
This volume is a compilation of seven chapters (plus an introduction) dealing with routinised and recurrent patterns of spoken discourse in a variety of languages: English, Japanese, Mandarin Chinese, Finnish and Estonian. The idea behind the book stems from the intriguing observation that there is great deal of formulaicness and idiomaticity in everyday language use, something that the label “fixed expressions” refers to here. However, we are not dealing with those kinds of frozen, figurative idioms that may come to mind when discussing formulaic language, like the English *black and blue*, *break a leg* or *spill the beans*. Rather, the studies that are included focus on strings of words, constructions or semi-constructions that are recurrently recruited to deploy specific social actions, usually in specific sequential locations in social interaction.

One telling example of such a routinised form of social action is the English directive format *why don’t you (do x)* discussed by Sandra Thompson and Elizabeth Couper-Kuhlen (e.g., *why don’t you try taking it again?*). The authors argue that *why don’t you* is typically used in contexts where the co-participant faces a problem with something: a suggestion framed with *why don’t you* is then offered as a remedy to that problem. The construction is formally an interrogative and thus less direct in its deontic force than a directive issued in an imperative. Indeed, this formal indirectness recognises the possibility that certain circumstances may hinder the deployment of the advised action. That is, a directive issued with *why don’t you* orients implicitly to a “because” which could account for a hindrance (as demonstrated by the authors). However, the advice-bearing meaning of *why don’t you* is context dependent and connected to a complaint or another trouble indication that has arisen in the conversational sequence.
Another example of a routinised social action format is presented by Leelo Keevallik and Ann Weatherall in their chapter on ‘I understand’-prefaced responsive turns. Using data from Estonian, English and Swedish (but exemplifying with Estonian), the authors argue that a speaker can use a turn format with ‘I understand’ (ma saan aru in Estonian) to deal with any misalignment with the co-participant’s contribution. By indicating understanding, the speaker is able to display that they have absorbed what the other person has said (e.g., I understand that you want x), which can then be followed by the speaker’s own perspective (e.g., but we don’t have time for that). Intriguingly, this format makes a claim to the intersubjective, both through indicating understanding and formulating the other person’s mind. As the authors point out, as constructional patterns, such ‘I understand’ formats are less rigid, but at the same time they manifest semi-fixed, sequential-formal properties, occurring in characteristic interactional micro situations.

As a step further from the realm of fixed expressions in a more traditional sense, the chapter by Ritva Laury, Marja-Liisa Helasvuo and Janica Rauma considers the syntactic string mä ajattelin että ‘I thought that’ in Finnish. This resembles a grammatically productive construction, a matrix clause that is a lead-in to a complement clause. However, it is not only used frequently in a literal sense, referring to the speaker’s past thoughts, but also as a platform for issuing plans and proposals of joint action (where the past tense has a modal meaning), e.g. MAATETTÄ jos sää lähtisit mun kans vähä ajeeleet ‘I was thinking [preface] if you would go with me for a ride [request]’. The chapter thus adds to our understanding of the workings of complement-taking predicates and how these, in principle regular expressions, may become routinised in specialised, utterance-framing functions, which is also reflected in their formal (prosodic and structural) erosion. As an addendum to this type of grammatical-functional specialisation, Anna Vatanen, Karita Suomalainen and Ritva Laury discuss the formulaic nature of the Finnish collocation se että ‘it that’ (cf. the thing/the fact that) which consists of a demonstrative and a complementiser. At first sight, one could question whether such a word combination is “an expression” at all, since it is basically a relational element, often abridging two parts of a clause combination, e.g., suurin haave olis SE ET pystyi jammailemaan mukana jossain kappaleessa ‘the biggest dream would be [THE THING THAT] one could jam along in a song’. By using a wide range of examples, the authors demonstrate how the combination of a demonstrative and a complementiser has developed discursive uses where it projects the next thing to come, typically a noteworthy point in the speaker’s reasoning, and thus organises the information shared in turns at talk. In this sense, se että is
related to generic and fixed projector phrases identified in other languages, like *die Sache ist* in German and *the thing/fact is* in English.

Given that most formulaic expressions tend to undergo formal reduction to some degree, Hongyin Tao brings elliptical expressions to the discussion. With parallel examples from English and Mandarin (many from written sources), he presents different variants of reduction and conventionalisation of form, which can concern implicit single constituents, like *[high] quality clothes*, phrasal units becoming discourse markers, like *[you’re] Absolutely [right]*, or the openness of turn structures, like turn-endings with “stranded” conjunctions, *Do I lose one, or [do I not]?* A related argument is proposed by Tsuyoshi Ono and Ryoko Suzuki in their chapter on so-called “zero anaphora” in Japanese, that is, dialogically resonant constructions with some implied but unexpressed arguments, in principle like the English *[It] Doesn’t matter* or *[That’s] Disgusting.* The authors’ point is that, in order to truly understand the nature of spoken Japanese (and probably language in general), we should not see such “reduced” forms as ellipted versions of fuller grammatical forms; thus, they need not be filled with arguments that appear to be missing. In fact, the authors point out that versions of “zero anaphora” forms that are constructed as “full forms” can sound awkward or even incorrect in their contexts of use. Everyday language consists, therefore, of fixedness of different degrees, and appears to constantly evolve towards new types of fixity, as shown in recurrent types of directives, stance expressions and discourse markers.

The book closes with a chapter by Tomoko Endo and Daisuke Yokomori which considers fixed expressions of the kind *nan-da-kke* ‘what was it again’ in Japanese conversation, that are labelled by the authors as a form of self-addressed question. In principle, these are reminiscent of “word search” markers, like *what’s it called* in English or *was heißt das* in German, that is, lexicalised sentences that are produced by speakers when they encounter problems in the progressivity of talk. The authors emphasise that such self-addressed questions in Japanese conversation may have the enhanced meaning of marking the speaker’s epistemic stance, downgrading the certainty about what is being said. Thus, they can be used instead of expressions like *I think*, which are not as readily available as an utterance-framing device for Japanese speakers because of word order constraints. Recurrent environments for self-addressed questions include situations where the speaker undertakes a delicate action, launches a new topic or initiates a (non-straightforward) answer to a question.

As the outline above indicates, the fixed expressions discussed in the volume do not constitute a uniform phenomenon. The chapters highlight different degrees of fixity, from lexicalised sentences, through utterance prefices,
to sequentially rooted grammatical formats. At least in some cases, for example, regarding ellipsis and conventionalization, the editors of the volume could have discussed in what manner such phenomena can be treated on par with other “fixed expressions”. Further, this variety, and the way the diverse phenomena resonate with the traditions of emergent grammar and construction grammar, which both are interested in different kinds and sizes of prefabs in language, could have been addressed in a stronger manner in the introduction; as it is now, the editors are content with only making reference to these strands of research. Nevertheless, Fixed Expressions is a remarkable contribution to studies on social interaction, more precisely the design of social actions and their points of connection with language structure and evolution. The volume and its chapters can appear as explorative in nature but make wonderful, thought-provoking reading.

Jan Lindström | ORCID: 0000-0002-7849-3816
University of Helsinki, Helsinki, Finland
jan.k.lindstrom@helsinki.fi