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Introduction

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Introduction*

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The current volume is a collection of studies focused on the use of fixed expressions in ordinary conversation, and their emergence from such use in a range of languages that are typologically, genetically and areally distinct. Authors consider the sequential contexts of fixed expressions and their close connections to social actions, also focusing on emerging and emergent structural aspects¹ of fixed expressions. By fixed expressions, we mean prefabricated, formulaic structures which have idiomatic and non-compositional meanings but are nevertheless associated with different degrees of fixedness, many with some open slots where one can vary elements as in *why don't you X* (see Thompson and Couper-Kuhlen this volume; see also Fillmore, Kay, and O'Connor (1988) on formal idioms).

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¹ 'Emerging' and 'emergent' in the sense of Auer and Pfänder (2011), Hopper (2011).

The authors share an interest in formulaic language use dating back to the late 1980s, when Paul Hopper's groundbreaking work on emergent grammar first came out (Hopper 1987; see also Du Bois 1987). That work stressed the role of fixed expressions in the makeup of ordinary language use, extending and concretizing the idea already anticipated by Bolinger, who suggested that instead of grammatical constructions being something that speakers produce or originate, they might result from repetition of "a pre-established inventory (1961:381)". Further, inspired by the more recent work in Corrigan, Moravcsik, Ouali and Wheatley (2009), which represents a variety of theoretical concerns, data, and methodologies, the chapters in the current volume take a usage-based and interactional approach by exclusively focusing on naturally occurring data, especially everyday conversation. We are motivated by a desire to promote a realistic view of human languages in their home environment, ordinary everyday conversation.

The issue of units in language has become newly relevant in recent research both in interactional and structural domains. Interactional linguists have questioned whether traditional linguistic categories are actually oriented to by participants in interaction (Ford, Fox and Thompson 2013), and typologists have suggested that such categories may not be crosslinguistically applicable or relevant (e.g. Haspelmath 2010).

This calls for a re-examination of categories that speakers of human languages actually orient to and even what orientation means (Ono, Laury and Suzuki 2019; Ono and Thompson in press).

In this volume, we approach the question of units of language through an examination of fixed expressions or ‘prefabs’ (Bolinger 1976; Erman and Warren 2000; Bybee 2010) in actual use. Functional approaches to grammar and the lexicon, including Construction Grammar, Cognitive Grammar, Discourse Analysis, Functional-typological Grammar, Emergent Grammar, and Heteromorphic Distributed Lexicon have long recognized the importance of fixed expressions as basic units out of which languages and discourses are built (Fillmore 1979; Pawley and Syder 1983; Hopper 1987; Wray 2002; Tannen 2007). Given that fixed expressions, premade ‘chunks’ of language beyond word-sized units, become fixed as a function of their frequent use (Bybee 2010; Scheibman 2000), their lexical, grammatical, and prosodic makeup and their pragmatics might tell us quite a bit about what types of expressions and grammatical structures in actual language use, especially in everyday conversation are routinely treated by speakers as units (Szczepek Reed and Raymond 2013; Ono and Thompson 1995). That is, we explore ways in which speakers operate with prefabricated structural and functional units to navigate interaction.

Structural approaches to linguistics typically see fixed expressions as a marginal part of human language, instead relying on the unverified assumption that utterances are mostly generated by syntactic rules. The current volume counters such a view by presenting empirical studies which show that fixed expressions in fact play a central role in language use in terms of both frequency and the social actions they accomplish.² As far as we know, it is the first volume to examine fixed expressions based on data from spoken interaction in a range of languages. While earlier studies have not commonly foregrounded the use of fixed expressions in natural conversation (for exceptions, see Aijmer 1996; Thompson and Ono 2009), the studies collected in this volume not only take their data from conversation, but also consider their sequential contexts and their close connections to social actions, at the same time taking seriously the need to account for the structural aspects of fixed expressions. Formulaicity is taken as a central feature of spoken language, and fixed expressions as a basic utterance building resource for interaction.

The authors in this volume examine topics such as identifying the degrees and types of fixedness, the usage contexts or ‘home environments’ of

² This suggestion was made and partially supported by the early 2000s by Erman and Warren (2000) based on English.

particular fixed expressions, the emergence of fixed expressions, the connection between fixedness and social action, the new understanding of traditional linguistic categories in light of fixedness, the fit of fixed expressions into general networks of expressions, and crosslinguistic variation in types of fixed expressions, as well as non-verbal aspects of fixed expressions. The volume is an attempt to situate the notion of ‘units’ at the intersection of interaction and formal structure, and it is part of a larger effort to replace rule-based conceptions of language with a more dynamic, realistic and pragmatically based model of language. The studies are based on naturally occurring data, mostly everyday conversation, in Chinese, English, Estonian, Finnish, Japanese, and Swedish.

The fixed expressions examined in the volume share the characteristic that through frequent use, they have developed meanings and structures that are idiomatic and non-compositional: their semantics are not predictable from the lexical and grammatical parts that they are made up of. They are resistant to rearrangement and substitution of components and will typically lose their idiomatic meaning if they are changed. However, the fixed expressions discussed here vary in their fixedness. Some authors discuss expressions that are only semi-fixed, so that they can be modified and items can be inserted into them, while the meaning and pragmatic import are retained (e.g. *ma saan aru*, Keevallik and Weatherall; *se että*,

Vatanen et al.), while others are less tolerant of modification, and may come with a fixed prosodic contour, while still allowing various degrees of phonetic reduction (e.g. *why don't you*, Thompson and Couper-Kuhlen); others may be entirely fixed (e.g. *under the influence*, Tao). Overall, all of these expressions involve some prefabricated parts which appear to be stored as units in the lexicon; none of them seems to be a novel expression created from scratch by combining words and morphemes afresh.

Themes running through the volume include discussions of formula city as a core property of actual language use, and the typology of fixed expressions (Tao; Ono and Suzuki), the connection between fixed expressions and social actions (Keevallik and Weatherall; Thompson and Couper-Kuhlen; Endo and Yokomori; Laury, Helasvuo and Rauma; Vatanen, Suomalainen and Laury), the emergence of fixed expressions (Ono and Suzuki; Laury et al.; Vatanen et al.), and intersubjectivity (Keevallik and Weatherall; Endo and Yokomori), as well as crosslinguistic comparison (Keevallik and Weatherall, and Tao).

A major finding highlighted in several of the chapters (especially Keevallik and Weatherall; Laury et al.; Thompson and Couper-Kuhlen, and Vatanen et al., as well as Endo and Yokomori) is that fixed expressions are crosslinguistically associated with social actions not

predictable from their lexicosyntactic semantics, showing that they are not generated by grammatical rules, but are rather fixed formulas which serve their speakers' interactional goals. They often, though not always, become morphosyntactically and phonetically reduced, approaching particle status in many languages. Another finding is that fixed and semi-fixed expressions are a significant resource for constructing intersubjectivity in interaction. That is, we find that language driving everyday interaction is not a general all-purpose machinery generating sentences serving all possible contexts but consists largely of premade fixed or semi-fixed expressions serving various specific pragmatic and interactional functions and meeting recurrent needs (Du Bois 1987) tied to and arising from specific sequential contexts. That is, speakers encountering recurrent needs naturally arising in everyday talk appear to keep developing ways to automatize how to deal with them by turning longer verbal expressions, along with non-verbal behavior, including prosody and gesture (Couper-Kuhlen and Thompson, this volume; Keevallik and Weatherall, this volume) into shorter phrase-, word-, or particle-like utterances.

The chapters also offer novel typologies of fixed expressions, as well as a new understanding of the link between formulaicity and 'elliptical' expressions such as 'zero anaphora' in languages like Japanese and Chinese by highlighting unexpressed material which might or might not be

taken by interactants as implied by formulaic expressions (Ono and Suzuki; Tao). The studies, both taken together as well as some of them individually, involve crosslinguistic comparisons of the structures and functions of fixed expressions.

Summary of contributions

The chapter by **Keevallik and Weatherall** concerns the Estonian expression *ma saan aru* ‘I understand’ combined with a second person expression and a cognitive concept. The authors argue that the phrase is a semi-fixed expression amounting to a “claim to the intersubjective” which occurs at moments of interaction when alignment and social solidarity are at issue. It is then shown that by saying ‘I understand that you + a cognitive concept’, the speaker claims to have access to the addressee’s motives and feelings, but in fact the expression is regularly used to advance the speaker’s own agenda. The authors compare this expression to a similar pattern used in Swedish and English and suggest that it reveals a systematic relationship common to these languages involving the lexicon, grammatical structure, and interactional function.

Ono and Suzuki’s topic is the phenomenon often, and misleadingly, called ‘ellipsis’ or ‘zero anaphora’ in Japanese everyday talk. The authors suggest that in their narrative and interactive data, most expressions that

might be suggested to involve zero arguments are in fact various types of fixed expressions. Therefore, it may not make sense to think of such expressions as involving deletion of tracked arguments. Two pieces of evidence supporting this argument are, first, that insertion of ‘deleted’ arguments into such expressions results in marked, awkward or even unacceptable expressions (Ono 2011) and secondly, ‘deleted’ arguments are often associated with multiple equally-possible referents, or no intended referents (Ono and Thompson 1997). Given the extreme prominence of fixed expressions in Japanese everyday talk, a characteristic which appears to be shared by a number of other languages, this study can be seen as a contribution toward building a realistic model of grammar based on the study of everyday speech, the most fundamental form of language (Schegloff 1996), that would capture its nature of being in a state of constant structuration (Hopper 1987).

In his corpus-based study of English and Mandarin Chinese, **Tao** also examines ‘ellipsis’ by showing that there are many instances of highly fixed expressions that can be recognized as having underspecified materials. For example, when the website of a real estate company named The Results Team is WeGetResults.com, one can expect that the “results” here refer to *desirable* and *positive* results as opposed to neutral or negative results. The underspecified element, then, is the positive and

desirable qualities than may otherwise be verbalized directly with explicit lexical forms. Tao shows that elliptical structures can manifest in different unit sizes and structural complexity: simple constituents such as modifiers, phrasal units of various types, and larger clausal units or complex turn constructional units. Tao points out the relevance of frequency effects and interactional factors in the use of these expressions. He suggests that frequently used collocations create mental representations with particular semantics and pragmatics which allows underspecification. He also suggests that these expressions are exploited by conversational participants to negotiate unarticulated materials in interactional contexts.

In their chapter, **Thompson and Couper-Kuhlen** examine the English fixed expression *why don't you*. They suggest that the expression arises in contexts where it is treated by participants as giving advice. That is, in spite of being seemingly a question asking for reasons why the recipient does not do something, it emerges in 'problem' or 'complaint' contexts, allowing the speaker to forward a solution to what is treated as a problem for the recipient. The problem in question can be either formulated by the recipient herself, and follow a request for advice, or it can be diagnosed by the speaker of the *why don't you* expression, who volunteers the advice. Besides being interpreted non-literally, the expression is also associated

with a particular prosodic-phonetic pattern involving phonetic reduction and a particular shape and distribution of pitch accents.

The topic of the chapter by **Laury, Helasvuo and Rauma** is the expression *mä ajattelin että* ‘I thought + COMP’ as a semi-fixed expression in spoken Finnish. The authors show that in both present-day conversation and older dialect interviews, the expression is most frequently used in the first person past tense form. As has been shown for ‘think’ verbs crosslinguistically, it is commonly used to frame stance expressions; however, in Finnish, it is also used to preface the *speaker’s* own plans as well as proposals for joint action. The study also examines the types of complements taken by the first person singular past tense form of *ajatella*, showing that in the older data, most of the complements were clausal, while in the newer data, complement types were more diverse. It is also shown that *mä ajattelin että* occurs in drastically reduced form and shows signs of morphosyntactic fixedness, especially in the newer data, although the authors note that it has not yet developed into an epistemic particle in spoken Finnish.

Vatanen, Suomalainen and Laury’s chapter shows that the Finnish expression *se että* ‘it (is) that’, consisting of a demonstrative followed by a complementizer, is a fixed projective element in talk-in-interaction both

on its own and with collocating elements. It shares features with projector phrases identified for other languages: it is used both to prepare the addressee for the nature of the upcoming and to underline it as central to the ongoing interaction. The analysis of *se että* having grammaticized into a projector phrase is also supported by prosodic evidence. For the most part, the two elements, *se* and *että*, are latched together and form one prosodic word. The findings support the idea that *se että* emerges in interaction with a fixed form rather than being generated by a syntactic rule involving a demonstrative integrated into a framing clause which then takes a complement clause as an argument.

Endo and Yokomori examine the structure and use of fixed expressions in interactional situations where speakers display difficulty in producing the next item (esp. noun phrases) due by expressing that they are “searching” for it. Question-word interrogatives are crosslinguistically employed in such situations to execute searching, and Endo and Yokomori focus on the fine but important interactional differences in three fixed expressions used for searching in Japanese conversation, the question-word interrogatives: *nan-daroo* ‘what would it be,’ *nan-te-yuu-no* ‘what do you call it,’ and *nan-da-kke* ‘what was it (again)’. After establishing the fixedness of these question-word expressions by examining argument structure, collocation with final particles, and phonetic truncation, Endo

and Yokomori argue that, similar to epistemic stance markers such as *I think* or *I guess* in English conversation, these expressions do not simply display that the searching is happening in the mind of the speaker (subjective), but makes the searching activity into a public and interactionally significant behavior (intersubjective).

Overall, our crosslinguistic investigation of language structure and use in everyday interaction suggests that humans have a propensity to automatize ways to handle various discourse-level needs for specific sequential contexts by creating (semi-)fixed expressions based on frequent patterns. In particular, as shown by Ono and Suzuki's typology, we have found these expressions to be tied to recurrent local activities, such as the English *why don't you*, which is used to make suggestions and giving advice in situations where a problem has either been mentioned or merely diagnosed by the speaker (Thompson and Couper-Kuhlen), and Japanese question-word interrogatives involving *nan* 'what', which display speakers' difficulty in producing the next item due by expressing that they are "searching" for it (Endo and Yokomori).

In addition, these expressions often project not simply structural units but further interaction, preface plans and proposals, and advance speakers' agendas. That is, the construal of unarticulated materials in fixed

expressions can be understood to involve interactional work by conversational participants (Tao). In Finnish, *mä ajattelin että* ‘I thought that’, besides framing stance expressions, prefaces the speaker’s plans as well as proposals for joint action (Laury et al.) and *se että* ‘it that, DEM + COMP’ prepares the addressee for the upcoming talk (Vatanen et al.). The Estonian *ma saan aru* ‘I understand’, while appealing to what speakers know about their addressee’s motives and feelings in contexts where social solidarity is at issue, is in fact exploited to advance the speakers’ own goals (Keevallik and Weatherall). Such understandings are the result, again, of frequent use of these expressions in particular types of contexts.

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