

Foreword

Michael Hoey | University of Liverpool

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Lexical Priming: Applications and advances

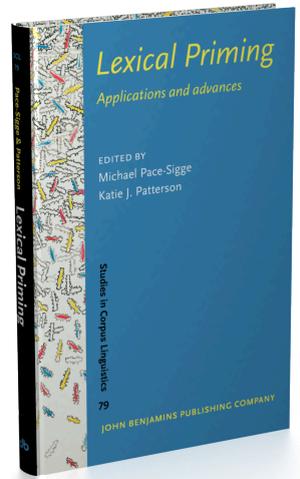
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Foreword

Michael Hoey

University of Liverpool

Ideas are like people. They have direct ancestors and share genes with their siblings. Sometimes they are lucky enough to have children; often their influence is more indirect, like that of a benign uncle or aunt sharing an interest with their near relatives. If they are lucky, they can grow old surrounded by ideas they have given birth to or had some influence on; if they are less lucky, they can see their family grow more distant and end up alone or patronised at a distance. Occasionally they have no families, either because they are difficult to relate to or simply because they grew up in a culture where their good qualities are not recognised.

Lexical priming is an idea lucky enough to have a family around it, and is itself the child of many famous parents (and here the analogy between ideas and people breaks down). Ideas from the minds of John Sinclair, Randolph Quirk and Eugene Winter, amongst many others, can all lay claim to its parentage. The idea also has distinguished older siblings, such as Sinclair's 'idiom principle' and Hunston & Francis's 'pattern grammar', from which Lexical Priming learnt and against which it gently reacted (like siblings the world over).

I am immensely fortunate (and humbled) that Lexical Priming has been allowed to be a benign uncle (and in a few cases the parent) to other ideas; this volume shows some of the exciting thinking going on in current corpus linguistics, and as someone at the end of my career, I am glad to have played a modest part in the development of this thinking. Like all ideas, lexical priming will in time grow old and die, replaced by fuller and more satisfying theories that may or may not make use of the idea they replace. This is entirely natural and healthy, but before this happens, I would like to reflect briefly on a couple of implications of the theory that have perhaps had less attention than others.

In essence, the theory says that a person's repeated exposure to contextualised instances of highly similar phonetic sequences or identical letter sequences results in their being primed to associate those sequences (typically, though not necessarily, words) with the recurrent features of those contexts; this claim is based on extensive psycholinguistic research into priming, well surveyed by Pace-Sigge in his recent book on Lexical Priming in spoken English usage. The effect of the priming caused by such exposure is that when the primed person uses the word

(or other piece of language) in question, s/he typically replicates the recurrent features of the context, thereby ensuring the perpetuation of the association of the word (or whatever) with those features. This, I claim, accounts for the existence of collocation, colligation, semantic association (or semantic preference) and a range of other corpus-identified features of language. Of course, collocation, colligation and the other features exist independently of the theory, which simply seeks to account for their existence. (A solely social explanation for collocation and the other features will not do, because we enter society and language at the same time and by the same processes.)

The first implication of the psychological explanation of collocation and other features is that there is no rational basis for believing that everybody's primings are identical. Each person, at least in theory, has their own unique language, which is harmonised with those of other speakers to a considerable degree by education and the media, but which reflects the people they talk with, the places they meet in and the material they choose to read. This seems to support those trends in both sociolinguistic research and work on language change that see social groupings as fluid, local and genre/domain specific.

The second implication is that priming is the mechanism whereby we arrive at our own personal (and incomplete and inconsistent) grammars and semantics. In other words, grammar and semantics are secondary outputs, rationalisations from the data, not inputs into the language system. This does not make them less important; they are powerful generalisations that all of us make, that some of us allow to interact with our primings and that a few of us try to systematise. But it does mean that we have to reject a number of positions that have historically dominated our discussion of these fields of linguistics. It also means that collocations, colligations and semantic associations are the source of our grammatical categories and semantic sets, not just drawing upon them. There are risks of circularity here, but pre-existing categories are a record of the way some previous speakers have been primed and provide a starting-point outside the circle.

As the idea of lexical priming starts the process of growing old (it is currently a teenager), perhaps these implications will begin to interest people or perhaps they are dead ends. One thing is certain: there are no obvious dead ends in this volume. It is my hope that the ideas in this book have their own progeny and provoke you, the reader, to have ideas of your own that are themselves fruitful to you and others.