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Language as Chunks, not Words

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Many people think of language as words. Words are small, convenient units, especially in written English, where they are separated by spaces. Dictionaries seem to reinforce this idea, because entries are arranged as a list of alphabetically-ordered words. Traditionally, linguists and teachers focused on grammar and treated words as self-contained units of meaning which fill the available grammatical slots in a sentence. More recently, attention has shifted from grammar to texts, and from words to chunks. Dictionary headwords are convenient points of access for the user, but modern dictionary entries usually deal with chunks, because meanings often do

not arise from individual words, but from the chunks in which the words occur. Corpus research confirms that native speakers of a language actually work with larger "chunks" of language. This paper will show that teachers and learners will benefit from treating language as chunks rather than words.

1. Written language as "chunks"

When children learn English as L1, they are first taught to recognize the letters of the alphabet, before learning to read and write words, e.g. n — — — o — — — t = "not", f — — — o — — — r = "for", t — — — h — — — e = "the", and so on. But once they have progressed to the word level, they don't continue to read or write texts letter by letter, because this would make the processing both very slow and very difficult. Letters are basic units of language, but they are only operational units for language processing at the very initial stage of language learning.

For many people, words are the most obvious unit of language. In written English, this is emphasized by the fact that words are separated by spaces. Kurus (2001) claims: "Most people read one word at a time, saying the word to themselves." But this cannot be true.

If we really processed language one word at a time, communication would still be very slow and very difficult, e.g. Not — — — for — — — the — — — first — — — time — — —, — — — an — — — argument — — — had — — — broken — — — out — — —.

If we read the text one word at a time, we first need to process WORD ONE, recall and keep in mind all of its possible uses or meanings, then process WORD TWO in a similar way, then go

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back to WORD ONE and see if we can now decide which use or meaning of WORD ONE was intended and how WORD TWO relates to WORD ONE, if this is still not clear, we would need to process WORD THREE, and so on, keeping an enormous number of unresolved possibilities in our minds for a long time.

It is very unlikely that words are the operational unit for native-speakers (Fostering Second Language Development in Young Children 1995, Kendon 1996, Ellis 1997), and therefore should not be for advanced learners of the language (Porto 1993, Ketko 2000, Marcus 2000, TOEFL Strategy #1 2002).

Words are in fact just another intermediate unit of language, like letters. The real operational unit of most native-speakers is "chunks", groups of words that form meaningful units, e.g. Not for the first time, — — — an argument had broken out — — — over breakfast — — — at number four, Private Drive — — —, — — — Mr. Terson Dunsley had been woken — — — in the early hours of the morning — — — by a loud, hooting noise — — — from his nephew Harry's room — — —. (Rowling 1993).

Therefore we should be helping advanced learners of the language to move towards operating at the "chunk" level as well. "Chunk-by-chunk" processing makes communication faster, more efficient, and easier for mutual comprehension. The text in the example contains 217 characters, 40 words, but only 8 chunks.

2. Spoken language as "chunks"

or may not be appropriate. The feedback they receive helps them determine whether they have guessed correctly." After the initial stage of learning, we don't continue to process spoken language phoneme by phoneme or syllable by syllable. We speak in chunks called "tone units" (also called intonation units, or breath groups), with pauses in between to breathe, to allow for a response, or for emphasis.

The Language Fun Farm (Interview with David Horner, 2002) focuses on listening, and segmenting discourse into chunks, rather than constructing chunks during production (see Section 7). However, Ketko (2000) addresses the crucial role of multi-word chunks in facilitating communicative competence.

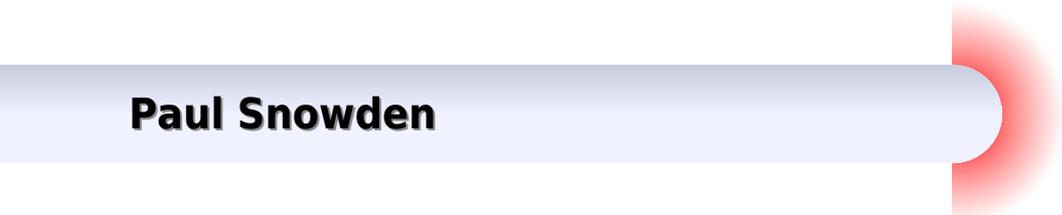
3. Why call them "chunks" rather than "phrases"?

The term "phrase" has a long history of technical usage in linguistics, and means different things to different people, depending on which linguistic theory they are working with. "Chunks" is a less established term, but therefore has less history, less "baggage" associated with it.

4. Why "chunks" rather than longer units, such as "clauses" or "sentences"?

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