Boxer Pants, G-String, *Stockings* and You Know What *Gear*: Towards Lexical Fields Aided Vocabulary Instruction

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Abstract: The major objective set to this paper is to investigate the problem of how lexical fields may be applied in vocabulary teaching at various proficiency levels of formal education, namely the primary and secondary school. The analysis of several lexical fields, such as **ANIMALS**, **SPORTS**, **TRANSPORT**, and **HOSPITAL** indicates that word groupings may be delimited by the age of the students, proficiency level as well as cognitive skills. Rather unsurprisingly, teaching materials are more complex for older students but, at the same time, children may also be provided with lexical affinities, be it synonyms, antonyms or basic collocations. The experiments conducted among two different English philology groups were aimed at viewing **CLOTHES** and **UNDERWEAR** as multidimensional and thought-provoking fields which may successfully stimulate students to identify relationships between particular lexical items. The experiment proved to be beneficial for the didactic process owing to the fact that grouping has long been recognised as one of the most effective ways of introducing lexical items. The participants exemplified a variety of subcategories, and although some of them seem fairly obvious, it must be concluded that lexical fields as such encouraged the language learners to think critically and carefully since particular elements may be perceived as politically incorrect and inappropriate in actual teaching practice.
Keywords: lexical fields, specialised language, vocabulary teaching, synonyms, antonyms, collocations.

1. Introduction

Beyond any shadow of doubt, vocabulary has long been universally perceived as an absolutely crucial element of each language system, and its importance has been emphasized both in the theory and practice of linguistic research on foreign language acquisition and foreign language teaching. Harmer (1991, p. 153) merely echoes the opinion of many when he says that the role of words in foreign language teaching can hardly be overrated, and – although grammatical structures are believed to be *the skeleton* – it is vocabulary and nothing else that *provides the vital organs and the flesh.* One cannot

agree more as this apt comment clearly shows that each element that forms parts of a language at any moment of its existence acquires both its force and its function from its relationship to all other elements in the system which are of the same or similar type. *To what extent does the vocabulary of a language constitute such a structure or system?* is a question that engaged the attention of a number of philologists in the first part of the 20th century, and – in particular – in the 1930s and 1940s, especially in the German-speaking countries as well as France and Denmark.

From a methodological point of view, lexical items are of great value since they foster the processes of teaching and learning the target language. The significance of vocabulary is made prominent, in particular, in what has become known as *the lexical approach* which was strongly promoted by Michael Lewis in the early 1990s (see Lewis, 1993). As the author stresses, the basic principle of the approach is that *Language is grammaticalized lexis, not lexicalized grammar* (Lewis, 1993, p.iv). Thus, teaching vocabulary ought to be the most essential component of each foreign language curriculum, particularly when the target language is considered to be a means of communication. As such, teachers take their students' production into account, which is claimed to be correlated with the output theory (see Swain, 2000),[1] but also learners' ability to use vocabulary in an effective way.

In order to foster language production, lexical items should be associated and combined with each other, and only then introduced in the classroom environment as vocabulary chunks, rather than isolated individual units. Such an approach to vocabulary teaching is related to the notion of lexical (semantic) field which is one of the central categories in the study of the lexicon in present-day lexical semantics and lexicology (see, among others, Burkhanov, 1998, p.123). More generally, the notion of a lexical field is a cornerstone of any attempt at identifying both the overall paradigmatic structures of the lexicon, and the semantic affinities between individual lexical items.

One may say that the fundamental aim of employing the notion of lexical fields, as well as lexical syllabi, amounts to grouping vocabulary in such a manner that some comprehensible input[2] based on word relationships is provided. Note that the structure of lexical syllabi depends not only on the proficiency level of the targeted students, but also to a considerable degree it depends on their age. By and large, lexical items can be divided according to varying lexical associations, and – to name but a few – one may mention: subjects (*family, food*), word formation (*injure, injury, injured*), synonyms (*main, major*), antonyms (*introvert, extrovert*), hyponyms (*rainy, foggy, cloudy*), collocations (*make a phone call*), connotations (*talkative, gossipy*). In what follows we shall attempt to show that the introduction of vocabulary on the basis of certain relations facilitates learning processes, and – on the other hand – it shows learners how the entirety of a foreign language system works.

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1 The output theory developed by Swain (2000) is based on the assumption that in order to communicate effectively, learners have to restrict their conscious language knowledge and they have to be given opportunities to use the target language in a number of contexts.
2 For the notion of *The Input Hypothesis* see Krashen (2009, pp. 20-22).

2. Lexical Fields and Primary School Instruction

In actual teaching practice, it has been observed that variously understood lexical fields play a considerable role in the organizational structuring of primary school teaching materials. The lexical field **ANIMALS** which at the lowest level is taxonomically split into such subcategories as PETS, FARM ANIMALS and WILD ANIMALS is the most common. To start with, the group labelled as PETS seems to be the most prominent at the primary school level, since it is the closest to the youngest students' cognition and hearts. The category PETS comprises such lexical elements as *dog, cat, hamster, parrot,* etc. The next set has been labelled FARM ANIMALS and the set includes as its constitutive elements such lexical items as *horse, pig, cow, chicken, goat, hen,* etc. In turn, the category WILD ANIMALS, to which such lexical items as *zebra, lion, tiger, monkey, cheetah,* etc. are linked, seems to be the one which children – for a variety of reasons – find rather troublesome to master. Therefore, such lexical subfields are normally introduced and presented at the higher stages of language mastery. Rather unsurprisingly, to a certain extent the shape of the lexical fields taught is determined by the limited language knowledge of those students who are subject to instruction. Obviously, such fields as **ANIMALS** are gradually expanded at the next level of language proficiency; the animal names are coupled and introduced with vocabulary related to their natural habitat, for example, in the case of WILD ANIMALS, *panda (forest), cheetah (grassland), whale (sea)*, and the same applies to animal-related ADJECTIVES that form pairs of antonyms: *big (elephant) – small (mouse), light (hamster) – heavy (panda), fast (dog) – slow (pig).*[3] By way of further illustration, let us point to the lexical field **SPORTS** which seems to be relatively more voluminous, as it is linked to many different subjects, and may be introduced and made use of in the context of many different topics. Firstly, sport-related lexical items, such as *tennis, golf, badminton, soccer, hockey,* etc., are introduced as individual words. The next stage is to introduce sport-related verbs which collocate with the modal verb *can,* for instance *ski, cycle, skate, run,* etc.. Likewise, the lexical items linked to the field may be grouped on the basis of various syntagmatic collocations, such as, for example *play – football, hockey, golf; go – swimming, sailing, jogging; do – martial arts, karate,* etc.

All in all, it is fairly evident that the concept of lexical fields may be interpreted and didactically adopted in many possible ways. Given specific purposes, however, lexical fields most frequently tend to be simplified depending on topic, students' age and language level. Yet, the relationships between lexical items seem to be the most relevant and fundamental aspects of the design of course books in present-day *FLT*, and one gets the impression that the authors busy in the field are well-aware of the fact that the proper structuring and arrangement of the instructed vocabulary do contribute to successful teaching, as well as learning processes.

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3   See, among others, *Welcome Friends 2* authored by Jenny Dooley and Virginia Evans.

3. The Application of Lexical Fields at the Secondary School Level

In fact, the usefulness of the concept of lexical fields has been particularly appreciated in teaching materials for more mature students, namely teenagers and university students, who represent the higher level of language comprehension and mastery. Here, the notion of *field* is regarded more thoroughly, as it is not merely associated with phrases or collocations, as is the case with young learners, but rather the notion frequently involves more complex vocabulary elements and lexical affinities. The field **ANIMALS** discussed in the foregoing has been split into a series of sets labelled as PETS, FARM ANIMALS and WILD ANIMALS, but one may also distinguish other subcategories, such as INSECTS, BIRDS and MAMMALS with those individual lexical items that are relevant to them (e.g. MAMMALS – *dolphin*; *fins, beak, flippers, tail*). It is worth pointing out, however, that the lexical field **ANIMALS** proves to be less attractive and didactically less promising at the secondary school level, since teenagers thoughts and interests tend to be absorbed much more in other conceptual (and lexical) spheres, such as, for example, **SPORTS**. Like any other, this lexical field may be expanded and split into a series of groups of related lexical items, and our teaching practice shows that it appears to be one of the most captivating language instruction fields.[4] To be more specific, the didactic account of the field most frequently involves:

1. equipment: *baseball – bat, cap, gloves,*
2. places: *motorcycling – circuit,*
3. verbs: *beat, win, injure,*
4. people: *football – captain, fan, coach, referee,*
5. synonyms: *go running, go jogging,*
6. word formation – *cycle, cycling, cyclist,*

One of the most valid observations to be drawn from the analysis of the didactic potential of the lexical field **SPORTS** is that it correlates with so-called schema, defined in the literature of the subject as prior knowledge of the world (Cook 1989:68-74). Note that teaching young learners such lexical items as *bat* may prove altogether pointless, as there is a high likelihood that very young Polish learners do not even know how the game of *baseball* is played, and what equipment it takes to play a game that is rather alien to teenage Slavonic sportsmen. By contrast, those teenagers who are inspired by and familiar with American culture/American English are more likely to understand the significance of the element *bat* within the schema of playing *baseball*. All this amounts to saying that one should stick to the rule that vocabulary ought to be introduced according to parameter of 'learnability' (see, for example, Harmer 2001:296). Also, as stressed by one of the authorities in the field, language teachers have to bear in mind that lexical items should be introduced gradually from less to more difficult ones in order to supply

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4 See, among others, *English File Intermediate*, authored by Christina Latham-Koenig and Clive Oxenden.

comprehensible input which needs to be slightly higher than the current language competence (see Krashen 2009:20-22). It goes without saying that it is crucial that such an approach keeps students motivated, and – equally importantly – they are constantly challenged by teaching materials and, needless to say, the element of challenge helps them to acquire their second language knowledge efficiently.

As brought up earlier, both lexical fields and lexical syllabi are based on numerous relationships between words, so-called *associative relations*, illustrated by such associative chains as, for example*, swim <> swimmer <> swimming or injure <> injury <>injured* which are linked together through the presence of the common root-element and likewise, such sets as, *injury <>surgeon <>ward <> hospital* which form a parallel set where the association is one of relatedness of meaning. The concept of the *associative field* surrounding each word in the language, was elaborated a long time ago by, among others, Bally (1940, p.196), who says:

We may think of a single word like <u>horse</u> as the centre of a series of circles of associated words. The most immediate circle would contain words like <u>mare, foal, mane, neigh, bridle, saddle,</u> [...]. In the next circle, a little farther from the centre, would come associations like <u>cavalry, ride, cart, graze</u> [...] and finally those rather abstract associations which are stored up chiefly in proverbs, aphorisms, and so on: <u>a dark horse, a horse of a different colour, cart before the horse, a dead horse, a gift horse, one's high horse, a willing horse, the Wooden Horse, horse sense, etc.</u>[5]

Notice that because each of these associated words is the centre of a similar group of circles, the connections extend throughout the entire vocabulary. However, it is Trier (1931) who is considered to be the founder of what has come to be known as *field theory*. The gist of the theory is that the vocabulary of a language forms a complete semantic structure in the manner of a mosaic which covers an underlying conceptual field without gaps and without overlapping. In each language, every word gets its significance from its position in relation to the words which are adjacent to it and hence, from the pattern of the whole structure. As frequently pointed out in the literature of the subject, the concept of a lexical field is of unquestionable importance for the design and compilation of *ideographic/thematic dictionaries*, which may be defined as those reference works in which *lemmata* are arranged according to their semantic affinities. Thematic dictionaries are usually compiled to satisfy the needs of foreign language learners. Thus, for example, the thematic group (field) **TRANSPORT** incorporates:

1) Lexical items denoting various kinds of vehicles: *aeroplane, car, bus, coach, tram, ship, bike,* etc.,
2) Prepositional phrases: *by air, by car, by bus, by coach, by tram, by sea,* etc.,
3) Verbal phrases: *change trains, board a plane, book a ticket, mount a bike, ride a bike,* etc.[6]

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5 This quotation has been adopted from Kleparski (2002, p.45).
6 See Burkhanov (1998, pp. 242-243).

From the point of view of language instruction, a thematic group may be viewed as a field of lexical items and expressions required for the production of oral or written texts on a particular subject or theme. In this context, let us point to the fact that the thematic approach to lexical structures is used by many foreign language teachers and it seems serviceable at all stages of foreign language teaching/learning. Let us concentrate on the lexical field **HOSPITAL** and its potential thematic constitutive elements:

1) Lexical items related to medical professionals: *physician, obstetrician, dermatologist, anaesthesiologist, cytologist,*
2) Phrases expressing different kinds of wards: *maternity unit, geriatric ward, ophthalmic ward, oncological ward,*
3) Adjective phrases: *chronically ill, fatally wounded, badly damaged,*
4) Verbal phrases: *admit to hospital, examine a patient, measure blood pressure, have a CT-scan, carry out an operation.*

The structure of this particular field indicates that thematic groups are undeniably practical both for teaching and learning purposes as the categorisation at any level greatly improves the general memory capacity of those who are subject to instruction. Apart from that, thematic groups may help teachers to design their teaching materials in a more understandable way so as to boost the process of vocabulary acquisition. As a matter of fact, the role of language instructors is crucial, as their teaching stimuli are required to contribute indirectly to effective and meaningful communication outside the classroom. However, it should be kept in mind that it is also due to an impeccable choice of lexical fields that students are provided with data that may be subconsciously used in the process of learning.

4. The Experiment

During the course of the academic years 2001/2002 and 2016/2017 two independent, yet similarly shaped and targeted experiments at two institutions of foreign language instruction were carried out. There were meant to be simple, self-designed teaching experiments intended to provide evidence to the validity of field-based vocabulary instruction. The first experiment was conducted on the 3rd year college students of English in the *English Section* of the *Teacher Training College* (Chełm, Poland), while the second one was carried out among the 1st year students of the *English Philology* in *The Podhale State Higher Vocational School* (Nowy Targ, Poland), who were – or at least could be assumed to be – at an advanced level of English language mastery. The experiments were assigned as vocabulary instruction tasks which were aimed at two lexical fields of varying scope, that is the lexical field **CLOTHES** and one of its subcategories labelled as **UNDERWEAR**.

In general, the students involved in both experiments proved to be resourceful,

and they appreciated the opportunity to show their individual approach towards the tasks they were faced with. The most commonly consulted dictionaries were *Longman Lexicon of Contemporary English* (1981), *Random House Word Menu* (1997), and a variety of on-line dictionaries (collinsdictionary.com, oxforddictionaries.com and macmillandictionary.com). Let us now focus on the two lexical fields separately and the results obtained.

CLOTHES
To start with, the students employed two basic ways of introducing the relevant vocabulary. Most of them proceeded from more general terms to more specific ones, listing them on the blackboard; while others employed the method of flash cards. For example, one of the students who was assigned the task of preparing and presenting the field **CLOTHES** categorised the most general items associated with the relevant field in the following manner:

1. GENERAL WORDS MEANING 'CLOTHES'
clothes: the things that you wear, such as trousers, shirts and dresses,
clothing: what people wear, used especially when you are talking about clothes in general and not about a particular piece of clothing,
garment: a word used especially by people who make or sell clothes, meaning a single piece of clothing,
wardrobe: a word used especially by people who write about fashion, meaning all the clothes that you own,
apparel (women's/men/ladies'): an American word used in the clothing business, meaning the clothes sold in a particular department of a large store.

2. TERMS DENOTING 'CLOTHES WORN TOGETHER AS A SET'
outfit: clothes that are worn together as a set, especially when the colours have been carefully chosen so that they match,
uniform: the set of clothes worn at work by the members of certain organisations or groups and by some schoolchildren,
kit: a set of clothes that someone wears for sport or other activity,
gear: (informal) the set of clothes that are worn for a sport or some other activity,
duds: (slang) 'clothes', for example, *cowboy duds.*
3. TERMS DENOTING 'CLOTHES INHERITED FROM SOMEONE'
cast-offs/castoffs: clothes that you no longer wear and have given to someone else who cannot afford to buy new clothes,
hand-me-downs: clothes that are given to a younger child in the family when their older brother or sister has grown too big for them or stopped wearing them.

Further, the presentation of the denotatively most general terms linked to the lexical field **CLOTHES** was followed by providing a list of specific terms associated

with the lexical field in question such as, for example, *T-shirt, blouse, shirt, sweater, jumper, vest, cardigan, V-neck sweater, polo-neck, round neck, skirt, dress, jeans, trousers, shorts, jacket, tie, suit, bra, pants, boxer shorts, slip underpants, tights, stockings, nylons, mackintosh, sheep's skin, hat, beret, boots, heels, sandals, slippers, overshoes*, etc., many of which were, understandably, familiar to the students, but such an over-all presentation was helpful in accounting for various minute denotative and register differences.

In a number of cases, the section pertaining to nouns was followed by the presentation of prepositional phrases and verbal phrases associated with a given field. For example, one of the students introduced a number of relevant phrases such as, to *be wearing sth, to have got sth on, to be dressed in sth, to get dressed/undressed, to dress/undress, to put sth on, to take sth off, to get changed, to change into sth, to try sth on, to dress well/badly/smartly, to be well-dressed/elegant/scruffy, to dress up,* etc., many of which the students were already familiar with.

UNDERWEAR
Obviously, the lexical field labelled as **UNDERWEAR** is justifiably perceived as a subcategory of the macrocategory **CLOTHES**, yet – somewhat significantly – it may prove to be didactically controversial due to entirely extralinguistic causes. Although somewhat hesitant to be active at the beginning, as the lesson progressed the students became fully involved and came up with diverse ideas which appeared to be didactically attractive and attention captivating. As in the case of **CLOTHES**, the students showed a general tendency to analyse the category **UNDERWEAR** from more general to more specific lexical items, starting from the very definition of the field in question:

1. THE DEFINITION AND THE SYNONYMS OF 'UNDERWEAR':
underwear: clothing worn under other clothes, typically next to the skin,
underclothes (underclothing): the clothes worn next to the skin, under dresses, suits and trousers,
undies: (informal) – underclothes, especially for women,
lingerie: underwear worn by women,
smalls: a British, (euphemistic, informal, old-fashioned) word for underwear.

2. THE 'UNDERWEAR' GROUPS DISTINGUISHED ON THE BASIS OF:
a) SEX
Here two categories were distinguished, that is to say: MEN'S UNDERWEAR with such lexical elements as, *briefs, boxer shorts, underpants, undershirt, thongs, midway briefs, strings, trunks,* etc., and WOMEN'S UNDERWEAR: *bra, brassiere, briefs, tights, body, panties, knickers, boy shorts, corset, stockings, thongs, slip, petticoat, shirt, half-slip, corselette*, etc.

b) UPPER AND LOWER BODY

Here, the upper and lower body groups can be divided into men's and women's underwear as well. The students, however, had a tendency to split it into: UPPER BODY: *bra, sleeveless shirt, corset*, brassiere, etc., and LOWER BODY: *briefs, boxer shorts, tights, panties, knickers, half-slip, stockings*, etc.

c) CUTS AND SHAPES

Here, one may speak of two main groups, namely BRAS and PANTS which may be treated as synonymous to UPPER and LOWER BODY sets, but when we consider women's underwear. The BRAS category includes such relevant lexical items as *push-up, classic, nursing, invisible, brassiere, triangle, balconette, sports, strapless*, etc. The PANTS group embraces such constitutive lexical elements as *briefs, high-cut briefs, control briefs, hipsters, boy shorts, bikinis, tangas, G-string, thongs,* etc.

d) COMFORTABLE AND UNCOMFORTABLE

Whimsical as it may sound, the division gains some tangible grounds when one takes modern underwear fashion trends into consideration. Given this and one's own experience, it takes little thought to arrive at the conclusion that the distinction is nothing else but meaningful. The experimental group of students aged 20-23, found it essential to introduce the dichotomy discussed here, and it was evidently clear to them that there are people who choose underwear for the pleasure of feeling good, while others base their choice on the individual need to show off how trendy they are, and still others are guided by some barely definable 'have it and keep it in the closet' accumulation streak of mind. It turns out that the underwear items that may be counted into the: COMFORTABLE UNDERWEAR category are *boxer shorts, sports bra, hipsters, classic bra, sleeveless shirt* and the UNCOMFORTABLE UNDERWEAR microcategory attracts the referents of such lexical items as *G-string, thongs, control briefs, strapless bra, corset, strappy lace bra* and others.

e) DAY AND NIGHT

The two categories discussed here were postulated by a minority of the students involved in the experiment, since underwear, and night underwear in particular, still appears to be a much hush-hush tabooed subject that is not to be mentioned, less so talked about aloud in broad daylight. Yet, its existence could not and was not in any way denied, though it may have been the more open-minded students who were more likely to make an unveiled mention of the category NIGHT UNDERWEAR. While the category DAY UNDERWEAR was most frequently related to such lexical items as *bras, pants, briefs, tights, sleeveless shirt,* etc., the list of lexical items organized within the canvas of NIGHT UNDERWEAR starts with the names of what are considered relatively 'decent' elements, such as *pyjamas, sleeping gown, boxer shorts, shirt, slip, nightie* and continues with those that may be said to be erotically-charged 'naughty' items, such as *G-string, suspender belt, chemise, basque, garter*, etc.

5. Conclusion

To conclude, our experiment confirms that the category **UNDERWEAR** as a lexical field is – didactically speaking – thought-provoking, including for those young adults who are strongly influenced by their family background, social environment and locally accepted hierarchy of values and taboo-guided *do's and don'ts.* Adult as they were, some students felt rather confused and embarrassed by the very prospect of analysing the ins and outs of the concept of **UNDERWEAR**, even though they were informed at the outset that the most fundamental thing was to assume their individual understanding of the concept. To be more precise, those on the shy side found it hard to approach the topic from any possible angle, yet – after some time – one could see the effects of the gradual 'ice-breaking' and – in some cases – there was a total and unqualified engagement in the experiment. From the psychological point of view the students' involvement in the production of the subgroupings itemized above may be regarded as more or less natural, but it should be stressed that the divisions that were proposed were oftentimes rethought, reformulated and renamed several times as the topic itself seemed somewhat provocative, challenging, and – for some of the students – somewhat irritatingly troublesome.

Most generally, it is true that the majority of the students were familiar with at least half of the lexical items grouped under the general heading **CLOTHES**, yet only a few of them were able to discern the minute differences of denotative meaning between such lexical pairs and lexical sets as *tights/stockings/nylons, pants/boxer pants,* etc. Note that the field method prompted us to set side by side such semantically related lexical items as, *tights/ stockings/ nylons, slip/ petticoat, trousers/ pants, garment/apparel/gear/duds*. The words grouped in such sets are denotatively more or less synonymous, yet they exhibit slight differences in meaning and/or belong to different varieties of English. Among other factors, introducing words in fields helps one to account for the temporal dimension (see Lipka, 1990, p.15). While introducing such sets of quasi-synonyms it is the role of the teacher to point to the fact that the lexical item *nylons* covers the denotative spectrum of both *tights* and *stockings,* yet it is an archaic term both in British and American English.

Moreover, what the British call *garments* and *trousers* are termed *apparel* and *pants* in American English. Obviously, on such occasions it should be mentioned that a number of words that bear a British English regional label are perfectly acceptable in many areas in America. Similarly, numerous Americanisms have become familiar in Britain, due to an increase in transatlantic travel, the influence of broadcast media and the Internet. Apart from that, the method of fields helps us to bring to light the fact that such parallel sets as *garment/apparel/gear/duds* contain lexical items that belongs to different stylistic registers. Thus, both British English *garment* and American English *apparel,* belong to a formal register, the originally British English term *gear* must be qualified as informal while the lexical item *duds* is evidently a slang word. It is our strong belief that such distinctions can be made and introduced systematically in the process of teaching

with the aid of the method of lexical fields. And, therefore, old masters such as Trier (1931) and Bally (1940) were – in spite of all the criticism directed against them – not altogether wrong, and the concept of lexical/semantic field that they developed may successfully be applied in vocabulary teaching; apparently it stands in sharp contrast to many modern methods of vocabulary instruction that are utterly unsystematic.

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