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Using grammatical criteria to identify formulaic sequences: the example of nominal determination

This paper will discuss the use of grammatical criteria in the identification of formulaic sequences, with reference to corpus-based studies of two types of French and English prepositional phrases.

The main focus of the paper will be on bare PPs, i.e. PPs in which there is no determiner before the noun, even though that particular noun would require one in other syntactic contexts (as is the case for singular count nouns in English). Contrast, for instance, the phrases *by boat* or *à table* with the ungrammatical sentences **Boat is sinking* and **Table est mise*. Bare PPs are very numerous, and many of their morphosyntactic, lexical and semantic properties point towards their potentially formulaic nature.

The second part of the paper will analyse the relationship between bare PPs and PPs in which the noun is determined by a "weak" definite article, like *à l'église* in French or certain uses of *in the classroom* or *to the pub* in English. "Weak" definites are uses of definite articles in which there is a semantic mismatch between the use of the definite article and the lack of reference to a unique, identifiable referent. Although PPs with a weak definite article appear to be less "irregular" than bare PPs, the two PP types share a number of characteristics. However, the corpus-based identification of PPs with weak definites is rather more complex, as it cannot be based solely on their formal properties.

This paper will focus on the following questions: a) the relevance and usefulness of grammatical criteria (and specifically nominal determination) for the identification of formulaicity and b) the diagnostic tests that can be used to assess formulaicity in corpus data, and to arrive at a more fine-grained classification of the PPs under investigation. Our analysis will draw on insights from the literature on formulaicity, but also from Construction Grammar. The case studies were conducted using the BNC and Frantext.

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