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TEACHING CONVENTIONAL SYNTAGMS
TO THE ADVANCED LEARNERS OF
ENGLISH - SOME DIDACTIC
OBSERVATIONS

The present paper was meant as an attempt to prove the practical value of some theoretical suggestions concerning the acquisition of syntagmatic relations of a foreign language, which have been put forward by Marton /1974/. Although Marton's views on the subject at issue are only a part of a broader theory /a certain "didactic hypothesis"/, which refers particularly to the framework of a Polish contemporary secondary school, it seems that they will also apply under the circumstances of University teaching in this country.

In this part of his hypothesis which refers to the lexical material introduction, one of Marton's points is that it is not the memorization of separate words, but the rules of connecting those words into larger meaningful units that cause most of the trouble in the process of the foreign lexical material acquisition. In order to denote those units, which can be roughly defined as "semantic combinations of words other than those expected by the learner" /Tabakowska, 1973:134/, e.g. "to pay attention", "to take pictures", "to make an appointment", etc., the term "conventional syntagms" has been adopted, and

in this sense it will be used throughout this paper. ^{1/}

In the teaching practice it means that the conventional syntagms usually do not bring about any difficulties in reception, being quite easily understood in context /consider the above mentioned examples/; that is why they probably most often remain unnoticed by the student, which is not the case with idioms, to which the students are usually required to pay attention. ^{2/} When it comes to production, however, the student's creativeness in the field of the foreign language is being seriously hampered not because of the insufficient number of acquired words and sentence patterns, but mainly because of the incompetence regarding those conventional syntagmatic relations specific for any language, which are not to be foreseen by the student in any logical way, and the number of which is practically non-finite from his point of view.

/Marton, 1974:113 ff/.

It seems that this aspect of FL teaching is very often neglected; both with less advanced learners - in favour of practising grammatical structures, and with more advanced ones /e.g. university students of English departments/ - because of an assumption that an intensive exposure to the foreign language influence /relatively frequent contacts with the language in its various aspects, contacts with native speakers/ will eventually result in an increase of the foreign language competence. /Rivers, 1968:160/.

According to Marton, though, the exposure to the foreign language alone, however intensive, only helps the learner to a very small degree. Such exposure will rather lead to the

memorization of individual words, whereas the syntagmatic relations between them will remain under the strong influence of negative transfer effects, and more precisely, under the effect of one of its aspects: a phenomenon known as interlanguage interference, operating here as retroactive inhibition. ^{3/} He points to the necessity of exercise practice, and suggests exercises with the use of the learner's native language /translation and retranslation/ as particularly worth recommending. /Marton, 1974:114/.

Another method that has been suggested is making the learner analyse the foreign text carefully, his attention being focused on the differences and similarities between the native and the target language. Thus the learner will become aware of the dangers of interference before it affects him. /Marton, 1974: 115/. This kind of approach reminds one of some suggestions made by Komorowska /1975/, who postulated a similar method of preventing interference in relation to the teaching of grammar. ^{4/}

Both the above mentioned teaching techniques are a logical consequence of Marton's views on

- a/ the role of the learner's native language in the FL learning process /"... the native language of the learner is a very powerful factor in second language acquisition and one which cannot be eliminated from the process of learning" /Marton, 1973:16/, and
- b/ the importance of the learner's conscious participation in this process /"... as the process of comparison is going to take place anyway, it is better to make it conscious and channel it to profitable uses". /Marton,

1973:18//. This intentional accentuation of the FL peculiarities, as well as the stressing of the meaningful aspects of the learning process are characteristic of the cognitive code learning method, of which Marton is an adherent. 5/

/ II /

The following discussion is the description of an experiment, the purpose of which was to verify the above assumptions, to which the author of the paper fully subscribes. The experiment was carried out during 6 weeks with 5 groups of the first year university students of a department of English.

The first stage of the experiment involved three groups of students, later referred to as A, B, and C, the number of people in the particular groups being 12, 10, and 13, respectively. 6/ In the discussion the results achieved by different ways of presenting the same lexical material were compared. The experimental material contained 30 conventional syntagms introduced either in short dialogues composed of 2 sentences, or in single sentences, both meant to supply a meaningful context /see Appendix I/. All the syntagms included in the presented material had been taken from the "BBC Modern English" magazine /issues from September 1975 until February 1976/, and had been selected on the basis of the following criteria:

1/ High degree of probability either that the given syntagm was not known to the students before, or that they were never required to learn it. /The possibility of the student's having met the given phrase before could not be excluded/.

2/ The construction of the syntagm causing no problems in reception for the Polish students. /All the chosen expressions were expected to be easily understood from the context. 7//. The students were not aware of their being subjected to an experiment, as the experimental material was introduced in the course of their "Spoken English" class and could be easily treated as a part of it. Neither could they expect a test later on.

During the first presentation group A students were requested to read the sentences and dialogues /first silently, then aloud/, and to explain the meaning of some phrases /the thirty conventional syntagms/ indicated by the tutor. It was required of them to give the paraphrases in English, i.e. the usual procedure followed during the new material presentation was observed. No references to Polish were made. None of the students had any problems with the understanding of the sentences.

With group B students the same procedure was repeated, except that they were allowed, and even encouraged, to give Polish equivalents of some expressions, especially in the cases where they were more obvious, and easier to be found, than English paraphrases, e.g. "it crossed my mind" - "przyszło mi to do głowy", "for the time being" - "na razie", "out of the question" - "wykluczone", "talk of the devil" - "o wilku mowa", etc. Finding equivalents of that sort appeared very easy for the students.

In group C, however, the presentation of the new material was preceded by a short commentary devoted to the phenomenon

of interlanguage interference, and warning the students of its dangers. The students were advised, on the one hand, to pay special attention to the structures that are different in both languages, although they mean essentially the same thing /those being especially susceptible to the retroactive inhibition effect, e.g. "robić notatki" - "take notes", "posłuchaj mojej rady" - "take my advice", "brać łapówki" - "accept bribes", etc./; on the other hand, to notice that, surprising as it may seem, some phrases have exactly the same structure both in Polish and in English, e.g. "she took my side" - "wzięła moją stronę", "the pictures came out well" - "zdjęcia dobrze wyszły", etc. In the second instance, an interesting case of proactive inhibition may prevent the student from using the proper structure, which seems to him "too Polish" to be correct.

The students from all groups were allowed to take notes, although they were not particularly required to do so.

After a week, the students were again confronted with the same material. Group A was only asked to read the sentences again, while group B was given some oral exercises /see Appendix II/. Exercise 1, meant to practise 15 syntagms, consisted in making the students substitute the original syntagms for the underlined parts of sentences, which were their paraphrases. Exercise 2, covering the remaining 15 syntagms, was a translation from Polish into English. The students were requested not to refer to their notes as far as possible. The exercises were conducted in such a way as to make all the students participate actively /for instance, several people were asked to present their versions of the same sentence/. In group C the second

reading of the experimental material was accompanied by some additional remarks on interference and transfer, referring to the previous commentary.

The following week the three groups were given the same test /see Appendix III/, in which they were required to translate 30 sentences from Polish into English. Some of the test points were the exact equivalents of the experimental sentences. Most of the conventional syntagms appeared in slightly different sentences, although care was taken to preserve the general contextual meaning. The students were allowed neither to use any notes or dictionaries, nor to communicate.

Results and Discussion

The outcome of this stage of the experiment has been presented below. The following tables illustrate the results of the test in groups A, B, and C. All the answers in which the conventional syntagms appeared exactly in the required form have been classified as "correct". The term "almost correct" has been assigned in those instances where only very slight mistakes occurred /e.g. change of an article, a spelling mistake, etc./.

Group A

	correct answers	"almost correct" answers	wrong answers or no answers
1	3	1	26
2	6	3	21
3	2	3	25
4	-	-	30
5	3	1	26
6	-	-	30
7	2	-	28
8	3	-	27
9	11	2	17
10	2	2	26
11	1	2	26
12	2	2	27

The average number of correct and "almost correct" answers, counted together - 4, 2.

It may be interesting to consider the distribution of the correct answers. Most of them were obtained in test sentences 23, 27, 14, 26, and 18 /cf. Appendix III/, four of which have almost exact Polish equivalents /"on your side", "took my side", "for good", "or something"/.

The most common mistakes committed by this group of students resulted from their attempts to translate the Polish sentences into English literally, which yielded constructions like:
x"who gave this advertisement", x"it came to my head", x"bore everyone to death", x"listen to /"or "hear"/ my advice",
x"I can't grumble", or even x"saint truth".

Group B

The average number of correct and "almost correct" answers, counted together, came to 13, 2. /see Table/.

The sentences translated correctly in the majority of cases were numbers 2 /8 students/, 7 /8 students/, 10 /7 st./,

	correct answers	"almost correct" answers	wrong answers or no answer
1	14	2	14
2	4	2	24
3	15	2	13
4	13	3	14
5	5	1	24
6	15	5	10
7	11	3	16
8	7	-	23
9	15	1	14
10	13	1	16

11 /8 students/, 12 /7 students/, 18 /8 students/, 23 /8 st./, 9 /6 st./, and 8 /6 st./, which are, except for 23, realized quite differently in Polish and in English, e.g. "talk of the devil", "I don't feel like...", "he always speaks his mind" /cf. Appendix III/.

Typical mistakes made by those students were of the same character as the ones committed by group A /^x"do notes", ^x"never in life", ^x"bore to death"/, the only difference being that the total number of wrong sentences, or sentences left without translation, was considerably smaller.

Group C

	correct answers	"almost correct" answers	wrong answers or no answer
1	3	3	24
2	2	1	27
3	10	5	15
4	2	3	25
5	5	2	23
6	2	2	26
7	4	2	24
8	7	2	21
9	3	3	24
10	7	3	20
11	9	2	19
12	5	1	24
13	5	2	23

The average number of correct and "almost correct" answers, counted together - 7, 3.

The mistakes occurring in those students' translations strike as being of a different nature than the ones in the other groups. Beside the well-known ones, resulting from word for word translation /the number, of which was very small as compared with the other groups/, the following constructions could be found: ^x"he says his mind", ^x"speaking about the devil", "who put this advertisement", ^x"put down notes", ^x"he took to trouble to...", which quite obviously were the result of the students' being aware of the existence of an English phrase, different from the lexical translation of the

Polish one; but also from their having failed to recall the necessary form.

/ III /

The above results quite strongly suggested the existence of a relationship between the way of introducing the phraseological material, and its acquisition, in favour of /a/ rendering the students sensitive to interlanguage interference /although this alone, not followed by any sort of practice, did not considerably improve the students' ability to remember the syntagms/; and /b/ the reinforcement of the presented material with the usage of specially prepared exercises.

The above having been considered, the second stage of the experiment was prepared, in which both ways of making the acquisition of the syntagmatic material easier and quicker were combined. In this instance, the subjects were 18 first year students of another English department, divided into two groups, which will be later referred to as D and E.

With group D, the adopted procedure was exactly the same as with group A. The other group /E/ was both made sensitive to interference /a short lecture before the first reading, followed by a commentary preceding the second reading; encouraging the students to match Polish equivalents to the English syntagms/, and given the same exercises as group B, after the second reading. The obtained results /i.e. the number of correct and wrong answers in the final retranslation test/ have been presented below:

Group D

	correct answers	"almost correct" answers	wrong answers or no answer
1	4	2	24
2	1	-	29
3	4	-	26
4	2	1	27
5	4	2	24
6	6	2	22
7	7	1	22
8	4	2	24
9	4	1	25

The average number of correct and "almost correct" answers, counted together - 5, 2.

Group E

	correct answers	"almost correct" answers	wrong answers or no answer
1	18	2	10
2	10	4	16
3	16	3	11
4	22	1	7
5	9	2	19
6	6	5	19
7	8	2	21
8	12	3	15
9	9	-	21

The average number of correct and "almost correct" answers, counted together - 14, 6.

The results achieved by group D were very much the same as with group A. The greatest number of correct answers concerned points 14 and 23 /exact Polish equivalents/. The characteristic mistakes /word for word translation/ appeared very often, e.g. ^x"put his guilt on sb else", ^x"stood on my side", ^x"hear my advice", ^x"do notes", ^x"I don't complain", ^x"once for ever" /for "raz na zawsze"/, ^x"have high qualifications". The number of mistakes of that kind was markedly smaller in group E; and so was, in general, the number of wrong sentences. Besides, group E students revealed the same tendency as group C: attempts to find a phrase different from the literal equivalent of the Polish syntagm, which, however, quite often appeared to be incorrect. /e.g. ^x"it has crossed my head", ^x"accept my advice", ^x"needn't grumble"/.

GENERAL CONCLUSIONS

The results obtained in group A and D seem to have fully supported the assumption that the exposure to the foreign language does not, by itself, lead to the acquisition of its conventional syntagms.^{8/} The numbers indicating the amount of syntagms learnt in this way were very small /the average 4, 2 and 5, 2, out of 30/; in fact, smaller than it had been expected. A rough error analysis of the test results in these groups clearly points to the general tendency exhibited by the students to render the English conventional syntagms by means of a literal /or nearly literal/ translation of their Polish versions. It also seems to contradict Labakowska's statement that "conventional syntagms /.../ can hardly be

listed as a teaching problem 'at advanced levels", because of the advanced students being more ready to accept "the novel instances of usage", and revealing less "intuitive tendency towards seeking congruence" than the learners in elementary courses. /Tabakowska, 1973:137/. The startlingly poor results of the retranslation test lead to the conclusion that it need not be so.

The comparison of the results obtained in group C against those of group A, as well as a similar comparison between groups E and B, lead to a somewhat disappointing conclusion that warning the students against interference does not automatically result in a striking improvement of the students' performance in the field of conventional syntagms. Group C did slightly better than groups A and D, but not to such an extent as it had been anticipated. Similarly, there was a difference between group E /warned and given exercises/ and group B /given exercises only/, in favour of the former, but not a really significant one. The analysis of the mistakes in those groups, however, showed that the students of both C and E groups /warned against interference/ made efforts to avoid word for word translation, thus often arriving at wrong constructions; while the students of the remaining groups revealed a tendency to simply leave a lot of test points unanswered.

The fact that the results were undoubtedly best when the presentation of the experimental material was followed by exercise practice, with stress being put on Polish equivalents, and translation from Polish into English /cf. the results of groups B and E⁹/, strongly suggests the necessity and

usefulness of such exercises in the teaching practice, especially in connection with the students' conscious approach towards the lexical material of the foreign language. As the results of the above described experiment may only have a limited value on account of its merely preparatory character limited time and number of the involved students, the groups not having been tested before to establish the possibly most equal level of their knowledge of English/, further research on this problem is clearly called for.

APPENDIX I

- . -Morning, Mike.
 - Hello. Talk of the devil! I was just telling John what we were discussing the other day.
- . -Have you decided yet which of them to employ?
 - They both seem highly qualified for the job.
- . -The man who placed this advertisement in our newspaper hasn't paid the bill yet. What shall I do?
 - Leave it for the time being, Jane.
- . -I understand the car I sold you doesn't work.
 - You are dead right!
- . -Are you still worried about this case? Well then, take my advice, and instead of boring everybody stiff, do something about it'
- . -I'd like to propose a toast to Sandra's mum. She's given us a very good Christmas.
- . -Hello, Mike. I saw you in the reporter's box, furiously taking notes.



- Yes. I was very impressed by the case.
8. -I don't like your friend Diana.
-Don't be like that. Just because she took my side when we were arguing?
9. -I won't lend you that money. It's out of the question, quite out of the question.
10. -I'm afraid there's going to be trouble.
-Don't worry, we are all on your side.
11. -We must go to the theatre. He really went to a lot of trouble to get us those tickets.
12. -You never did like Mark.
-Yes, it's true enough.
13. -Why do you call him hypocritical? He usually speaks his mind.
14. -What's the matter with Tom?
-I'm afraid he's been taken ill.
15. -Do you like that story?
-Yes, very impressive at first glance.
16. -Stop looking at me like that' You don't think I'm in love or something?
-It did cross my mind.
17. -Now, let's clear this matter once and for all: either you are lying, or he has been accepting bribes all the time' In that case he would have to leave our office for good.
18. -It's a pity you let yourself be talked into that concert.
-Yes, now I regret it, too.
19. -I don't believe your story was true.
-Well, it was true, like it or not'

20. -Whatever goes wrong, you are always trying to put the blame on me.
21. -Cigarette?
-I honestly don't feel like one at the moment, thank you.
22. -Hello, Mike. How are you?
-Mustn't grumble.
23. -Those pictures came out quite well, considering it was such an old camera.
24. -So I've got to wait for another 12 moths? Not on your life!
25. -What will you have to drink?
-Make it a whisky, will you?

APPENDIX II

EXERCISE 1

1. Instead of talking about it all the time, so that everyone is bored, do something about it.
2. -What will you drink?
-I'd like some whisky, please.
3. Don't worry, we are all ready to support you.
4. It was very difficult for him to get us those tickets.
5. He usually says what he really means.
6. Whenever anything goes wrong, you are always trying to make me seem responsible for it.
7. - You never liked Mark.
-Yes, it's very true.
8. Hello, Mike. We were just talking about you'
9. They both seem to have enough knowledge and experience to

do this job.

10. Either you are lying, or he has been taking money from customers for helping them.
11. He will have to leave our office and never come back.
12. -I don't like Diana.
-Why? Only because she supported me when we were arguing?
13. -Cigarette?
-Thank you, I really don't want one at the moment.
14. -So the car I sold you doesn't work?
-You are absolutely right'
15. -No matter what you think about it, it is true.

EXERCISE 2

1. Nie pożyczę ci tych pieniędzy. Wykluczone'
2. Chyba nie myślisz, że się zakochałem, czy coś takiego?
3. Owszem, przyszło mi to do głowy.
4. Mike, widziałem jak gorączkowo robiłeś notatki.
5. Na pierwszy rzut oka to bardzo dobre opowiadanie.
6. Człowiek, który dał to ogłoszenie, nie zapłacił rachunku.
7. Posłuchaj mojej rady i idź tam.
8. Wyjaśnimy to raz na zawsze.
9. Zostaw to na razie.
10. Chciałbym wznieść toast za zdrowie mamy Sandry.
11. -Jak się czujesz?
-Nie narzekam.
12. Mam czekać jeszcze 12 miesięcy? Nigdy w życiu'
13. Żałuję, że dałem się namówić na ten koncert.
14. Zdaje się, że Tomek zachorował.

15. Te zdjęcia dobrze wyszły.

APPENDIX III

1. Czy naprawdę myślisz, że on bierze łąpówki?
2. Na razie zapomnijmy o tym.
3. Słyszałem, że twoja siostra zachorowała.
4. Jak myślisz, kto dał to ogłoszenie o sprzedaży samochodu?
5. Czy zauważyłeś, że on zawsze stara się zwalić winę na kogoś?
6. Skończmy z tym raz na zawsze!
7. Nigdy nie przyszło mi do głowy, że on mógłby to zrobić.
8. -Papierosa?
-Dziękuję, naprawdę nie mam ochoty.
9. Jak wyszły nasze zdjęcia z wakacji?
10. Przestań już o tym mówić, zanudzisz wszystkich na śmierć!
11. A, to ty. O wilku mowa!
12. Ja mu wierzę. Zwykle mówi to, co myśli.
13. Nie pożyczę ci tych pieniędzy. Wykluczone.
14. Pamiętaj, że jestem po twojej stronie.
15. To prawda, czy ci się to podoba, czy nie.
16. Czy nigdy nie robisz notatek na wykładach?
17. -Cześć, jak się miewasz?
-Nie narzekam.
18. Dlaczego nie posłuchasz mojej rady i nie pojedziesz tam?
19. -Czego się napijesz?
-Poproszę o whisky.
20. Co, pożyczycie ci pieniądze? Nigdy w życiu!
21. Ona wydaje się mieć odpowiednie kwalifikacje do tej pracy.
22. Dał się na to namówić i potem miał tyle kłopotów.

23. Nie lubisz jej, bo wzięła moją stronę gdy się kłóciliśmy.
24. Chciałbym wnieść toast za powodzenie naszego planu.
25. -A więc ten samochód nie działa?
-Ma pan rację jak diabli.
26. Czy on już na dobre wyjechał?
27. Chyba nie wyobrażasz sobie, że się zakochałem, czy coś takiego?
28. Pożycz mi tę książkę. Bardzo ciekawa na pierwszy rzut oka.
29. Musimy mu podziękować, miał tyle kłopotów z załatwieniem nam tych zaproszeń.
30. -Ty go nigdy nie lubiłeś.
-Owszem, to święta prawda.

NOTES

- 1/ The term "conventional syntagm" is an exact equivalent of the Polish "syntagma konwencjonalna" and as used here it strictly corresponds to the term "phraseological unit" as understood by Weinreich /1966:42/, meaning "any expression in which at least one constituent is polysemous, and in which a selection of a subsense is determined by the verbal context"; and also to the term "habitual collocation" as used by Roos /1975:4/. It should not be confused with the term "idiom", though. /According to Weinreich, an idiom is a "phraseological unit that involves at least two polysemous constituents, and in which there is a reciprocal contextual selection of subsenses". /Weinreich, 1966:42/, e.g. "find one's feet", "break the ice", etc.
- 2/ The paradoxical thing here is that the conventional syntagms display much more frequent occurrence, especially in spoken language /Tabakowska, 1973:234/, than the idioms; thus being acquainted with them seems to be for the student much more essential than memorizing expressions like, for instance,

"down in the mouth", "pull someone's leg", or "make a song and dance about sth".

- 3/ For a detailed discussion of the types of transfer and interference see Komorowska, 1975:91 ff.
- 4/ Her research proved that the introduction of a short grammatical commentary, explaining the structure of the given grammatical form and stressing the differences between the phenomena which might evoke interference, appeared to be in many cases a good way of fighting against it. /Komorowska, 1975:129/.
- 5/ cf. W. Marton, "Nowe horyzonty nauczania języków obcych", Warszawa, 1972.
- 6/ Because the experiment was conducted on a very limited scale, the subjects were not separately tested on their knowledge of English; the groups were accepted according to the division made officially at the beginning of the course, which should have guaranteed their equal language level.
- 7/ The degree of idiomacity that the particular syntagms revealed was treated as a criterion of secondary importance only, thus it varied between the individual syntagms. "Pure" idioms were avoided, though.
- 8/ It must be stressed again that this conclusion is only valid with regard to a typical situation of a Polish learner /student/, whose contact with the foreign language is greatly limited; and it does not concern a situation of learning a FL in the conditions of "total immersion".
- 9/ Having compared the results of groups B and C, one may assume that it was rather the exercise practice than conscious approach of the students that contributed to the larger extent to the results achieved by group E.

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