

# Current Research on Language Learning and Teaching



# Current Research on Language Learning and Teaching:

*Case Study of Bosnia  
and Herzegovina*

Edited by

Azamat Akbarov

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Case Study of Bosnia and Herzegovina

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# SLIPS OF THE TONGUE: REPPRESSED THOUGHTS OR PRIMA FACIE EVIDENCE OF LINGUISTIC FLEXIBILITY

ALMA JEFTIĆ

## Abstract

Slips of the tongue are almost inevitable. It is proven that for every thousand words spoken, people make one or two errors, which means that a slip is bound to occur about once every seven minutes of continuous talk. The average person makes between 7 and 22 verbal slips every day. This paper aims to analyse both linguistic and psychoanalytic aspects of slips of the tongue, as well as describe their prevalence in the Bosnian language. Freud insisted that slips of the tongue represent repressed thoughts or motives, while his contemporary, philologist Rudolf Meringer, said that they are just accidental shifts of linguistic units. By contrast, cognitive scientist Gary Dell contends that slips of the tongue reveal a person's capacity for using language and its components. In order to analyse the most prevalent slips of the tongue that usually occur within a group of native speakers of Bosnian, a random sample of 100 Bosnians (50 males and 50 females, aged 25–55) filled in a questionnaire designed to identify their awareness of the number of slips in their everyday speech, as well as their willingness to describe them as either repressed thoughts or motives or accidental shifts. It is concluded that people are less likely to adhere to Freudian principles of unconscious motives than the description of slips as ordinary errors. The results are further described in the context of Dell's idea of spreading activation according to which language is error prone, which allows for the novel production of words, and is prima facie evidence of linguistic flexibility and proof of the great dexterity of the human mind.

**Keywords:** slips of the tongue, unconscious, errors of speech, linguistic flexibility, dexterity

## 1. Introduction

Slips of the tongue are almost inevitable, and it is proven that for every thousand words spoken people make one or two errors, which means that a slip is bound to occur about once every seven minutes of continuous talk. The average person makes between 7 and 22 verbal slips every day. This paper aims to analyse both linguistic and psychoanalytic aspects of slips of the tongue, as well as describe their prevalence in the Bosnian language. Freud insisted that slips of the tongue represent repressed thoughts or motives, while his contemporary, philologist Rudolf Meringer, said that they are just accidental shifts of linguistic units. In contrast, cognitive scientist Gary Dell contends that slips of the tongue reveal a person's capacity for using language and its components. In order to analyse the most prevalent slips of the tongue that usually occur within a group of native speakers of Bosnian, a random sample of 100 Bosnians (50 males and 50 females, aged 25–55) filled in a questionnaire designed to identify their awareness of the number of slips in their everyday speech, as well as their willingness to describe them as either repressed thoughts or motives or accidental shifts. The results were further described in the context of Dell's idea of spreading activation according to which language is error prone, which allows for the novel production of words that is *prima facie* evidence of linguistic flexibility and proof of the great dexterity of the human mind.

## 2. The “Slip of the Tongue” Phenomenon: Theory, Research, and Practice

Sigmund Freud derived the terms unconscious, preconscious, and conscious, particularly from slips in speech, slips in reading, and forgetfulness in both “The Psychopathology of Everyday Life” and his lectures. He thought that slips are parallel and similar to dreams, and therefore analysed these in depth as part of mental motivation.

Freud (2010) believed errors of all types were revealing and sometimes serve as defensive mechanisms. Freudian slips are errors of language, such as word substitutions and mispronunciation, and are defined as any language error that is unintentionally revealing.

The words involved in a Freudian slip usually resemble each other in form and function. Freud recognised this and maintained that most errors had *several causes* that worked together to create the error, and therefore named this an “overdetermination” of an error (Ibid.). This is partially

based on the idea of the intersecting association process, or how memory retrieval takes place.

However, less known than Freudian slips are mishearing or misleading errors, as well as errors caused by motivated forgetting. According to Freud (2010), people always forget for a reason, which reflects an unconscious wish and desire. Losing things can also reveal unconscious desires. People sometimes lose a valuable thing they have borrowed because, unconsciously, they rebel against giving it back. On the other occasions, a loss can reflect an unconscious wish to get rid of something a person does not like.

Freud (2010) also discussed a type of error he called the erroneous idea. This occurs when a person who knows better makes a revealing mistake involving factual or autobiographical knowledge. For example, one might describe her/his home town as the town where she/he grew up as a child, rather than the town where she/he currently lives, if they are different. This might reveal a yearning for the conditions of childhood. According to Freud, people who remember their own ages incorrectly are unconsciously desiring to be older or younger.

It is possible to conclude that all Freudian ideas of the unconscious have in common an intrusion into the conscious life by some thought or emotion (an urge or desire) that is “normally outside of awareness,” or which a person is struggling *not* to think about. Such errors can be revealing if they reflect mental activity going on under the surface, which is not easy to demonstrate.

Sigmund Freud paid tribute to Rudolf Meringer and Carl Mayer's study published in 1895. Meringer and Mayers showed the reversal and rearrangement of whole words, syllables or sounds, along with pre-tones or anticipations and echoes, word contaminations, and word substitutions as phenomena responsible for slips of the tongue. These three scientists contributed to the controversy of their standpoints because, for modern psycholinguistics and the psychology of language, speech errors are always an expression of a momentary malfunction of the human speech production system. For the cognitive process of speech production, slips of the tongue offer an insight into speech processing (Kohler and Simon 2002).

According to Meringer and Mayer (1895), pre-tones, echoes, and serialisation errors represent the vast majority of slips of the tongue. They do not reveal any hidden point. However, with lexical-semantic slips of the tongue the question of mental motivation is admissible. Meringer was originally motivated by Hermann Paul's (1880) observations concerning similarities between speech errors and the processes of language change.

He decided to reject the possibility that errors might actually precipitate sound change. According to Meringer and Mayer (1895), speech errors and certain kinds of sound change are not inter-dependent but share a higher cause in the nature of the psychological language organ.

Four major generalisations may be extracted from Meringer's speech error writings:

- (1) errors are not random but are rule-governed (Meringer 1908, 3; Meringer and Mayer 1895, 9–10);
- (2) the fundamental unit of speaking is not the speech sound but the word (Meringer and Mayer 1895, 6–7);
- (3) words can be divided into structural components that differ in the strength of their internal representations (Meringer and Mayer 1895, 164);
- (4) all speakers produce errors in the same way (Meringer and Mayer 1895, 10; Meringer 1908, 6, 123).

However, it is evident that Meringer was determined to attach mental processes to the unconscious and describe the topology of the psychic apparatus. Kohler and Simon (2002) tried to induce spoonerisms with the presentation of short written texts of erotic, aggressive, and neutral content. They concluded that after reading the erotic and the aggressive text, slips were produced more often than following the neutral text. In addition, significantly more slips of the erotic kind occurred after reading the erotic text, whereas more aggressive slips were observed immediately after the lecture of the text with aggressive content (Kohler and Simon 2002). The obtained results replicated Motley's findings on laboratory generated spoonerism errors (Motley et al. 1982).

However, the previously analysed experiments did not rely on the possibility of language complexity that was well noted by Dell. According to Dell's idea of spreading activation, language is error prone, which allows for the novel production of words and is *prima facie* evidence of linguistic flexibility and proof of the great dexterity of the human mind (which has nothing to do with unconscious desires and wishes). Dell's model claims that speech is produced by a number of connected nodes representing distinct units of speech (i.e. phonemes, morphemes, syllables, concepts, etc.) that interact with one another in any direction, from the concept (Semantic) level, to the word (Lexical selection) level, and finally to the sound (Phonological) level of representation (Dell 1986). Therefore, slips can be the result of pure language complexity from one side, or unconscious wishes and desires from the other.

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1 Participants**

This research included 100 participants who voluntarily filled in a specially designed questionnaire; 50% of participants were male and 50% female, aged 25–55. All participants possessed Bachelor degrees at the time of the implementation of the research, and were native speakers of Bosnian.

#### **3.2 Instruments**

A Likert-type scale was designed to explore the following constructs:

- the participant's awareness of the number of slips of the tongue she/he can make during the period of one month (4 items);
- the participant's readiness to analyse slips as unconscious desires and/or wishes (4 items);
- the participant's readiness to describe slips as simple errors that result from language complexity (4 items).

The answers were provided on a scale from 1 to 7, where 1 means “completely disagree” and 7 means “completely agree.”

#### **3.3 Method**

The participants completed the questionnaire in a quiet classroom environment. All received the same instruction and were given ten minutes to complete the twelve-item questionnaire. The data were later analysed according to the results on three specific subscales: awareness of everyday slips of the tongue/lapsus linguae, readiness to describe mistakes as unconscious wishes, and readiness to describe mistakes as simple errors.

### **4. Results and Discussion**

Frequencies of “agree” and “strongly agree” answers for each subscale were measured.

In all, 87% of participants said that they were pretty much aware of all the mistakes and errors in speech they had made during the previous month. However, only 31% of participants described their speech errors as unconscious wishes and desires in a Freudian way. Surprisingly, the

majority of them were male participants (70% of the whole group that was willing to understand speech errors as unconscious wishes and desires). In all, 69% of participants described their speech errors as the result of linguistic flexibility in the context of Dell's idea of spreading activation, according to which language is error-prone, which allows for the novel production of words and is prima facie evidence of linguistic flexibility and proof of the great dexterity of the human mind.

It is evident that, for the majority of participants, speech errors are mostly just accidental shifts in Meringer's sense, and have nothing to do with the Freudian idea of the unconscious. However, the fact that the majority of male participants were most likely to adhere to the Freudian explanation can be described in a psychoanalytic way in terms of the need for the large repression of sexual drives and cultural oppression. Therefore, men are most likely to think that the excessive sexual impulses they possess have to be repressed due to the cultural norms. In that case, they usually think that all the repressed thoughts they have (as well as speech errors they have made) have some sort of sexual connotation. In contrast, women usually suppress their sexual impulses even more than men; therefore, they were less likely to adhere to them even during this research (so that we might assume that they did not even want to choose spoonerisms as potential answers, in order to conform to the standards of society).

## 5. Conclusion

It is concluded that people are less likely to adhere to Freudian principles of unconscious motives than the description of slips as ordinary errors, which is in line with Dell's idea of spreading activation and Meringer's accidental shifts. However, researchers should extend this analysis in terms of gender differences and repressed sexual drives, as well as cultural norms and standards.

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# A CROSS-CULTURAL STUDY OF APOLOGIES IN BOSNIAN AND ENGLISH

ALMA ŽERIC

## Abstract

The aim of this study is to examine the speech act of apologies in both English and Bosnian languages. Participants in the study, conducted in 2014, were first-year students of the four-year cycle of the Pedagogical faculty, University of Bihac, Department of English Language and Literature, and five native speakers of English. The primary objective was to determine whether there are certain similarities and differences when it comes to the selection of apology strategies in English and Bosnian. In addition, an attempt was made to establish if there is a significant difference in the way in which native speakers of English and EFL speakers (students from Bosnia and Herzegovina) apologise in English, which would show if there is a correlation between language competence and cultural knowledge. Another segment of the research served as a comparison between apology strategies provided by EFL speakers, in English and Bosnian, in order to examine if and to what extent strategies differ when apologising in one's native and foreign languages.

The research data were gathered using a Discourse Completion Test (DCT), commonly used in pragmatic research. The test itself consisted of five hypothetical situations designed as every day events that would, most often, be deemed as requiring an apology. In addition to responding to the question, participants were asked to grade the situations on a scale based on the seriousness of the offence made to determine which situations were considered the most serious social injuries. The results of the study revealed the existence of both similarities, possibly assigned as belonging to the same age group, and some differences, mostly assigned to cultural differences.

**Key words:** pragmatic, speech act, apologies, Bosnian language, English language

**Abbreviations:**

DCT	Discourse Completion Test
EFL	English as a Foreign Language
IFID	Illocutionary Force Indicating Device

## 1. Introduction

*“The pen is mightier than the sword.”*

*Edward Bulwer-Lytton*

The importance of communication in human society has always been evident, and as the metaphorical pen compares to and even dominates the sword, so can a word have the same consequences in society as any other action. One of the first to state his opinion that words accomplish much more than the transmission of information was linguist John L. Austin. In his monumental work “How to do things with words” (1962), Austin sets the stage for the theory of speech acts, whose creator was his student John Searl. Searl defines a speech act not just as a statement but also an action, and one of those speech acts is the apology. This speech act has, in recent years, become a very common subject of many works.

## 2. Defining and Categorizing Apologies

During the 1990s politeness became one of the most popular topics of research in pragmatics. In the context of observing speech acts through the theory of politeness, Brown and Levinson define apologies as: “culturally stabilized interaction rituals with conventionalised formulae” (1987, 235). They claim that all speakers use the same strategies when they find themselves in identical situations. Marc Bergman and Gabriele Kasper, in “Perception and Performance in Native and Nonnative Apology” (1993), define an apology as a: “compensatory action to an offense in the doing of which S was actually involved and which is costly to H” (1993, 82). However, as the authors claim, injuries that may in one culture be regarded as very serious might not even require an apology in another. Janet Holmes writes that, “an apology is a speech act addressed to the person offended’s face-needs and intended to remedy an offence for which the apologizer takes responsibility, and thus to restore equilibrium between the apologizer and the person offended” (Holmes 1990, 156). What this study shows is that even the choice of apology strategies is determined by social factors such as age, sex and social status.

A categorisation that is almost inevitable in most studies of apologies is that of Elite Olshtain and Andrew Cohen from 1983. They propose seven categories, divided into two parts. The first contains five basic categories for the cases when the speaker apologises: an expression of apology, an explanation of the situation, taking the blame, offering a remedy, and a promise that it will not happen again. Each category has several subcategories for the purpose of increasing the delimitation of strategies. The second part contains two strategies for cases where the perpetrator does not feel the need to apologise: denial of the need to apologise and denying responsibility. Similarly, Bergman and Kasper (1993) distinguished seven categories of apologies.

### **3. Previous Research**

Deutschmann (2003), in his extensive research in English language within a corpus consisting of a large number of apologies by different speakers in different contexts, makes some interesting observations. First of all, the frequency of strategies in which speakers try to reduce their liability is four times higher than those in which they take responsibility. In addition, the choice of strategies is influenced by the level of formality of the environment in which the apology is performed. Holmes (1990) comes to the conclusion that when the situation is more serious there is a greater chance that the apology will consist of a number of strategies, and vice versa.

What can be concluded from the research of these authors is that the use and selection of speech acts is influenced by many different factors. Whether it is sex, age, or belonging to certain classes or groups, even within the same language, we find certain specificities and also some inevitable similarities. It is interesting that in many cross-cultural studies of the speech act of apologising, similar results can be found; i.e., there is no strict division between languages, and all similarities and differences are attributed to the context or situation and the already mentioned social factors.

As far as the cross-cultural research of apologies between English and other languages is concerned, perhaps the most important one to mention would be “Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Project (CCSARP)” from 1984, and another from 1989 created as a joint effort by an international team of linguists including Blum-Kulkau, House, and Kasper, where apologies in several languages were analysed. The framework for analysing apologies developed within this project was later used in many studies contributing to the collection of comparable data in

many different languages, and thus continuing the debate between the universality of speech acts and their cultural specificity.

#### 4. The Study

As can be inferred from previous studies of apologies, the results confirm that the majority of universalities in language, at least as far as the speech act of apologies is concerned, cannot be conclusively proven. The questions that this research will try to answer are:

- (1) Are there certain similarities and differences when it comes to the selection of apology strategies in English and Bosnian?
- (2) Is there a significant difference in the way in which native speakers of English and EFL speakers apologise in English (a correlation between language competence and cultural knowledge)?
- (3) Do strategies differ when apologising in one's native language and foreign language (apology strategies provided by EFL speakers, in English and Bosnian)?

The data used in this study was obtained using a Discourse Completion Test, which is used in many cross-cultural studies. The test consists of three parts: an introduction that contains instructions on how to properly fill out the questionnaire; the main part, which consists of five hypothetical situations that potentially require an apology; and the final part, where respondents graded the five situations (on a scale from 1 to 5) on the basis of the severity of the offence. The situations are as follows:

Situation 1: destroying the property of a family member

Situation 2: being half an hour late for a meeting with a friend

Situation 3: losing an acquaintance's property (colleague's notes)

Situation 4: missing a meeting with a professor (a person in a position of "authority")

Situation 5: accidental physical injury of a stranger (old lady).

The participants were 46 students of the Pedagogical faculty, University of Bihac, English Department. The students were divided into two groups; the first filled the questionnaire in Bosnian, while the second answered in English. In addition to students, the study included five native speakers of English.

The categorisation of apology strategies used in this study is a combination of the so far used categorisations, and the examples are taken from survey respondents.

- (1) Explicit expression of an apology:
  - (1.1) IFID—“Sorry!”
  - (1.2) Intensified IFID—“I’m so sorry!”
- (2) Taking responsibility:
  - (2.1) explicit: the speaker takes full responsibility due to some personal flaw—“It’s my fault.”
  - (2.2) indirect:
    - (2.2.1) offer repair/compensation—“I’ll buy you a new shirt.”
    - (2.2.2) verbal redress—“I will never do it again.”
- (3) Minimising responsibility:
  - (3.1) blaming others—“He pushed me.”
  - (3.2) giving an explanation—“I’m very busy with my midterms.”
  - (3.3) lack of intent—“I didn’t do it on purpose.”
  - (3.4) denying responsibility—“It’s not my fault.”

## **5. The Data Analysis and Results**

The first and most obvious difference when it comes to apology strategies used by speakers of Bosnian and English is that speakers of English use much more explicit apologies, both with and without illocutionary force indicating devices. All native speakers of English used an explicit apology with an illocutionary force indicating device in all five hypothetical situations, while the speakers of Bosnian used this strategy less (65.92%), although not completely omitting it.

With strategies of acknowledgement of responsibility, indirect recognition is much more frequent than explicit ones, which appear only in a minority of apologies in Bosnian (6.66%), while native English speakers did not use them. Indirect recognition, in the form of offers to fix the situation, are the most widely used strategy in both languages (English 72%, Bosnian 52.59%), and all of the subjects used it in at least one hypothetical situation, while the promise that a violation will not happen again was used only once in the English native speakers’ excuses (4%), and nine times with speakers of the Bosnian language (6.66%).

When it comes to minimising responsibility, blaming others is the least-used strategy, used only once with a speaker of Bosnian (0.74%), while the strategy of giving explanation is very common in both

languages. As for the other two strategies, lack of intent is more common (36% in English, 24.44% in Bosnian) than denying responsibility (12% in English, 0.74% in Bosnian). The reason for this could be that the speakers are, by explaining the situation, trying to save face and good relations with other members of society.

Another interesting difference observed is that the speakers of English use explicit apologies with intensifiers IFIDs mostly in the fourth situation where they have not complied with the agreed dates for meeting a person who is, one might say, in a position of power (professor), while the same apologies in Bosnian are most often in the fifth situation where the offended is an elderly lady, indicating the potential existence of a different value systems. In Bosnian traditional culture, the elderly are respected as bearers of wisdom, while in American culture more respect is given to persons in authority. Table 1 below shows the previously discussed results.

**Table 1**

APOLOGY STRATEGIES	English (5)					Bosnian (27)				
	S1	S2	S3	S4	S5	S1	S2	S3	S4	S5
Illocutionary Force Indicating Devices (IFIDs)	5	5	5	2	5	12	9	10	14	10
Intensifiers	/	/	/	3	/	7	2	4	8	12
Acknowledgement of Responsibility	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	2	1	6
Compensation/Reparation	5	2	5	1	5	21	6	20	/	19
Promise not to repeat offence	/	/	/	1	/	4	2	/	3	/
Explanation/Accounts	3	5	4	3	3	6	18	14	20	6
Blaming others/Minimisation	/	/	/	/	/	/	1	/	/	/
Lack of intention	2	/	/	3	4	10	/	3	6	14
Denying responsibility	/	1	/	2	/	/	/	/	1	/

As for the differences in the selection of apology strategies between English speakers and Bosnian students in English, there is a greater use of a combination of apology strategies by the students, so that the native speakers most often use apologies that are a combination of three strategies, while the students often use a combination of four or more strategies. The reason for this can potentially be found in the fact that students have, through many years of education and formal learning of a

foreign language, become accustomed to a more extensive and detailed use of language, while the native speakers do not have a subconscious need to “impress” anyone with their extensive vocabulary. In addition to this, unlike apologies in Bosnian (65.92%), when students apologise in English they include more explicit apologies (with and without intensified IFIDs) (94.73%).

Here we also find that indirect recognition apologies (58.94%) are much more frequent than explicit ones (17.89%). However, due to the fact that in all the hypothetical situations the majority of respondents combined four or more apology strategies, explicit apologies, in addition to indirect ones which are almost an inevitable apology strategy of BiH students in English, are still used in students’ apologies in English more often than in Bosnian (6.66%). With indirect apology strategies compensation is once again most frequent (English speakers 72%, Bosnian speakers 53.68%), while verbal redress (12.63%) as well as explicit apologies are used by the students more when apologising in English.

With strategies of minimising responsibility, a strategy that is not encountered when apologising in English is blaming others, while the strategy of giving an explanation is again used most often (76% of English speakers, Bosnian speakers 54.73%). Lack of intent is encountered in most combinations in English (English speakers 36%, Bosnian speakers 14.73%), while denying responsibility is less so often (English speakers 12%, Bosnian speakers 5.26%). The frequency of using strategies which minimise responsibility is attributed to the speaker’s need to keep their face intact, as already mentioned. Table 2 below shows the previously discussed results.

Hypothetical situations are graded in both languages as expected, with the first three situations graded on a scale from one to three, and with situations four and five as the more serious ones. This shows the similarities between the speakers of Bosnian and English, at least as far as the subjects in this study are concerned. The reason for this could be the social factors that Brown and Levinson mentioned. The first three situations, graded as less serious, are related to someone close to the speaker, where the social distance is small (e.g. family member, friend, or colleague). However, when the violation involves a stranger or a person of higher social status with greater social distance, the situations are graded as more severe.

**Table 2**

APOLOGY STRATEGIES	Native speakers (5)					Students (19)				
	S1	S2	S3	S4	S5	S1	S2	S3	S4	S5
Illocutionary Force Indicating Devices (IFIDs)	5	5	5	2	5	10	8	15	10	8
Intensifiers	/	/	/	3	/	9	10	4	8	8
Acknowledgement of Responsibility	/	/	/	/	/	2	/	7	5	3
Compensation/Reparation	5	2	5	1	5	15	7	10	2	17
Promise not to repeat offence	/	/	/	1	/	3	5	/	4	/
Explanation/Accounts	3	5	4	3	3	/	/	/	/	/
Blaming others/Minimisation	/	/	/	/	/	14	16	10	8	4
Lack of intention	2	/	/	3	4	5	/	3	/	6
Denying responsibility	/	1	/	2	/	/	/	/	5	/

## 6. Conclusion

The results from this study should not be generalised due to the fact that there are some limitations. These limitations are the relatively small number of respondents only five subjects were native speakers of English and the fact that only a written test was used. In order to come up with some more relevant results in terms of similarities and differences in the choice of apology strategies in English and Bosnian, the scope of subjects, at least regarding the native speakers of English, should certainly be increased. In addition to this, there is a chance that the results would be significantly different if the respondents were more diverse; that is, of different ages and social groups and not just students of English language and literature, who are familiar with the language and culture, and who also have a lot of other similar characteristics that may influence the selection of similar strategies. Also, some authors list the limitations of using a DCT only, and therefore other forms of testing, for example role-play or analysis of a corpus collected in real-life situations, should be used.

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# ENGLISH AS A WINDOW INTO UNDERSTANDING THE BRAIN

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## **Abstract**

The purpose of our study is to closely examine the effect of human cognitive and social levels on lexis perception. This relationship is a concern of cognitive linguistics, which concentrates on cognitive and cultural resources in use when the connection between words in the human brain and their usage is made. In the same way, the schema that helps in the organisation of already acquired lexis and which simultaneously assists in the acquisition of new lexis is constructed. The field of cognitive linguistics also encompasses a grammatical approach called cognitive grammar. This approach to language is based on our experience of the world and the ways we perceive and conceptualise it. Exposure to language is mandatory to initiate the acquisition process, which is computed by the brain in various ways. Although cognitive factors have a great impact on meaning perception, social factors cannot be overseen. Language is not only used to express thoughts and interpret meaning, but also to construct meaning from various contexts and discourses. During our study, we conducted an experiment followed by interviews of participants in order to get insights into the human perception of lexis in descriptive texts, and the process of combining these lexical items and how they form grammatical constructions.

**Keywords:** cognitive linguistics, lexis, perception, social linguistics

## **1. Introduction**

Every living creature has a brain and some produce sounds, but only humans can produce language as an organised and structured system of words. Some say that nothing but cognition and mental activity are responsible for the comprehension of language. However, social factors

should not be overlooked. In mainstream cognitive linguistic circles, it has been acknowledged for quite some time that language should not be studied as a solely mental phenomenon, but also as a social activity (Hollmann and Siewierska 2011). In *Methods and Generalizations* by Gilles Fauconnier (2000), Cognitive Linguistics is described as, “a science of meaning construction and its dynamics”. Furthermore, if language is seen as a part of cognitive processing, then it can be used as a, “window into understanding the human brain” (Pinker 1994). Cognitive linguists believe that various factors, such as environmental, biological, psychological, developmental, historical, and sociocultural, shape language.

Cognitive linguistics deals with both cognitive and cultural resources when the connection between meaning perception in the human brain and the outcome (words) is made. “Meaning is considered to be a matter of conceptualization” (Pavlović 2010); in other words, different users of language interpret words in disparate ways under the influence of cultural and social determinants. Moreover, under the influence of the nature of the human brain, body, and environment, human understanding and reasoning are shaped and constrained. The question of meaning is not just one of language, but also of the possibilities of human cognition, interaction, and expression.

Language is symbolic and the line between figurative and literal meanings is very thin. Idioms are one of the segments whose influence on human perception could be closely examined. When they are looked at literally they are not meaningful, which means that knowing the words that construct them is not enough. This leads to the question of what it means to know a word. There is no such thing as completely knowing or completely unknowing, “it is always a matter of degree” (Cameron 2001). It has been argued that there are different levels of word knowledge between complete innocence and complete competence (Miller 1999). Cronbach (1942) described the different kinds of knowledge of a word as the ability to define it, the ability to recognise situations for using it, knowledge of its alternative meanings, the ability to recognise inappropriate uses of the word, and the availability of the word for use in everyday life. Also, there needs to be a connection between the idea of the word and its orthographic form to create concepts in our brain and form conceptual knowledge of the word.

The mental representation of the meaning of the word is also important because it can provide insight into the human mind. Johnson-Laird’s (1987) article demonstrates that some theorists have assumed that the sense of a word consists of a structured set of semantic features into which its meaning is decomposed (e.g. Schaeffer and Wallace 1970;

Smith, Shoben, and Rips 1974). Others assume that the mental lexicon takes the form of a semantic network (e.g. Anderson 1976; Anderson and Bower 1973; Collins and Quillian, 1969; Rumelhart, Lindsay and Norman 1972), or a combination of network and features (Glass and Holyoak 1974/5). A third sort of theory, however, rejects the notion of semantic decomposition and assumes that there are no semantic representations for words, only a vast set of rules of inference, or “meaning postulates” (see Fodor, Fodor, and Garrett 1975; Fodor 1977, Ch.5; Kintsch 1974). Word meaning can be acquired by one of two processes: one can be told what the word means, or one can infer what it means from encountering it in use.

Knowing a word involves much more than knowing its meaning and pronunciation. An important component in word knowledge is the context in which the word can be used to express a particular meaning. While learning a mere definition of a word is straightforward, learning a word from its context is a quite complex process. One word may have different (referential or connotative) meanings, or it may be part of a wider range of specific terms in a given semantic field. For example, the verb “move” is a generic term under which there are lower level terms such as “walk” or “run,” and there are even hyponyms such as “march” or “stroll.” One needs to encounter many different contexts in order to master all the meanings of a new word. Context is important not only for acquisition, but also for comprehension. In some cases, context is closely related to meaning, and therefore it adopts all the characteristics related to meaning. In order to have a meaningful experience with the word one must consider its context. Therefore, language is one of the best starting points to examine human comprehension and context interpretation, and to get insight into the cognitive processes supporting them.

### **1.1 Aim of the study**

The main aim of our study is to closely examine the factors influencing lexis perception. Therefore, our research questions were: “What has an influence on lexis perception?” and “How do we construct meaning?” We have primarily focused on cognition and its sole effect on deriving meaning from unknown words when encountered in specific contexts.

## **2. Materials and Methods**

In this study we applied the qualitative method. A stratified random sampling design was implemented in selecting study participants.

The sample represented 14 students in their 3rd and 4th years at the English language and literature department at the International Burch University. Participants were of Bosnian, Turkish, and Chinese nationalities. The instrument used was a questionnaire consisting of descriptive text by Theodore Dreiser from his work *Sister Carrie*, where participants were asked to guess the meanings of the words in bold by associating them to other words given in the text. The words given were “satchel,” “timid,” “parting,” “gush,” “clacked,” “environs,” and “irretrievably.” It is important to emphasise that we intentionally provided vocabulary that was unknown to the majority of participants since it was not frequently used. The independent variable was the descriptive text, and the participants’ perception of lexis in the text was the dependent variable.

Upon completing the task with descriptive text, participants were interviewed. The interview was conducted in a written form and consisted of three questions. We first asked them whether they were familiar with any of the words given. The second question determined the words they associated with the unknown words in bold, and the third question was on how they guessed the meanings of the unknown words.

### 3. Results and Discussion

The results show that the majority of participants have the correct definition of the words in bold in the questionnaire. What we expected them to do was to read the text carefully and try to understand a word in the given context. They may not have had enough information or they might have been misguided in some cases. Those words were placed specifically to show that cognition, the connections we make between words, and perception play a crucial role in understanding lexis and deriving meaning. Ten participants guessed correctly the meaning of the word “satchel,” while for “timid” only 7 gave the correct definition. For “parting” and “gush” there were 9 correct guesses. Lastly, for “clacked,” “environs,” and “irretrievably,” 8 participants guessed the right meaning. It was not expected that the participants would write the exact definition, rather one that was general or close to the meaning. For example for the word “satchel” it was enough to write that it was a bag, and further explanation was not needed. Moreover, students were not allowed to use a dictionary or any kind of tool that would help them in guessing the correct meanings of the words.

Our main interest was the way they guessed the meaning of words, correctly or incorrectly. In that regard, we shall begin with the first word. “Satchel” was found in this part of a sentence: “her total outfit consisted of

a small trunk, a cheap imitation alligator-skin **satchel**, a small lunch in a paper box....” Students who wrote that it was a bag could understand the meaning from the idea of luggage that was implied in this part, and also the “imitation alligator-skin” segment, which is frequently used in relation to bags. Next was “timid.” In this case, students could not so easily write the correct meaning of the word since the context was misleading. The sentence: “She was eighteen years of age, bright, **timid**, and full of the illusions of ignorance and youth” implied something good, since it stood in context with the words “bright” and “youth,” while it means “shy.” With regard to this, participants would write cheerful, happy, and beautiful, rather than its correct meaning. Therefore, only half of the total number of participants answered correctly. “Parting” was given at the beginning of the sentence: “Whatever touch of regret at **parting** characterized her thoughts....” It was a more or less familiar word to a majority of students. However, if they did not know the right meaning, the word “regret” implied that it referred to something sad, as farewell usually does. The word “gush” was provided in the context “A **gush** of tears....” The correct meaning could be immediately noticed since the word occurred with the word “tears,” and also due to the common collocation “to burst into tears.” The word “gush” reminded participants of something onomatopoeic, and since it was mentioned with “tears” they assumed it was connected with the sound of flowing liquid. The next word was “clacked,” and it was used in the sentence: “when the cars **clacked** by the flour mill....” Here, participants could also be misguided by the flow of the sentence where they could think that “clack by” meant “pass by,” rather than “make a sharp sound,” but what led them to the correct answer was the fact that it was an onomatopoeic word. The word whose meaning could be guessed easily was “environs.” It was used in the sentence “familiar green **environs** of the village passed in review....” The word was associated with “green” in the text, and since participants knew the word “environment” they guessed the meaning correctly. Moreover, not many words began with the consonants “env.” It was surprising that only 8 participants wrote the correct meaning. A common answer was “trees,” but was not accepted as correct. The last word was “irretrievably,” where participants were supposed to use their background knowledge of prefixes to understand that the prefix “ir” actually represents negation. In which case, “irretrievably” represents something that cannot be retrieved. Moreover, it was used in the context where participants could easily derive the correct meaning, i.e., “the threads which bound her so lightly to girlhood and home were **irretrievably** broken.”

In the interviews they gave the reasons mentioned in the previous paragraph. The majority of participants got the right meaning of unknown words. Some may not have written the exact meaning but they were close to it, which shows that their similar educational backgrounds affected their schema activation. As the results show, they mostly relied on the context to draw out the meanings of the unknown words. Moreover, making associations with other words in the text helped participants in finding the correct meanings. The difference between those who successfully guessed the meaning and those who didn't lies in their cognitive levels. In other words, students with higher cognitive levels—by which we mean those who could connect their previous knowledge to the new—could guess the majority of the words' correct meanings from the context, whereas students with low cognitive levels could not. Another influential factor was exposure to the unknown words. Participants who have known or encountered some of the words were able to complete the task faster and without difficulties.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Cognitive levels are an important part of meaning perception but they are not enough. Every aspect of language is affected by the knowledge of word meaning. Taking context and discourse into account when deriving the meaning of unknown words is also necessary in order to get the correct meaning. Participants of this study were supposed to recall the meaning of the word they already knew in order to comprehend the meanings of new, unknown words. The results showed that the linguistic context had a great impact on interpreting specific words. Based on word schemata formed earlier, the human brain retrieves stored words and phrases and links them to newly encountered words. This clearly indicates that language is used not only to express thoughts and interpret meaning, but also to construct meaning from various contexts and discourses.