The title of this book piqued my curiosity for several reasons. During the early stages of learning Maguindanaon, my small vocabulary hindered communication and comprehension. Although I employed a number of learning strategies (flash cards, key word association, picturing) that I had gleaned from my SIL training, I lacked a clear understanding of the importance and nature of vocabulary acquisition in a language-learning program. Later when I began studying lexicography, I recognized that the complexity of the lexical net had to be mastered before words could be used accurately and naturally. Norbert and McCarthy’s book clarified a number of issues and relationships between these subjects for me.

The book is a collection of fifteen articles written by and for teachers of English as a second language, organized into three sections as indicated by the title. Each of the three sections is followed by a summary by the editors. The editors present the volume as a “broad view of the ‘state of the art’ in vocabulary studies” (p.1). A 40-page bibliography and frequent references to the literature substantiate the editors’ claim that there has been a recent flood of books on various aspects of lexis. The references and bibliography provide an entrance into the literature for further study. The book ends with a helpful glossary of 62 items, a nice 8-page author index, and an inadequate 3 page content index.

Although most SIL members will not be heavily involved in pedagogical tasks (the third section), except perhaps in writing language-learning lessons, the field of ESL has much to offer us as language learners (section two) and compilers of dictionaries (section one). Rather than attempting to summarize the book, I will focus and comment on a couple of key points in each article.

**Part 1. Vocabulary and description.**

Paul Nation and Robert Waring, “Vocabulary size, text coverage and word lists.” The size of the English lexicon has been estimated at 54,000 word families (base word plus transparent derivations) for the language as a whole, and 20,000 for a university graduate. Studies indicate that a child adds about 1000 word families per year, approximately the same for a second language learner. The 2000 most common words account for 80-90% of texts, while 3,000–5,000 words are needed for reasonable comprehension, accounting for approximately 95% of the words
encountered. The implication is that we as language learners need to learn at least 3000 words before we can expect to communicate or read texts with much degree of comprehension. Early on in our programs we need to elicit large numbers of words, and run frequency counts on a large and varied text corpus, in order to focus on common, productive words.

**Michael McCarthy and Ronald Carter**, “Written and spoken vocabulary.” Much of the recent work on the English lexicon has been based on massive computer corpora of both written and spoken speech. The computer programs we use in SIL have the capacity to duplicate some of this frequency and concordance work, although on a much more limited basis. Corpus-based studies have been combined with text-based studies to reveal some surprising things about range of usage, variation in meaning, collocation, idioms, and differences between oral and written speech. For instance, the 15 most common words in written speech are the, to, of, a, and, in, I, was, for, that, it, on, he, is, with, and in oral speech are the, I, you, and, to, it, a, yeah, that, of, in, was, is, it’s, know. One of the major differences in oral speech is the high frequency of discourse markers such as you know, I think, well, never mind, kind of, mm. Our language learning should take these differences into account.

**Rosamund Moon**, “Vocabulary connections: multi-word items in English.” One characteristic of language that cropped up throughout the book is its tendency to chunk, not just in the familiar ways of collocations, compounds and idioms, but also in larger constructions (such as the “prefabs” the thing/fact/point is, that reminds me, I’m a great believer in...) that we use as ready-made sentence stems on a discourse level. Multi-word items differ widely in nature, function, and frequency, creating special problems for the learner.

**William Nagy**, “On the role of context in first- and second-language vocabulary learning.” Nagy discusses the nature of the mental lexicon in relation to the frequency of polysemy and the use of context in disambiguation. He presents two views of polysemy: SENSE SELECTION, the mental storage of multiple senses which are disambiguated by context; and REFERENCE SPECIFICATION, the storage of a single generalized meaning which is specified in context by general rules of inference. Although he accepts the validity of both, he argues for the primacy of the former, concluding that polysemy in running text is rather frequent, with a consequent heavy dependence on context for disambiguation.

He follows this with a discussion of the role of context in vocabulary acquisition. He argues that vocabulary instruction cannot account for the astronomical amount of lexical information being picked up by the learner. Consequently most vocabulary must be learned through multiple incidental encounters with words in context, rather than deliberate attempts to learn definitions. He recommends massive reading and striving to comprehend the overall meaning of the text, rather than attention to individual words. We might counter that, in the context of a pre-literate language, what is needed is massive auditory input in an understandable context, but his basic point is well founded.

**Francine Melka**, “Receptive vs. productive aspects of vocabulary.” The starting point of Melka’s chapter is the assumption that receptive vocabulary is much larger than productive vocabulary and that reception precedes production. She has three stated aims: to describe the notions of reception and production, describe the gap between them, and to review the variables
that influence their description. She concludes that reception and production should be viewed as degrees of knowledge, rather than two separate systems. She suggests that the process is actually incremental in which the speaker becomes increasingly familiar with the word.

Her review of the literature raises several points. Reception and production are never clearly defined. Attempts to describe the difference between them refer to a threshold at which a word moves from receptive to productive. Estimates of the ratio between receptive and productive vocabularies range from close to 1:1 to 5:1. Our testing techniques are simply not up to the task of determining when a word is in receptive vocabulary, productive vocabulary, and when it moves from one to the other.

Unfortunately, Melka’s discussion is full of metaphors that have little explanatory value (see Meara’s article below). She admits that she has not answered all the questions raised, but gives little direction for answering them. However if we view the lexicon as a multidimensional network of relationships, we can begin to understand the problem. Using this model, it is possible to conceive of vocabulary growth as the forging of new links between semantic notions, morphemes, affixation potential, phonological realizations, spellings, culturally appropriate settings, registers, collocations, generic terms, synonyms, morphological categories and a host of other types of information which are tied together in our heads and which we attempt to describe in our dictionaries. Such a model explains why the difference between receptive and productive vocabulary is so hard to pin down and so difficult to test. Reception tests often look merely at the link between a word on a page and its meaning, while production depends on the formation of a sufficient number of links so that the speaker is confident enough of the word to use it.

**Part 2. Vocabulary and acquisition.**

**Paul Meara,** “Towards a new approach to modeling vocabulary acquisition.” Paul Meara’s article is a gentle rebuke to researchers in the field of language acquisition for not using explanatory models in their methodology. He points out that the use of metaphors may help our thinking, but metaphors fail to explain or predict behavior. He develops a couple of simple models to illustrate their value in explaining behavior, raising questions and suggesting avenues of research. One model raises some tantalizing questions about acquiring words through exposure to reading material. A second model attempts to explain the difference between receptive and productive vocabulary items, and how words move from one category to the other.

**Nick C. Ellis,** “Vocabulary acquisition: word structure, collocation, word-class, and meaning.” Language is composed of strings of units hierarchically organized into increasingly large chunks. Ellis argues that the acquisition of phonological form, collocation and grammatical class results from unconscious analysis of sequence information. But the acquisition of semantics and the mapping of form to meaning are accomplished by conscious learning processes. Much of language learning is the memorization of strings (phonological and syntactic) resulting in the formation and retention of patterns in long-term memory. These in turn aid in the memorization of new strings.

Fluency involves the PRINCIPLE OF IDIOM—we use semi-preconstructed phrases, rather than exercising the full creative potential of the syntactic rules of a generative grammar. We say,
“Will you marry me,” rather than the well formed but incorrect, “My becoming your spouse is what I want.” Rather than a minor feature, most of text is interpretable by this principle. Learning collocations and chunks increases fluency and frees the mind for other tasks.

Second language learners rely on the semantic framework of their first language, relabeling existing concepts and then adjusting for the differences. Success in determining and learning new meanings, and linking new forms to meanings is largely determined by the employment of useful strategies.

Batia Laufer, “What’s in a word that makes it hard or easy: some intralexical factors that affect the learning of words.” Knowing a word involves knowing its form, morphological structure, syntactic pattern, meaning, connotation, pragmatics, lexical relations, and collocations. Factors that increase learning difficulty include pronounceability, foreign phonemes and phonotactics, suprasegmentals, spelling, morphological complexity, existence of similar forms, register restrictions, idioms and polysemy.

Michael Swan, “The influence of the mother tongue on second language vocabulary acquisition and use.” We all know that our first language interferes with learning a second. But Swan points out that there is also massive common ground that provides a ready-made template, enabling us to shortcut the process. We don’t have to relearn all the conceptual apparatus that allows us to name the universe. This is why it works to learn L2 words by associating them with L1 words. The concept is there; what we need to do is learn a new label, then adjust the semantics and rules of usage to match the second language. This runs counter to much of what I was taught—that I should try to think in the second language and not use my first language as an intermediary. However the studies show that association is a very productive method of learning new words.

Ann Ryan, “Learning the orthographical form of L2 vocabulary—a receptive and a productive process.” The orthography and morphological structure of an L2 may require reading strategies that are different than the L1. Logographic orthographies require word recognition skills while phonemic orthographies require phonemic processing. English requires both, which explains why Japanese do better reading English than Spanish speakers. Arabic speakers reading English confuse vowels more often than consonants because the tri-consonantal root structure of Arabic produces “vowel blindness.” The learner brings unconscious reading skills to the L2, which may have to be supplemented with new skills.

Norbert Schmitt, “Vocabulary learning strategies.” Schmitt lists, categorizes and discusses 58 strategies. He reports on a survey of Japanese learners of English, asking which strategies they use and which they find helpful. Bilingual dictionaries win, followed by repetition, study the spelling/sound, and guess from context. As the learners matured they employed more “deep processing” strategies such as connect with synonyms, ask teacher to use in sentence, and analyze part of speech.

Part 3. The pedagogical context.

Anita J. Sokmen, “Current trends in teaching second language vocabulary.” The pendulum in language teaching has swung from direct teaching of vocabulary to incidental learning from
context, and now back to a combination of both. Sokmen discusses the following recommendations from the literature: build a large sight vocabulary, integrate new words with old, provide a number of encounters with words, promote deep level processing, facilitate imaging and concreteness, use a variety of techniques, and encourage independent learner strategies.

Felicity O’Dell, “Incorporating vocabulary into the syllabus.” In the last 30 years course design has moved from the traditional focus on grammar and translation to a behavioral audio-lingual methodology, then to a communicative emphasis on notions and functions, and most recently to a greater emphasis on vocabulary. O’Dell discusses principles and methods of incorporating vocabulary, suggesting that words be included on the basis of frequency, range of use, availability, learnability, and learner interest. Greater emphasis should be placed on vocabulary early in the program, and learners should be taught learning skills and strategies.

Phil Scholfield, “Vocabulary reference works in foreign language learning.” Scholfield looks at how dictionaries store information, how they are utilized in language use, and how they aid language learning. For instance, learning may be enhanced by organizing the dictionary semantically, which better reflects the multidimensional, meaning-related network of the mental lexicon, and enables the user to work with sets of words related in meaning.

John Read, “Vocabulary and testing.” Read discusses various kinds of vocabulary tests, their validity, and what they purport to test. For instance, he discusses the role of context in vocabulary tests. He distinguishes between tests of vocabulary breadth (how many words are known) and vocabulary depth (how well the word is known). The former are common, while the latter are much more problematic. He notes that we must ask what the theoretical construct is that underlies any kind of test. Unfortunately our theoretical knowledge is often too poor to enable us to evaluate the validity of tests or devise better ones.

I highly recommend the book for the issues it raises and the insights it gives. Field teams will be better prepared to learn a language and produce a dictionary useful for language learning. The book greatly enriched and expanded my understanding of this important field.