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Formulaic Language and Linguistic Change

A substantial proportion of our everyday language is 'formulaic', that is, it consists of oft-repeated chunks. From pause fillers such as *you know* to phrases such as *Many thanks*! *Is this seat taken*? or *strong tea*, they form a phenomenon central to language. This important new book investigates formulaic language from the point of view of language change. Employing a novel quantitative and data-led approach, it traces and analyses change in phraseology across twentieth-century German as used in Switzerland. Drawing on nearly 20 million words of textual evidence, this book shows that social and cultural change in the speech community is the predominant motivator of change, though other factors are also at play. This book demonstrates a close link between language change and the culture of the speech community, arguing that this has repercussions for the study of language in general, as well as the study of society and history.

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A Data-Led Approach

Andreas Buerki
Cardiff University

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Preface

To say that research into phraseological phenomena has exploded over the past quarter of a century has now itself practically turned into a cliché. Yet it is remarkable how this strand of linguistic research has developed. From being very much a niche interest with some of its leading centres of research having been all but obliterated in the aftermath of counter-revolutions in the Eastern Bloc, the field has since become a wonderfully diverse network, connecting an intriguing multitude of otherwise rather different and, in some cases, disparate areas with their own histories, philosophies and goals by a fascination for similar types of phenomena. A network of interests, I venture, that pervades almost all areas of purely theoretical as well as application-minded linguistic thought today and has arguably given birth to the most exciting one of the current grand theories of language – the in itself richly diverse family of constructionist approaches to grammar.

This book comes from a fascination with phraseological phenomena. It brings the study of formulaic language in contact with the study of language change and the relationship between language, culture and society to see how they might fit together and in fitting together, what these areas of study tell us about each other. This turns out to be a fair amount, of which this book can barely scratch the surface. Further to insights gained by (re-)connecting these three areas to allow them to enlighten each other from new angles, glimpses emerge on the nature of language itself. They strongly suggest that the reintegration of the study of language into its proper context of the study of history and culture is critical to solving the many puzzles that still remain in the understanding of what language is and how it operates.

I would like to thank Annelies Häcki Buhofer for her support from the very beginning of this project. I am indebted also to Anke Lüdeling and to colleagues at the Department of German Language and Linguistics at Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin for their advice, to Alison Wray and my colleagues at Cardiff University, and to Heike Behrens and Angelika Linke for their thoughts and advice – all remaining mistakes are of course my own.

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Abbreviations

BNC	British National Corpus
CV	coefficient of variance
ELF	English as a Lingua Franca
MEU	Morpheme Equivalent Unit
MI	Mutual Information
MWE	Multi-Word Expression
MWU	Multi-Word Unit
NE	named entity
NGP	N-gram Processor
NLP	Natural Language Processing
NP	noun phrase
NSP	N-gram Statistics Package
NUM	number
PP	prepositional phrase
SD	standard deviation
SE	Schematic Element
STC	Swiss Text Corpus
US	Usual Sequence
VP	verb phrase
XML	Extensible Markup Language

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