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ABSTRACT

Both teachers and learners assume that to know a language, an individual need only learn its vocabulary and grammar. The correct use of common collocations, formulas, and idioms is the skill that makes language fluent, natural, and comprehensible. These formulaically constructed phrases that are not assembled by rule but recalled from memory are known as "phrasems." While phrasems are necessary and significant parts of any real language, they are anomalies in current grammatical paradigms. The genre of academic writing employs selectional restrictions that apply just as stringently at the phrase level as at the word level. Attempts to improve the verbal scores of Hawaii's students (who traditionally score lower in verbal skills than the U.S. average) by attacking the grammar and vocabulary of Hawaii Creole English (HCE) speakers have done little to change students' performance. A study of writing errors of students in basic writing courses at community college showed that more of the errors of HCE-speaking writers were of the idiomatic rather than the grammatical variety. To help these and other students, teachers must recognize the enormous role that common collocations, formulas, and idioms play in natural language, both spoken and written. Conventionalized collocations, formulas, and idioms needed by students to produce idiomatically appropriate academic discourse must be identified, with an inventory based on frequency of usage, so that students could master the use of conventionalized phrasems systematically. Composition teachers may see added value in selecting reading materials that are excellent models of idiomatic writing in English. (CR)

Hawaii Creole English and the Idiomatic Demands of Academic Writing

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Language scholars have traditionally operated within the framework of an incomplete assumption about language that limits its basic building blocks to (1) the lexicon (words of the language, its vocabulary) and (2) the grammar (rules for grouping the words together into larger structures such as sentences). Whether or not they ever think of it consciously, both teachers and learners of languages, as well, assume that to know a language, one need only learn its vocabulary and grammar. Few realize that such knowledge can take one only so far—and that distance is not very great. Notice, for example, that these two signs are grammatical and use the English vocabulary correctly: *Drop your pants here* (Chinese laundry) and *You are invited to take advantage of the chambermaid* (Tokyo hotel). What more did the sign writers have to know besides English vocabulary and grammar to avoid embarrassment to guests? For the first, the writer, of course, needed to know the phrasal verb "drop off" as well as the special idiomatic meaning of "drop your pants," and for the second, the writer needed to know at least two meanings of the whole phrase "take advantage of."

When actually engaged in the use of language, everyone finds it necessary to employ formulaically constructed phrases that are not assembled by rule, but are simply recalled from memory. Ample and correct use of common collocations, formulas, and idioms is the skill that makes language fluent, natural, and comprehensible. Thus, while prefabricated phrases, hereafter, "phrasems" (Greciano 1986) are anomalies in current grammatical paradigms (Chafe 1968), they are both necessary and significant parts of any real language. What's more, the genre-specific nature of phrasems identifies thousands of them as the only ones suitable in particular contexts. The genre of academic writing employs selectional restrictions that apply just as stringently at the phrasem level as they do at the word level. Unfortunately, little systematic attention has been given to identifying the essential and frequently used phrasems or to instructional techniques that would help students conform fully to the phrasematic demands of academic writing.

In Hawaii, grade school students have, as a whole, always scored lower in verbal skills in standardized tests than the nation's average. Subscribers to the traditional view of language have repeatedly attempted to improve the verbal scores of Hawaii's students by attacking the grammar and vocabulary of Hawaii Creole English (HCE) speakers (referred to nontechnically as "pidgin speakers"). Yet, increasing grammar instruction, contrasting HCE grammar with standard American English (SAE) grammar, and related tactics have done little to change

the students' performance. When HCE-speaking students arrive at college, too many are ill-prepared to meet the idiomatic demands of academic writing. Even college teachers of composition find ourselves resorting to grammar instruction and other such largely ineffective strategies in accord with the grammar-lexicon view of language. While few formal assessments have been made, informal consensus seems to confirm the general ineffectiveness of grammar teaching.

Indeed, English teachers have long been perplexed by the negative results of practically all systematic studies of the effects of grammar instruction. We find it difficult to believe that grammar instruction can be so ineffective when it is so obvious that students are making grammatical errors. One widely accepted explanation is that grammar has to be internalized—that making students conscious of rules does not help them because there is no time to apply rules consciously under actual conditions of use. There is another possible explanation for the failure of grammar instruction to improve students' production. Diminishing returns are inevitable because the applicability of general rules of grammar is rapidly exhausted. So little of language as used is rule-governed that beyond learning a dozen or two general rules, the rest is all idiomaticity. Much more of language is idiomatic than either practitioners or theorists have heretofore recognized.

There is probably little that composition teachers can do to change the current linguistic paradigm, but perhaps something can be done in the trenches to help not only creole-speaking students, but English speakers of other native languages and speakers of substandard dialects of English as well. We can begin by recognizing the enormous role that common collocations, formulas, and idioms play in natural language, spoken and written.

A study of writing errors of students in basic writing courses at the Kapiolani Community College in Honolulu showed that more of the errors of HCE-speaking writers were of the idiomatic type than were grammatical errors. Rather than being ungrammatical, the writing more often simply failed to conform idiomatically to the demands of academic writing. Inappropriately colloquial language and creole forms topped the list of errors for HCE speakers. Colloquial forms like topic fronting (left dislocation), tags (right dislocation), and jargon are actually parts of the idiomaticity of informal spoken language but are considered wrong for formal academic writing. Structures condemned in traditional grammars as having double subjects—as in, "My father, he . . ."— are actually topic-comment structures, which are common and useful in speech. They show up in student writing in such forms as: *The rest of our money we play the games separately* and *The one is cold I bake that one . . .* Tags are like afterthoughts and are equally useful in speech. Unsophisticated HCE writers permitted tags to remain, as in *All the juice comes out and the seeds ; I was happy for him even my family*; and *The colors go with the rides pretty much.*

Uniquely creole idioms appeared in writing much less frequently than expected from speech, perhaps because they are stigmatized through grade school. The HCE marker *da kayn*, for example, never occurs in writing as an accidental error. Neither do such phrases as *bambai, æs wai, næ mayn,* or *črai*+V. On the other hand, English sounding phrases in special creole usage did occur regularly: *Give stink eye, get chicken skin, humbug, still yet, mostly all,* and*waste time* , for example, all have special HCE uses.

Another common colloquial form is the syntactic blend that combines parts of two common phrases into one: *Why did you do that for?*, for example, blends *Why did you do that?* with *What did you do that for?* An HCE speaker wrote: . . . *pressure from the people they are around with* while another wrote . . . *how the final product should look like.*

The idioms of comparing—*as X as Y, Xer than, different from, difference between, rather than, compared to, compared with*—caused as many difficulties as the grammatical comparative and superlative markers. ESL students had the most serious problems, of course, but HCE-speakers wrote: *thinking about girls was not quite interesting as his trout fishing*, and *they were not strong like the ball players of today.* These may exhibit the HCE speakers awkwardness in handling comparison, or, perhaps they are simply colloquial versions of standard phrasems.

Negation, too, is often a matter of phrasal formulas, which, uncontrolled, produce such strained attempts as *both of them couldn't sleep* and . . . *the teachers are always not there for you at all times.* Problems with negation were never of the stigmatized sort often noted in speech. College writers are apparently well aware that such favored HCE vernacular forms as *no can, no like, no more nothing* and *no care* are not acceptable in writing. Some HCE examples of confused negation are analyzable as phrasal blending: *Her parents forbid her not to see him, It's very tempting not to go right up and buy a ticket, If nobody eats their hamburger, she gives it to the person who asks for it,* and *People have seen this cat and yet somehow anybody responsible doesn't want to bring it home.*

Formulas for correlating are idiomatic markers: *one is X and the other Y, ranging from X to Y, which is X and which is Y,* and so forth are seldom systematically taught within grammar-lexicon pedagogy. We pick them up through literary experience, from books and other printed sources or through exposure to the language of those who read.

Academic writing requires an ample inventory of single word and phrasal connectives (the distinction often being arbitrary): *in addition, for instance, nevertheless, however, on the other hand* and so forth. No amount of grammar teaching seems to help students who have trouble choosing between such options as *first* and *at first,* or, *although* and *even though.* The problem involves

semantics, discourse functions, and idiomaticity.

Among the most common phrasems are phrasal verbs. At least two words make up a phrasal verb, the first word being a common verb, followed by a preposition-like word functioning as a particle, so that together they constitute one verb in meaning. For instance, there are several phrasal verbs based on the common verb *look: look up, look over, look into, look upon, look down upon.* Each phrasal verb has a unitary meaning, often difficult to express in English in any other way. These are matters of idiomaticity, which cannot be learned by studying grammar but must be learned by memory, just as words are.

Studies of idiomatic language have usually focused on idioms with non-literal, figurative meanings. Much more common in language, however, are those combinations of two or more words that literally mean exactly what they say but are conventionalized phrasems by dint of common usage: *sheet of paper, reference source, gather data, take notes, express an opinion.* Writing in English for academic purposes demands access to an infinite store of common collocations, combined in ways that have become stabilized and are the familiar, expected, and recognized ways of saying things in written English.

One practical implication of recognizing phrasems is that more exposure to good models is probably better than more grammar. This is because phrasems, being part of an inventory, are simply memorized rather than being generated by rules. Writing idiomatically depends upon memory of idiomatically written models rather than upon rule application. We pick up the language of writing by being exposed to models of good writing and imitating those models.

Secondly, if idiomaticity must be taught—or even caught—we must identify conventionalized collocations, formulas, and idioms needed by students to produce idiomatically appropriate academic discourse. Currently, it is unlikely that all types of phrasems have been properly described. Certainly, no single source exists that any teacher can turn to for information about all types of phrasems. More important than a taxonomy, however, is the need for an inventory based on frequency of usage. Such a frequency list of common phrasems would allow us to order our presentation so that students could master the use of the most important phrasems systematically.

Additional research should pinpoint students' problems of both reception and production. Students' problems may range from lacking awareness that conventions exist to inability to encode phrasems correctly in every detail.

Of course, much can be done while waiting for theoretical groundwork to be laid. Teachers who teach vocabulary can immediately consider including phrasems in their lists. Those who teach grammar may discover what aspects are really idiomatic by applying the test: Do we know this by rule or by memory? If it is by rule, it is grammar, but if by memory, it is an idiomatic construct. Learning by memory requires a different pedagogy from learning to apply rules.

Composition teachers may see added value in selecting reading materials that are excellent models of idiomatic writing in English. Finally, all teachers of composition and communication may reflect more thoughtfully upon how they might lead students to master the use of conventionalized phrasems, since skill in the language of the academic community is essential to joining in its discourse.

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