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## **The use of the selected lexical and function words *to, there, before* by L2 Polish users at different proficiency levels**

### **Abstract:**

The objective of this article will be both the theoretical and the practical analysis of the use of the selected English lexical and function words (*to, there, before*) by Polish users of English representing different proficiency levels. The practical part, in particular, will concern the use of the afore-mentioned, selected words comprising both categories based on the available corpus of L2 users (PELCRA – PLEC). The first acronym refers to Polish and English Language and Corpora for Research and Applications (PELCRA), which is the result of scientific work of the scholars from the University of Łódź. The other one (PLEC), stands for PELCRA English Learner Corpus (see the Bibliography section below). It is commonly known that learners/ students may demonstrate their awareness and professional knowledge with reference to the basic use and comprehension of words in their primary meaning, namely lexical words. The problems arise when they need to confront their current knowledge and awareness while discovering that some words are ambiguous or polysemous. Hence the idea of such research, the intention of which is to validate the students' performance when faced with words, which are only seemingly simple and predictable.

### **Introduction**

Lexical words (content words) constitute an open word class and they contain: nouns, main (lexical) verbs, adjectives and adverbs. This class is open, as it encompasses a linguistic set that can be extended throughout life. Such types of words are, however, associated with semantic-type speech errors (W. Levelt 1992).

T. Klammer/ M. Schulz/ A. Volpe (2009) claim that function words are words that have little lexical meaning or have ambiguous meaning, as they signal the structural relationships that words have to one another and are the glue that holds sentences together. They serve as important elements to the structures of sentences. They comprise, e.g. auxiliary verbs, pronouns, conjunctions and determiners. It is believed that when fluency breaks down in spontaneous speech, speakers repeat pronouns and conjunctions (H. Clark/ E. Clark 1977).

Pronouns and conjunctions are types of function words that have a grammatical, or functional, role but do not carry a full lexical meaning (R. Hartmann/ F. Stork 1972, R. Quirk et al. 1985).

## 1. Research problem

The main problem raised in the article will be the analysis of the scope in which Polish L2 users are able to comprehend the polysemous system of the selected word categories.

These categories, depending on the available context, may be meaningful or may merely signal a given meaning, e.g. an English word *to* may be a lexical word, or an adverb, etc. *The patient came to*, but also in the other context it may serve as a functor, e.g. an infinitive marker (*'to swim'*) or a preposition (*'ten to twelve'*).

In the case of the second analysed word (*there*), it may function as an adverb, e.g. *Sit over there* or as a pronoun, e.g. *There are numerous items. There must be another exit.*

With reference to the last analysed word *before*, it may fulfil three functions, depending on the availability of the context. *Before* may function as an adverb, e.g. *They called me the day before*. Its second function may be a preposition, e.g. *The young man's whole life lies before him*. Eventually, the last function fulfilled by the word *before* is the one of a conjunction (depending on many sources, interchangeably named a subordinator), e.g. *See me before you leave*, where two clauses, the main one *See me* is separated from the subordinate clause *you leave*, which is initiated by a word *before*.

## 2. Research assumptions

Non-native language users (the subjects) are mostly aware of the use of lexical words. However, they seem to have problems with the distinction between adjectives and adverbs, such as, e.g. *likely*, *lively*, which are treated by them only as adverbs.

When a word possesses its grammatical function, the awareness of the learners/students ceases, doubts and hesitations tend to occur. It is mostly caused by the fact that the frequency of occurrence of lexical words in their functional role is not regularly mentioned by teacher during classes of different kind, namely languages courses or university classes.

## 3. The quantitative study

The quantitative study will be based on the corpus analysis (the afore-mentioned PLEC) with reference to different proficiency groups, comprising the levels ranging from A1 to C2 (based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages).

We shall focus on the selected instances of the afore-mentioned words belonging to two groups with reference to two available registers: spoken and written. The subjects constitute 90% of females and 10% of males; with age variable ranging from 17 to 33 in case of the spoken register. As for the written register, we are able to gain access to the origin of written texts, e.g. essay, personal letters, e-mails.

## 5. Research material

Oral and written performances of non-native users of a foreign language (English) constitute a research material, which was registered during foreign language classes. The material comprises conversations as well as composition classes in a foreign

language. 2000 contexts have been analysed for each selected and investigated word, containing spoken register only or both spoken and written register.

## 6. Corpus analysis

The corpus analysis, demonstrated below, is divided into several sections (5.1 to 5.8). Each section juxtaposes and demonstrates the use of the investigated words (*to*, *there*, *before*). The bracketed information in each of the instances below contains the mode it was constructed in (spoken or written), followed by a proficiency level, age of the respondents, gender and education level, e.g. secondary school or university.

The illustration of the spoken mode is demonstrated as precisely as it was expressed by the speakers, hence some of the parts of spoken register may indicate the imperfection of communication, which is due to the lower proficiency levels (A2, B1) or it may be caused by a high level of stress indicated by the occurrence of hedging expressions, which are not observable in fluent speech.

### (1) 'To' as an infinitive marker (corpus analysis)

The corpus analysis of the use of *to* as an infinitive marker is illustrated below. We were able to observe 7 uses of this word in such a function. They are as follows:

1. Er in the future I like to be businessman (spoken A2 Age: 17 Sex: f Level: secondary school).
2. I think that erm this is the best way to do that er (spoken B1 Age: 19 Sex: f Level: 1\_yr\_BA).
3. It's yyy good idea **to** get married and be happy together (spoken B1 Age:17 Sex: m Level: secondary school).
4. And er way **to to** learn something (spoken C1 Age: 23 Sex: m Level: 2\_yr\_MA).
5. You have **to** be prepared er all the time during whole semester (spoken C1 Age: 22 Sex: f Level: 3rd year English philology).
6. Aah I think it's my hobby I I started **to** be interested in two years ago (spoken C1 Age: 23 Sex: f Level: IV year English philology).
7. I don't know how **to** say yyy without yyy mmm (spoken C2 Age: 22 Sex: f Level: 1\_yr\_MA).

### (2) 'To' as an adverb (corpus analysis)

Unfortunately, no instances of the use of *to* in the function of an adverb were observed. Even the most proficient L2 learners/ students do not use this word in such a function.

### (3) 'To' as a preposition (corpus analysis)

The corpus analysis of the use of *to* as a preposition is illustrated below. We were able to observe 3 uses of this word in such a function. They are the following:

1. So er of course I was preparing by learning to my Mature exam (spoken C1 Age: 19 Sex: f Level: 1\_yr\_BA).
2. Simple simple idea of travelling a lot because it's not just er er 9 **to** 5 work but you just er er all the time do something new er you all the time (spoken C1 Age: 19 Sex: f Level: 1\_yr\_BA).

3. But you are not a regular subscriber **to** any of these you know er film magazines like Cinema or (spoken C1 Age: 23 Sex: m Level: 2\_yr\_MA).

(4) 'There' as an adverb

The corpus analysis of the use of *there* as an adverb is illustrated below. We were able to observe 3 uses of this word in such a function. They are the following:

1. What in what interesting things could I see **there**? What could you recommend? (spoken C1 Age: 23 Sex: m Level: 2\_yr\_MA).
2. The place where they live because they are forced for example to live in a big city because er their their job is **there** and (spoken C2 Age: 19 Sex: m Level: 1\_yr\_BA).
3. Mmm they have to live **there** (spoken C2 Age: 19 Sex: m Level: 1\_yr\_BA).

(5) 'There' as a pronoun (corpus analysis)

The corpus analysis of the use of *there* as a pronoun is illustrated below. We were able to observe 6 uses of this word in such a function. Here we had access to two registers, spoken and written. What is worth focusing on is the peculiarity of the bracketed information with reference to written register. Such information contains (in instances numbered 1, 2 and 6), similarly to the prior sections and instances, the type of mode that it was constructed in as well as a proficiency level. What is different, however, is the occurrence of a domain, e.g. imaginative and a form of a written assignment, e.g. personal letters. The instances are as follows:

1. What is more. **There** aren't too a lot of schools in your city. It should build new schools. (written A2 Domain: W\_imaginative Genre: W\_letters\_personal).
2. **There's** just one other thing: you'd better remember to be systematic in learning foreign language. (written B1 Domain: W\_imaginative Genre: W\_letters\_personal).
3. Their their clothes were totally different like **there** is a tribe er Massai tribe (spoken B2 Age: 22 Sex: f Level: 3rd year English philology).
4. Thank you very much that's actually it **there** is nothing more just er (spoken C1 Age:23 Sex: m Level: 2\_yr\_MA).
5. **There's** a beautiful landscape I we can suspect but on the third one (spoken C2 Age:19 Sex: m Level: 1\_yr\_BA).
6. **There** is no point in destroying the pleasure of understanding other people by (written C2 Domain: W\_soc\_science Genre:W\_essay\_univ).

(6) 'Before' as an adverb (corpus analysis)

The corpus analysis of the use of *before* as an adverb is illustrated below. We were able to observe 4 uses of this word in such a function. They are the following:

1. Since that day has went by few years but really nothing has changed and we me and my sister have better contact than **before**. (written B2 Domain: W\_imaginative Genre: W\_essay\_univ).
2. I've never spent holidays like that **before!** (written B2 Domain: W\_imaginative Genre: W\_essay\_univ).

3. After an hour we were sitting in a small café near the park drinking coffee and talking as if we had known before. (written C1 Domain:W\_imaginative Genre:W\_essay\_univ).
4. The research exemplifies Wilkinson's model of accent hierarchy and corresponds to studies done in the field of accent attitude **before**. (written C2 Domain:W\_app\_science Genre:W\_ac\_soc\_science).

(7) 'Before' as a preposition (corpus analysis)

The corpus analysis of the use of *before* as a preposition is illustrated below. We were able to observe 5 uses of this word in such a function. Both registers: spoken and written were accessible. The instances are as follows:

1. It seems to be that our Polish culture can't hide before influence of American culture because this culture is for us magical and we want to know more about it. (written B1 Domain:W\_imaginative Genre:W\_essay\_school).
2. I think **before** that we're not going to play anywhere else we need to practise a lot (spoken C1 Age:23 Sex: f Level: IV year English philology).
3. When the last Sunday of August came I went with my family to the church in Świącieniec to pray **before** the main part of the whole event. (written C1 Domain: W\_imaginative Genre: W\_essay\_univ).
4. As good as I was **before** the accident (spoken C2 Age:23 Sex:m Level: IV year English philology).
5. You have to get the insurance number **before** you start work (spoken C2 Age:19 Sex: m Level:1\_yr\_BA).

(8) 'Before' as a conjunction (corpus analysis)

The corpus analysis of the use of *before* as a conjunction is illustrated below. We were able to observe 4 uses of this word in such a function. Unfortunately, only the written register was at our disposal. The instances are the following:

1. It is important thing to do **before** you start a course. (written B2 Domain: W\_imaginative Genre: W\_essay\_school).
2. The very act of killing the king is also similar, as they stress what happens with Macbeth before **he** decides to kill, and how he behaves after the first stab. (written C1 Domain:W\_arts Genre:W\_ac\_humanities\_arts).
3. Thirdly, the important aspect is the knowledge of social connotations of an accent **before evaluating** it as charming or harsh. (written C2 Domain:W\_app\_science Genre:W\_ac\_soc\_science).
4. Various aspects should be analysed before choosing a model accent for Poles learning English. (written C2 Domain:W\_app\_science Genre:W\_ac\_soc\_science).

## 7. Conclusions

As far as the conclusions are concerned, we decided to firstly present them in a brief commentary juxtaposed in a tabular form (see Table 1), followed by more elaborate conclusions presented in the subsections below.

1. <i>To</i> as an infinitive marker	Frequent use, observable in most analysed contexts.
2. <i>To</i> as an adverb	No instances found of this kind.
3. <i>To</i> as a preposition	Observable use, however not frequent.
4. <i>There</i> as an adverb	Observable use, however not frequent.
5. <i>There</i> as a pronoun	Frequent use.
6. <i>Before</i> as an adverb	Observable use, however not frequent.
7. <i>Before</i> as a preposition	Frequent use.
8. <i>Before</i> as a conjunction	Observable use, however not frequent.

Table 1. Brief commentary of the obtained research results

(1) ‘to’

We are surprised with the fact of non-use of the word *to* in the function of an adverb, even among most proficient groups. The use of *to* as a preposition is below our expectations. We observed just several cases per 2000 analysed contexts. Eventually, the use of *to* as an infinitive marker was compliant with our expectations and frequent.

(2) ‘there’

The use of the word *there* as a pronoun is compliant with the prior research assumptions. However, the use of *there* as an adverb is below our expectations and research assumptions. We were able to observe only several cases of this kind per such an enormous number of the analysed contexts.

(3) ‘before’

The use of the word *before* as an adverb was not compliant with our expectations. It was too rare due to the fact of the common use of this word in such a function. The use of *before* as a preposition was frequent, indicating the knowledge and awareness of this use among all proficiency groups. The use of *before* as a conjunction was unfortunately not frequent, which does not reflect the research assumptions and expectations of the researcher.

## 8. Limitations affecting the obtained research results

The study had its limitations. A number of analysed and available contexts amounted to 2000. It could be bigger, which would allow to conduct more complex and in-depth study. Moreover, a number of available variables was insufficient. Only a proficiency level, age and gender of the users were observable. There were only 3 words, namely *to*, *there*, *before*, which were investigated. The research was centred only on one corpus available, as indicated in section 5. The analysed corpus comprised a different, changeable register (spoken and written), which imposed a lot of constraints in the overall results obtained after the investigation.

## 9. Further research

The implications for the future research may be, predominantly, to increase a number of contexts to observe how the words in question are used by L2 Polish users. In addition, it would be advisable to calculate percentage results, which would demonstrate the frequency of the use of both lexical and function words.

Subsequently, we could increase a number of variables to obtain a more clear-cut division into both spoken and written registers. Finally, the correlation of the research results from the afore-mentioned corpus with other L2 corpora (e.g. ICLE, which stands for International Corpus of Learner's English) would profoundly facilitate our comprehension of the use of both lexical and function words by L2 users in general.

### 10. Pedagogical implications

The obtained results from the subsequent research will certainly allow to obtain a more clear-cut image of research over a complicated role a given, selected words fulfil in a foreign language. Moreover, the inclusion of the semantic variability of the afore-mentioned words during classes with students of English philology will increase their linguistic awareness concerning such phenomena as well as it will positively influence the development of their language fluency.

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