* ‘come’ both change into *irassharu* in *sonkei-go* and into *mairu* in *kenjoo-go* and *teinei-go*).

In English, the role of vocabulary in the signalling of pragmatic information is simpler than in Japanese, but we cannot forget that there are differences in the use of both grammatical and full lexical items according to different parameters of the communicative situation. Grammatical terms such as the use of modals (*can, may, might, should*, etc.) or choice of more formal terms (e.g. *hereby, thereof, thus*, etc.) can be used for politeness. Some words like *Sir, Madam, Mr., Ms.* can be used to refer to the relative status of the interlocutor. Most importantly, nearly every word can be chosen for pragmatic effects according to its connotations, which may be based on encyclopaedic information of some kind (e.g. *chief, boss*, used for a superior).

3. Some conclusions

By way of conclusion, let us remember some of our main ideas. We have acknowledged the importance of vocabulary in language processing and we have explained how, in the cognitive linguistic perspective, lexical units are entries to huge encyclopaedic semantic networks. In addition, we have presented some illustration of two facts: (a) Lexical items can act as windows opening to a whole stock of new information in discourse processing, and (b) Lexical items are also important for the decoding of pragmatic information, because, in addition to conventional uses, they can also convey pragmatically relevant meanings by means of new construals, new grammatical devices or connotation. In both cases, lexical items should always be considered dynamic entities (as opposed to the static view of words as containers of meaning).

References


