CHAPTER ONE

On Clichés

1.1 Introduction

This book addresses the highly debated notion of clichés, exploring their role in discourse. Clichés are a subject that has been a matter of discussion and debate within both academic and public discourses for some time. The term 'cliché' is often used to refer to any phenomenon that is perceived as commonplace and even undesirable on account of its commonality. When it comes to the linguistic form, the *Collins English Dictionary* defines a cliché as 'a word or expression that has lost much of its force through over-exposure' (Hanks, 1996: 297). Fowler (1965) notes that clichés are common in many domains of social life; however, their original meaning of application and semantic value may, in time, be lost and only retain a more emotive meaning. Along these lines, Kirkpatrick poses that 'a cliché came to describe an expression that was repeated so often that it lost its freshness and became hackneyed' (1996: 16). Anderson-Gough et al. (1998) similarly identify clichés as 'the taken for granted and unreflexive use of language through the use of commonplace or rather "hackneyed" phrases'. (p. 566). It is therefore easy to see why such language is, at times, considered undesirable or negative by lay users of languages, as well as by experts engaging in discussion about their usage.

Indeed, the debate about the use of clichés historically takes a negative view of the phenomena. From as early 1885, *Punch* magazine published cartoons by Joseph Priestman Atkinson that mocked clichéd expressions in contemporary popular literature (Punch, 1900). This debate is still current in realms outside academia, in media and corporate as well as private domains. BBC News (2008) published '20 of your most hated clichés' featuring the votes of the audience who volunteered to participate in a survey. Among them we find the seemingly infamous *at the end of the day*, *24/7*, *literally*, *to be fair*, *110 per cent*, *let's face it*, *touch base*, *moving forward*, *I'm not being funny but*, *by end of play today*, among others. Similarly, in 2015 the *Mail Online* published a list of football clichés that 'make us cringe', (a cliché in itself), which

also features the all-pervasive *at the end of the day* cliché at the top of the list (Baker, 2015, online).

Very interestingly clichés have a complex relationship with business and corporate registers and communities of practice (CoPs) (Lave and Wenger, 1991; see also Chapters 5 and 6). On the one hand, some clichés, considered 'dead' forms of figurative language, tend to be efficient forms of communication. They carry known, conventionalised (at least within specific contexts or CoPs) and, hence, unmistakable meanings between interlocutors. The efficiency of language and communication is a public relations asset in most internal business and corporate settings (see Chapters 4 and 5), and clichés often signal and enact not only efficiency of communication, but arguably also identity, membership and belonging and, to use another cliché, *being on board* with the current prevailing project, the 'direction of travel', and therefore a specific corporate culture and broader CoP.

On the other hand, it must be pointed out that, in the same domains of corporate communication, the issue of clichés as a poor form of language has also been a matter of debate. Marketing agencies, for example, are now urging businesses to stop using clichés (at least in their outward facing discourse) if they want their brand to stand out from their competitors. Agencies have labelled clichés 'an all too common enemy' (Webb, 2013: 216) precisely because of the air of negativity surrounding the use of unthinking, hackneyed and heavily conventionalised language. This apparently overwhelmingly negative outlook on clichés is also evidenced in websites suggesting alternatives to the use of clichés in CVs and job interviews (Boyce, 2015) and even in social or dating situations (Smith, 2015).

The debate has also reached organisational life. Anderson-Gough et al. (1998) studied clichés as constituting the social practice of organisational life and found that, as well as forming a core set of heavily conventionalised communication resources in set business practices, 'clichés may also demonstrate resistance in that their use can be reflexive, ironic or conflictual' (p. 566). Anecdotally, and in support of Anderson-Gough et al.'s findings, a senior manager told the authors of this book that he consciously makes an effort to avoid using clichés in business situations in order to gain credibility. Another colleague also told us that he purposively uses clichés ironically as 'a tool for surviving the boredom of meetings'. Along these lines, there are now games that people play to mock clichés and pass the time in perceived fruitless or low-value situations, such as in the case of cliché bingo where people create a cliché grid and cross them out, or tally their use on the grid as they are said in the course
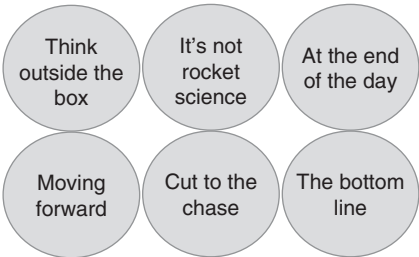
Figure 1.1 Corporate cliché bingo. Source: Adapted from www.slideserve.com/markmccrindle/conference-cliches-mccrindle-research-meeting-bingo-game [Last accessed 14 December 2021].

of a work meeting.[1] Certain internet memes have also surfaced that identify media discourse-specific, or media discourse-sensitive, grids of clichés ostensibly as a way of allowing people to play a game, but actually operating as negative metacommentary on the prevalence of the (over) reliance on clichés in certain discourse types and the perceived inherent ideological bias their use indicates. Figure 1.1 is an example of a classic 'corporate cliché bingo', modified due to copyright issues.

These anecdotes and observations of real-world practices support Anderson-Gough et al.'s (1998) findings. They also tell us that (a) clichés are so embedded in our language system that sometimes we need to 'think before we speak' if our aim is to avoid using them; and (b) people may choose to use clichés, or deliberatively avoid using them, for specific interactional or strategic reasons.

The poor reputation of clichés is so influential that, occasionally, people feel compelled to use the disclaimer 'I know it's a cliché, but … ' preceding their use. The first named author of this book overheard two people on the bus talking about the hindering and disruptive circumstances that a particularly challenging situation had caused in one of the passenger's lives. When asked how they coped, the speaker said 'I know it's a cliché but *one day at a time*'. There are two interesting points arising here: firstly, the disclaimer seems to operate as an attempt to simultaneously legitimise the use of the cliché and excuse the speaker to the listener for using it; the speaker is thus making the listener aware that the cliché is used, therefore providing an element of vindication for its

[1] Cliché bingo is also colloquially known as 'bullshit bingo'. The term 'bullshit', a negative epithet denoting that an item or piece of information is of zero or negative value, further signals negativity surrounding the perception of the use of clichés.

use. Secondly, and more relevant to the point we are trying to make, despite the disclaimer, which works as an acknowledgement of poor language, the speaker still willingly, and even potentially embarrassingly so, chooses to use it. In the time it took the speaker to issue the disclaimer, the speaker could arguably have thought of saying what they intended to say in a literal or even more unconventionally figurative way. Yet they still chose to use the cliché.

This discussion shows us that, whether we like them or not, whether we are aware of them or not, clichés are part of our everyday language use and further they fulfil a variety of functions in and surrounding discourse which suggests that, as Partridge (1978) points out, their 'ubiquity is remarkable' (p. 2). It is such ubiquity that constitutes an interesting starting point for our enquiry, especially given how clichés are used in specific settings for specific extra-linguistic purposes, as we explore in detail in Chapters 5 and 6.

1.2 Scope of This Book

Much of the literature on clichés, either in academic or other domains, attempts to categorise them (Kirkpatrick, 1996), explain their origin (Rogers, 1991), discuss their social standing or even provide alternatives for their use, as in the examples quoted in Section 1.1. Some scholarly work (e.g. Down and Warren, 2008) suggests that clichés can act as fillers in conversation without the need to be informative or purposive. Our informal observation and experimentation shows, however, that a close examination of clichés in the context in which the communicative event takes place can shed light onto a variety of functions that clichés perform in relation to discourse. By this we mean that the study of clichés, as with other formulaic language devices, needs to be seen in relation to the various elements of the communicative event such as the role, aims, identity of both addresser and addressee, in relation to the CoP and to the wider discoursal context in which communication takes place, be that institutional, political and so on. (Semino, 2008).

In previous work (Bullo, 2019), it has been argued that clichés constitute conventionalised linguistic structures with pre-existing meanings which function as 'valuable conduits for communicating pre-existing understanding in new ways' (Down and Warren, 2007: 8). As such they operate from the cognitive 'comfort zone', which allows them to evoke vivid imagery from a safe distance (Oswick et al., 2002: 294). By this we mean that, whilst they evoke powerful visual imagery, they offer a comfortable standpoint of commitment to the propositional content of

the utterance. In this book, we elaborate on the notion of meanings and attempt to arrive at a working definition of clichés that considers the discursive functions that they fulfil. We focus on four main functions that we identify clichés as fulfilling and that constitute the scope of this book: (1) to argue, (2) to persuade, (3) to create and maintain relationships and/or (4) to create or restate identities. We introduce these functions by illustrating with examples from observation and informal experiments we have conducted by way of raising hypotheses.

One important function of clichés is that they help strengthen an argument and justify the potentially 'frowned upon' consequences of an action derived from the logical conclusion inferred from the cliché. Take, for example, *life's too short* By using this cliché, the speaker draws on conventional inferable premises about the length of life and approaching mortality that warrant prompt action, lack of action or even dismissal of the issue at stake as lacking in importance *in the grand scheme of things* and therefore justifies a potentially socially unacceptable practice. These devices, which link the argument to a claim based on inferable and socially shared premises, are known plurally as topoi or 'topos' in singular form (Kienpointner, 1992). Take, for example, *it is what it is*. By using the 'topos of reality' the speaker is resorting to a tautological argumentation scheme in order to derive a logical conclusion justifying a particular type of action, or even lack of action, or a particular type of emotional response, or advocacy of emotional restraint, all of which are based on the premise that 'reality is as it is', and cannot be changed or questioned (see the discussion in Wodak and Idema, 2004: 21).

When used in advertising or corporate discourse, clichés can help 'establish a strong and stable set of associations in the minds and memories of consumers' (Moore, 2003: 335) by drawing on particular sets of pre-existing frameworks of thoughts, or sociocognitive representations (SCRs) (Koller, 2008a; Bullo, 2014). Take the infamous *the real world* cliché, which is very common in university and schools advertising, for example 'preparing students for *the real world*'. From a cognitive linguistics perspective, the *real world* cliché contains information and schematic models of professional life and employment drawn upon by institutions' promotional discourse promising appropriate preparation for the current market demands whilst also economising on the detail of how the preparation is done and what the preparation is for exactly. The cliché works as a tool of efficiency and consequently allows for this economy of information due to the entailments contained in the cognitive model drawn upon. Such entailments are socially shared and accepted precisely because they call to the familiar, the 'known', and

are hence comforting. At the same time, the cliché serves as a bridge between the professional world and the traditionally perceived theoretical, if not sometimes considered idealistic, academic world. Similarly, cognitive models drawn upon by clichés in advertising are used to build credibility and reassure people of the quality of an entity, product, or agent as in *you are in good hands* by virtue of the qualities contained within the cognitive model, such as safety and trust, which are borne out as metonymical to the aforementioned functions of comfort and familiarity.

In a study of clichés used to convey an evaluative position in an institutional setting, Bullo (2019) concluded that clichés were not always or even regularly used and perceived negatively (as might be imagined from the observations made earlier) but rather they were used positively, in order to mitigate a negative assessment of people's performance. Take the infamous *think outside the box* cliché, for example, where normal thinking is metaphorically seen as contained 'within' the box in joint THINKING IS CONTAINED, INNOVATION IS BOUNDLESS[2] conceptual metaphors (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980), which represents a practice of working and thinking as mundane and unimaginative if artificially constrained. In more detail, the cliché seems to suggest that innovative ideas are found in an alternative space to the enclosed surroundings of a box. The box is seen as artificially restraining imagination and hence innovation. It is only by stepping out of the conventional boundaries of the box that innovative ideas are allowed to expand to their natural limit. Imagine a manager telling her or his colleagues to redesign a new project or change a plan of action by asking them to *think outside the box* rather than telling them that their current ideas or plan are 'not good enough'. The use of such standard, conventional language as clichés in this way is a face-saving and politeness marker, one that, by the very nature of its commonplace use in communities of (business) practice, is safe, comforting, familiar and hence supportive as its use at the interactional level avoids the face threat of direct criticism inherent in 'not good enough'. Furthermore, they also constitute a sign of trust and approval in the employees' capability for improvement of the task, therefore fulfilling a positive face-enhancing function (Brown and Levinson, 1987). Finally, the imagery conveyed by the constraining box also allows the boss to safely mitigate the imposition of ordering employees to

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[2] Traditionally within cognitive linguistics, conceptual metaphors are CAPITALISED to distinguish them from linguistic metaphors. We will follow this practice in this book.

redo the job, thus acting as a negative face-oriented politeness strategy (Brown and Levinson, 1987). In this way, by virtue of the imagery they convey, clichés can be seen as fulfilling not only an interactional function, but also an interpersonal function by negotiating relationships without the potential face-threatening effects of the literal expression. We discuss this aspect in more detail in Chapter 5, where we elaborate on the argument that clichés help mitigate a negative evaluation whilst softening the positive face threat posed by criticising the employees' inability to perform effectively.

Finally, clichés can be used as 'discursive self-builders' (Kupferberg and Green, 2005: 28) allowing narrators to present specific self-narratives in relation to the unfolding story and its sociocultural dimensions. In a study of entrepreneurial discourse, Down and Warren (2008) found that entrepreneurs use certain clichés to establish, maintain and convey the sense of an entrepreneurial identity (p. 6). A couple of years ago, one of the contestants on the BBC's version of the television show, *The Apprentice* was criticised by one of the members of the panel for using too many business-related clichés but not performing to the expected standard that his language suggested or indeed promised. The contestant was clearly using clichés as a tool for projecting a desired identity for himself, an identity that he associated with the use of such language. Similarly, we asked a number of university students why they use certain clichés, for example *literally*, when, as linguists-in-training, they know very well that its use is mostly figurative. A few of them claimed that the reason for using such clichés was 'just because the people I hang out with use them and they catch on'. We also encountered those who rejected them and (claimed to) avoid using them because they want to sound credible or educated. An example of this is the anecdotal observation of the senior manager discussed in Section 1.1 who, in his case, avoids using clichés as a way of constructing the identity he wishes to project for himself in his organisational setting. In both other examples in this section, clichés, or their deliberate avoidance, also constitute tools for constructing a certain type of identity. Of course, the question remains how effectively he or the students described actually avoid using clichés, given that they are heavily conventionalised and thus may be difficult lexical tokens to self-monitor constantly.

The examples discussed in this section point to the fact that the seemingly straightforward definition of clichés with which this chapter was introduced falls short of illustrating their wider scope and the reasons for their usage. That is exactly the problem we encounter when we try to attempt a definition of clichés by either trying to spell out what they

are, or their constitution, instead of asking what functions they perform in the particular context of occurrence at interactional and discoursal levels. Our examples earlier in this section, rather, support Partridge's view on the ubiquity of clichés and point to the need to build an enquiry about clichés based on the function(s) that they fulfil in specific contexts and for particular reasons and purposes. Therefore, this book aims to account for the different functions clichés fulfil in language use, which we call discourse (e.g. van Dijk, 1997b), and explore them from a range of available discourse analytic approaches that can provide an explanation of the different functions that clichés fulfil.

As well as problematising clichés as a formulaic language strategy in discourse, fulfilling specific strategic functions, this book offers a variety of sources of data covering a wide spectrum of usage that ranges from online platforms and media text producers to institutional usage of language and personal narratives. This will ensure that different CoPs in which clichés are used are represented: from the elusive reception data in discourse analysis and the established corporate communication discourse analysis, to people interacting in a work environment and people talking about themselves. Therefore this book draws from a variety of sources of data, and offers a variety of discourse-based approaches to the analysis of such data. As equally important, it explains why clichés are useful resources given their strategic potential, which may account for their widespread use despite their negative reputation.

1.3 Structure of the Book

This book is structured as follows. Chapter 2 outlines established disciplines that have addressed the study of clichés, from lexicography to formulaic language. It also addresses the issue of defining clichés based on form and the blurred boundaries between clichés, idioms and other figurative language devices. Most importantly, it positions linguistic clichés within discourse studies and conceptualises them as socio-semiotic resources and discursive strategies that fulfil a range of specific functions in different discourse types and sites.

Chapter 3 explores clichés as argumentation strategies in public responses to online articles on current political issues. Chapter 4 investigates clichés as socio-cognitive representations, or SCRs in advertising and corporate branding discourse, drawing on theories of social cognition and sociocognitive discourse analysis. Chapter 5 draws on sociopragmatic theories and explores clichés as face-saving devices in

evaluative discourse in interaction from an im/politeness perspective in organisational settings. Chapter 6 investigates clichés from a face and identity perspective and explores their role in the construction of entre-preneurial identity, examining extracts from reality television (RTV) show *The Apprentice*. Finally, Chapter 7 summarises the findings and considers implications for further research and the contributions this book has made.

CHAPTER TWO

Clichés in Discourse

2.1 Approaches to Clichés

Clichés have long been studied from various perspectives within academia. Monroe (1990) explores them in terms of their role as stylistic devices in literature. In creative writing studies, Schultz (2015) approaches clichés as cognitive processes linked to habits of thoughts, while Jackendoff (1995) explores the role of clichés in idiom recognition.

Some scholars have concluded that the meaning of clichés cannot be predicted from the individual lexical items that compose the sequence (see Jordan-Barker, 2017), but rather from their functionality in the context of their usage. In so doing, clichés are partially analysable linguistically; that is, their 'symbolic components' are not entirely 'discernible within a complex expression' (Langacker, 1999: 13). Further to this, claims that they are 'multi-word units' or 'multi-word tokens' (sometimes also referred to as 'lexical chunks') abound, with arguments that clichés, for example, are 'stored as complete units in the minds of speech participants. They are easy to retrieve for the speaker and easy to decode for the hearer' (Hamawand, 2015: 115). This equates them to idioms, not only in terms of retrieval but also in relation to the (non)compositionality problematic distinction (e.g. Jackendoff, 1995). In fact, the distinction between idioms and cliches is not clear-cut. For example, expressions listed in dictionaries of idioms (e.g. Cambridge University Press, 2017) also appear in any online search for clichés and published dictionaries of clichés (e.g. Fountain, 2012; Rogers, 1991). The classic at *the end of the day* or *think outside the box* are examples of this fuzzy boundary. Various linguists (e.g. Ricks, 1980) have problematised the issue of boundaries between idioms and clichés and some have concluded that 'some clichés are idioms and some idioms are clichés, but neither group includes the other fully' (Makkai, 1972: 171). Nunberg et al. (1994: 492) discuss that clichés, like other formulaic and fixed phrases, as well as idioms, proverbs and allusions 'inhabit the ungoverned country between lay metalanguage and the theoretical terminology of linguistics'.