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Flexible formulaic sequences in English academic writing

Abstract

Recently, considerable attention has been devoted to corpus-based studies on recurring multiword expressions in English academic language (e.g. Biber, Conrad, Cortes 2004; Biber 2006; Hyland 2008). However, these studies place their focus on uninterrupted sequences of lexical items, the so-called 'lexical bundles'. At the same time, several studies have indicated that the vast majority of prefabs are of flexible nature, i.e. including optional slots as well as semantically constrained slots (see, for instance, Schmitt and Carter 2004:7).

The present study investigates the use and function of the latter type of sequences in the register of English academic writing. These prefabs will be referred to as 'flexible formulaic sequences' (henceforth FFSs). The focus is on FFSs around two groups of high frequency lexical items in the academic subcomponent of the BNC, viz. the 'coming-to-know' verbs (e.g. *find*, *suggest* or *show*) and the 'research' verbs and nouns (e.g. *analyse*, *investigate* or *study*).

One of the major reasons why FFSs have been hitherto not neglected has to do with their identification and extraction. The fact that the sequences involve slots whose filling is not restricted to a single lexical item or expression, but to a homogeneous group of lexical items, leads to difficulties, especially concerning their automatic extraction. Whereas lexical bundles, as defined by Biber, are easily extractable with the help of available software programs, the FFSs can only be distilled by a manual inspection of concordance lines.

It is shown in this paper how FFSs serve important pragmatic functions in the register of academic writing. Academic texts (regardless of which text type (articles, monographs)) take a completed or ongoing research process as their major topic and the academic discussion about it constitutes a major and essential part of their content. This is, among other things, reflected in the use of FFSs which signal the various stages of the research process starting from the problem-definition phase and ending with the scientific communication of the research findings. Furthermore, FFSs are also used in the same way as lexical bundles, viz. as discourse organizers (see, for instance, Biber 2006) as well as markers of "competent participation in a given community" (Hyland 2008:5).

To sum up, the present paper shows that the set of FFSs found around the two groups of target lexical items play a considerable role in establishing cohesive and persuasive discourse, and performing register-specific rhetorical functions, both for authors and readers of academic texts.

References

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