

Business English – a journey from vocabulary to lexis

Andrzej Stęsik,

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Some important thoughts about language

- *”Without grammar little can be conveyed; without vocabulary **nothing** can be conveyed”* (David Wilkins)
- *”A lexical mistake often causes misunderstanding, while a grammar mistake rarely does.”* (John Sinclair)
- *”Language which contains grammatical errors is unlikely to be misunderstood in context, but with lexical errors misunderstanding, incomprehension, or in rare cases even offence, are quite likely.”* (Michael Lewis)
- *”Language is grammaticalized lexis, not lexicalized grammar.”* (Michael Lewis)



Some remarks from students:

- *"This was really a terrible day - only two new words."*
- *"The lessons are best when the teacher gives us many new words."*
- *"I keep words in my notebook. I read them every day. Then I will learn."*
- *"It's clear to me. If I don't know the words, I don't understand."*

Vocabulary? No, lexis!

- What is lexis?
- single words: 'profit', 'price', 'pay'
- expressions: 'place an order'
- **'place an order for** (a product / a service) **with** (a company / a supplier / a producer / a manufacturer')

A possible categorization of lexis: words

- **Single items:**

bill

tax

pay

buy

expensive

realistically

by

of

A possible categorization of lexis: polywords

nevertheless

by the way

in a way

on the other hand

the day after tomorrow

put up with

hit it off with

A possible categorization of lexis: collocations

‘rancid ...

‘rancid butter’

‘nomadic ...

‘nomadic tribe’

A possible categorization of lexis: collocations

‘perfectly ...

‘perfectly acceptable / fine’

‘to boost ...

‘to boost sales / confidence’

A possible categorization of lexis: collocations

‘to make ...

‘to make a decision / a mistake / progress’

‘to have ...

‘to have a drink / lunch / fun / a go at ...’

A possible categorization of lexis: collocations

‘Internet browser’

‘disruptive technology’

‘adaptive learning’

Collocations can be put on a spectrum from fixed to free.

A possible categorization of lexis: institutionalized expressions

- **Short utterances:**

Not yet.

Certainly not.

Just a moment, please.

A possible categorization of lexis: institutionalized expressions

- **Frames:**

That's not as (adj.) as you think.

I've got a (plane / train) to catch.

Could you pass the (noun), please.

A possible categorization of lexis: institutionalized expressions

- **Sentence heads:**

Sorry to interrupt, but can I just say ...

That's all very well, but ...

Why don't we ...

I think you should ...

If I were you, I'd ...

A possible categorization of lexis: institutionalized expressions

- **Whole sentences:**

I see what you mean.

Take your time, there's no hurry.

Should you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Words	Multi-word items		
bill tax reduce buy profit margin expensive realistically by of	Polywords	Collocations	Institutionalized expressions
	in a way by the way up to now on the other hand the day after tomorrow	rancid butter nomadic tribe (fixed collocations)	1. Short utterances : Not yet. Certainly not. Just a moment, please.
	put up with hit it off with bring down cut down on	perfectly acceptable / fine to boost sales / confidence	2. Frames (with slots for various fillers) : That's not as (adj.) as you think. I've got a (plane / train) to catch. (NOT : taxi, post) Could you pass the (noun), please.
		to make a decision / a mistake to have a drink / dinner / a 15 % market share (collocations with de-lexicalized words)	3. Sentence heads : Sorry to interrupt, but can I just say ... That's all very well, but ... Why don't we ... If I were you I'd ... I think you should ...
	Internet browser disruptive technology (free collocations)	4. Whole sentences : I see what you mean. (NOT : I grasp ...) Take your time, there's no hurry. (NOT : Take time, there	



Size of the mental lexicon

- How big is a native speaker's lexical repertoire?
- Native speakers store a huge number of items of all the categories we've just looked at: from single words to collocations to institutionalized expressions. How many exactly?
- Estimates vary considerably, but are **never less than tens of thousands**. If we consider both active and passive lexical items, the number probably runs into **hundreds of thousands**.

How do we choose which lexical items to teach?

- business people are busy
- the most relevant and useful lexis

Importance of collocation in BE

- ”(...) collocation is closely tied to particular subject areas and, to a certain extent, it could be argued that **topic-specific collocations are a major defining aspect of these areas**. It follows that **language proficiency within science, medicine, and commerce will be determined to a large extent by the students’ mastery of the common collocations particular to each field**. This means that **a focus on collocation must become a major priority in Business English and English for Academic Purposes courses**.” (George Woolard)

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- Where do we find these collocations?



What lexis is likely to be used in a magazine article about inflation?

- expressions / collocations with ‘inflation’
- expressions / collocations with ‘price(s)’
- ways of expressing how things changed over time (language of change)

Whiffs of inflation?

AS IF disappointing profits were not enough to send financial markets into a spin, another spectre of gloom appeared this week: inflation. On October 17th Eurostat, the European Union's statistical office, announced that consumer-price inflation in the Euro area had risen to a six-year high of 2.8% in the year to September. That was up sharply from 2.3% in the year to August, and well above the European Central Bank's long-term ceiling of 2%. The next day, Wall Street was rocked—temporarily perhaps—by the news that America's consumer prices had also risen by more than expected. Overall consumer prices rose 0.5% in September and 3.5% compared with a year earlier.

In both cases, higher oil prices bear the brunt of the blame. Core inflation in the euro area (that is, excluding volatile energy and food prices) is running at just 1.4%, up from 1.3% in August. In America, the energy index rose a whopping 3.8% in September as petrol, heating-oil and natural-gas

prices all shot up. Given that America's petrol prices appear to have fallen during October, this surge may prove short-lived. Such are the views of inflation doves.

Yet not all the bad news can be dismissed as temporary. Europe's core inflation rate is also rising. Though still low, in the euro area it is inching upwards perhaps because of a weak euro, or because of higher oil prices. It is notable that the euro zone's overall inflation rate is now higher than that in some of the European Union countries that have kept their own currencies. In the year to September, consumer prices rose by 1.1% in Sweden and 2.2% in Denmark. If the euro continues to wobble, expect more bad news on the inflation front.

Nor was America's inflation a surprise driven just by energy prices. Core inflation ran at 0.3% in September (although the year-on-year measure stayed constant at 2.6%). After surging to 0.4% in March, core inflation had held steady at 0.2% every month. Here, too, "special factors" played a

role: tobacco prices jumped by 3.5% after the end of a spell of August discounting. Prices for clothing jumped by 1.6%, as higher-priced autumn and winter collections were brought in early.

Some analysts also reckon that the September figures showed promising signs of price stability. Economists at Chase Manhattan, for instance, point out that the prices for new-model cars rose only modestly. Such explanations give cheer to optimists, who argue that high productivity growth has ensured that high energy prices and tight labour markets do not translate into broader price pressure. And, with increasing signs that the economy is slowing, the inflationary pressure should subside further. Well, perhaps. It is certainly true that inflation has not accelerated dramatically. Prices may have nudged up since August, but year-on-year inflation in America is still below its nine-year high of 3.8% in March. Nonetheless, it is a lot higher than in 1998 and 1999. No cause for panic, but, equally, no cause for complacency, either—inflation, however measured, is rising, not falling.

UNHEALTHY DIET

Why has Polish inflation surged?

Poland knows the perils of high inflation better than most. Fortunately, the days of skyrocketing prices are long gone, thanks to prudent finance ministers and a tough central bank. So what caused July's massive jump in inflation, which forced the bank to raise interest rates to a two-year high? Several factors, apparently, most of which are beyond the central bank's control.

The alarm bells started ringing in January when the hard-won fight to bring inflation down to single digits collapsed. Prices nudged above 10% year-on-year for the first time since September 1998. The single-digit figures had been largely a psychological breakthrough, but they had given credibility to Poland's pledge to join the euro zone within this decade—a commitment that implies, among other things, having inflation of around 3%.

That's tough to achieve in Central Europe, where most countries have high shares of food and energy in their consumer price indicas. These pump up and down a bit, resulting in volatile inflation rates. Food accounts for a third of Poland's price basket, compared with an average of just 17% in the EU. So there's no doubt that this year's rotten harvest helped drive up inflation to 11.6% in July.

But is food the real culprit? The government certainly didn't help matters last year when it slapped tariffs on a range of imported foods in order to appease angry farmers protesting against subsidised EU goods. The central bank (not to mention Brussels) wants the tar-

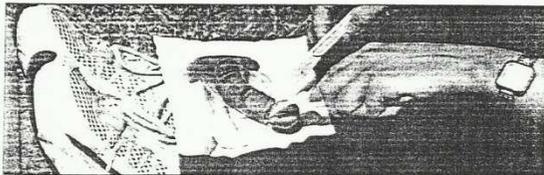


iffs lifted, but the government is loath to upset farmers with elections coming up next year. Besides, soaring oil prices are also to blame, with fuel costs rising 50% in the past 12 months.

Monopolistic pricing only makes things worse. It is sheltered sectors like energy and telecoms that analysts see as the most worrying and persistent element of high inflation. "The main problem is structural. We just have too many protected sectors," says Witold Chuś, at CDM Pekao brokerage in Warsaw. That's why the central bank also called for the dismantling of monopolies to spur competition as it jacked up interest rates last month to a stifflingly high 19-23% a year.

The government has responded by lifting import duties on fuels but has so far refused to slash food tariffs. The central bank, meanwhile, is likely to miss its inflation target for the second year running. The good news is that food prices are falling which should help for the rest of the year. But Mr Chuś isn't smiling: "These problems don't disappear overnight."

— NICHOLAS SPIRO (WARSAW)



Article 1: expressions with 'inflation'

- the perils of **high inflation**
- July's massive **jump in inflation**
- the hard-won fight to **bring inflation down** to single digits collapsed
- **having inflation of around 3 %**
- volatile **inflation rates**
- this year's rotten harvest helped **drive up inflation** to 11.6 % in July
- The central bank is likely to miss its **inflation target** for the second year running

Article 1: expressions with 'price'

- **skyrocketing prices**
- **prices nudged** above 10 %
- consumer price indices
- Food accounts for a third of Poland's **price basket**
- **soaring oil prices**
- **monopolistic pricing** only makes things worse
- **food prices** are falling

Article 2: expressions with 'inflation'

- **consumer-price inflation** had risen to a six-year high of 2.8 %
- **core inflation** is running at just 1.4 %, up from 1.3 % in August
- Europe's **core inflation rate** is also rising
- **inflation is inching** upwards
- expect more bad news on the **inflation front**
- America's **inflation driven by** just energy prices
- **core inflation** had held steady at 0.2 % every month
- the **inflationary pressure** should subside further
- **inflation has not accelerated** dramatically
- **year-on-year inflation** is still below its nine-year high of 3.8 % in March
- **inflation is rising, not falling**

Article 2: expressions with 'price'

- **consumer prices** had risen by more than expected
- overall **consumer prices** rose 0.5 % in September
- higher **oil prices**
- volatile **energy and food prices**
- **petrol, heating oil and natural-gas prices** all shot up
- **petrol prices** appear to have fallen
- **consumer prices** rose by 1.3 %
- **tobacco prices** jumped by 3.5 %
- **prices for clothing**
- **higher-priced (...) collections**
- September figures showed promising signs of **price stability**
- **the prices for new-model cars** rose only modestly
- high **energy prices**
- **prices may have nudged up** since August



Conclusion:

- start with a key business word (e.g. inflation)
- find factual texts where this concept is discussed
- there we inevitably come across collocations / expressions with this word
- as well as with other words (e.g. price / lg. of change)



Why use factual texts in teaching?

- Language is always used in context. Texts are a natural way of providing context.
- "Any factual text is a disguised concordance of some of its key words." (Michael Hoey)

What kind of collocations should have priority in BE teaching?

- Those with the key business words like:

business

company

price(s)

market

cost(s)

profit / loss

money

account

What kind of collocations should have priority in BE teaching?

- order
- product(s) / production
- service(s)
- tax(ex)
- staff
- office
- department
- agreement / contract
- etc.

How do we help students learn these useful collocations?

- First make them aware that they have to start noticing useful collocations in text.
- How?
- "The alarm bell started ringing in January when the hard-won fight to b_____ inflation d_____ to single digits collapsed. Prices n_____ above 10 % year-on-year for the first time since September last year. (...)"
- "The alarm bell started ringing in January when the hard-won fight to **bring** inflation **down** to single digits collapsed. Prices **nudged** above 10 % year-on-year for the first time since September last year. (...)"

Recording useful collocations:

1. verb + n

accept n
agree on/to n
set n
fix n
establish n
offer n
quote n
guarantee n
pay n
haggle over n
negotiate n

↑ raise n
increase n
push up
put up
↓ lower n
decrease n
reduce n
cut n
slash n
bring down n
push down n

→ freeze n
maintain n

PRICE(S)

2. adj. + n

+ attractive n
competitive n
fair/good n
moderate n
modest n
reasonable n

- excessive n
exorbitant n
inflated n
outrageous n
ridiculous n

3. kinds

wholesale n / retail n

4. expressions

put a price tag on ...
at a price
not at any price



Thank you !

Andrzej Stęśik

andrzej.stesik@intersection.pl