Lexical Selection and the Evolution of Language Units

Glenn Hadikin

In this paper I want to lay the foundation for a new way of looking at formulaic language that draws on the metaphor of biological evolution and natural selection. The idea comes from Dawkins' (1976) concept of the *meme* - the cultural equivalent of a gene - and, though the study of *memetics* is controversial in its wider sense of being a model of culture transmission I argue that the basic concept can be applied to the selection of lexical units in a social group. I draw on work such as Sinclair's Idiom principle (1991), Wray's concept of the heteromorphic lexicon (2008) and Hoey's Lexical Priming (2005) as I discuss the potential for words, extended units of meaning and texts themselves to act as units and vehicles in a selection-based system.

I introduce the terms *extended selection units* (ESUs) and *variators* as the equivalent of genes and bases respectively and discuss how well the model holds up when discussing data from my PhD study on Korean English. The string *there are a lot of*, for example, appears to be a commonly selected string in Korean English because of L1 influence and the string *do you* is more strongly associated with *know* in Korean English (than British English) partially because it is associated with a more restricted function of introducing new topics and checking for shared knowledge. The work suggests that the concept of the heteromorphic lexicon can be usefully applied to communities as well as individual language users.

References

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