Big words, small grammar

Scott Thornbury

takes note that some words are more important than others.

Leave-taking

He took her hand. She took his money.

He took a lover.

She took exception. He took leave of his senses. She took advice.

He took fright.

She took him to the cleaner's. He took to drink.

She took a holiday.

He took his life.

She took up ballroom dancing.

(Susie Bamworth)

The above mini-saga*, highly commended in a *Daily Telegraph* competition, is a good example of the generative power of a single high-frequency verb: *take*. *Take* is a very big word. In one learners' dictionary, 42 separate meanings of *take* are itemised – not to mention a dozen or so idiomatic expressions and 14 phrasal verbs, many of these also polysemous (ie having multiple meanings). And this does not include common collocations like *take exception* and *take fright*, which are included under their associated noun elements. Nor does it include compounds and derivatives like *leave-taking, takeaway, takeover, takings* and *piss-take*.

Delexical verbs

Part of the phenomenal versatility of *take* is that it is what is called a delexical verb: that is, it forms idiomatic combinations with nouns where the main informational load is in the noun, not the verb, as in *take a photo, take a shower, take a nap*, etc. *Take* – in these expressions – is virtually devoid of meaning and serves a purely grammatical function, a bit like an auxiliary. Other common verbs of this type are *have, give* and *make*.

Take, then, hovers somewhere in the twilight zone between vocabulary and grammar. *Take a* + noun (as in *take a seat, take a break, take a bow*, etc) is such a generative pattern that it is less vocabulary, more 'small grammar'. Likewise, phrases like *I take your point, take your time, take it as read* are so fixed and idiomatic that they are more like 'big words' than grammatically generated sentences. This 'big word, small grammar' quality is shared by all high-frequency words.

Common words

Take is the eighth most common verb (ie discounting auxiliaries and modals) in written English. The fact that it is so frequent is not so much because it has 42 different meanings and 14 phrasal

verbs (although this helps), but because its core meaning is incredibly important in terms of what people need to say. *Taking* things, from some person or some place, to some other person or some other place, is a universal human activity – something it would be very difficult *not* to talk about in any language or in any culture. That is the thing about common words: they have common meanings. The most frequent words in a language encode its most frequent meanings. So, from a learner's point of view, especially a learner in a hurry, words like *take* are very much worth paying attention to.

Common patterns

Because you always have to mention what exactly it is that you are *taking*, *take* always has an object: *She took his money; take the bus; take your time.* And, unsurprisingly, it is often followed by some sort of place adverbial: *I took your suit to the cleaner's.* What's more, you often take things to some other person, a meaning which can be collapsed into the two-object pattern: *Take grandma her dinner.*

These syntactic patterns, which are part of the grammar of *take* (**verb + noun, verb + noun + place adverbial**, and **verb + noun + noun**), are hugely common in English. The **verb + noun + noun** pattern attracts such useful verbs as *ask, tell, give, lend, pay, buy, sell, show, teach, send* and *throw*. By learning the word *take* along with its associated syntax, the learner not only gets access to a lot of meaning-making potential, but also a highly generative set of grammar patterns. As John Sinclair put it, *'Learners would do well to learn the common words of the language very thoroughly, because they carry the main patterns of the language.'*

This idea is not new. In fact it has been around for well over a century. In 1864 Thomas Prendergast, in *The Mastery of Languages*, wrote, *'When a child can employ two hundred words of a foreign language he [sic] possesses a practical knowledge of all the syntactical constructions and of all the foreign sounds.'*

Not just a (male) child, but any language learner, I'd suggest. In fact, if you take just the top 200 words in English, and for each of these words you display its commonly associated grammar, you cover all the main grammar structures in the language.

Just think of how many structures are associated with the verbs *have, be* and *do*, for example. Or with the adverbs *ever, more* and *still*. Or with the conjunctions *if, while* and *since*.

Not only that, if you memorised just one or two idiomatic expressions associated with each of these high-frequency words, you'd be internalising the high-frequency grammar patterns in which these words are commonly embedded. For learners who are not well disposed to generating sentences from rules, these memorised 'chunks' offer another way into the grammar. Like slow-release aspirin, they surrender their internal structure slowly over time. And, if nothing else, these ready-made

> High-frequency words pop up everywhere: the top 200 words comprise nearly 50% of text

chunks contribute to spoken fluency. Think of the conversational mileage provided by these expressions with *take: Take it from me. It won't take long. Take it or leave it. Take X, for example. It takes one to know one.* etc.

In fact, a good many film and song titles include *take*. A quick search of the internet threw up these film titles: *Take A Girl Like You; Take The Money And Run; Take All Of Me; Take A Hard Ride; You Can't Take It With You; Winner Take All; Give And Take.*

That's the thing with these high-frequency words: they pop up everywhere. It's been estimated that the top 200 words in the language comprise nearly 50% of text. That is to say, half of the words in any text (including this one) are likely to be in the top 200. That's quite a large chunk of text to have access to, assuming, of course, you are familiar with these 200 words, and their many meanings.

★ ★ ★

The fact that these words are so common lends itself to an exercise type that (I think) I have invented. It goes like this:

Is there a case, then, for re-thinking our approach to the teaching of grammar, and, by focusing on the 'big words', replacing 'big grammar' with 'small grammar'?

After all, the entire grammar of English is contained in just a handful of words.

Take my word for it. **ETp**

* A **mini-saga** is a piece of writing with exactly 50 words, which tells a story. It has to have a beginning, a middle and an end, and cannot be simply a description of something.

Bamworth, S in Aldiss, B (Ed) *Mini-Sagas* Enitharmon Press 2001

Sinclair, J *Corpus, Concordance, Collocation* OUP 1991

Prendergast, T *The Mastery of Languages* Richard Bentley 1864

Scott Thornbury is a freelance teacher trainer and writer. His latest book, *Natural Grammar*, is published by Oxford University Press.

sthornbury@wanadoo.es