

Brigitta Mittmann, *Mehrwort-Cluster in der englischen Alltagskonversation. Unterschiede zwischen britischem und amerikanischem gesprochenen Englisch als Indikatoren für den präfabrizierten Charakter der Sprache*. [Multi-Word Clusters in English Conversation – Differences Between British and American Spoken English as Indicators for the Prefabricatedness of Language.] PhD Dissertation, Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg (Prof. Dr. Thomas Herbst). Tübingen: Gunter Narr, 2004. xii + 407, 68,- €. *Language in Performance*, 30.

The importance of fixed or semi-fixed multi-word expressions such as routine formulae, lexicalised sentence stems or frequent collocations has increasingly been recognized over the past two decades. Considering this surge of interest in lexical combinatorics, it is surprising that very little has been published on British-American variation in this field. So far, the literature on differences between American and British English has mostly ignored word combinations.

The book is a thorough and extensive study of this central field of English dialectology. It is based on two computerized corpora of English conversation: the ‘spoken demographic’ part of the *British National Corpus (BNCSD)* and the *Longman Spoken American Corpus (LSAC)*. All age groups, all major social strata and a variety of different regions of the two countries are represented in both corpora. Both are similar in size: the *LSAC* has about 4.9 million words of running text, while the *BNCSD* contains about 3.9 million words.

A series of programs specially written for this purpose by a computer programmer was used to extract the most frequent word combinations (or *clusters*) from each of the two corpora, to count their frequency of occurrence, and to select those which are the most frequent and most typical for each of the two varieties. Thus, the method is neutral and does not restrict or anticipate the results in any way. It works very well with an investigating study of the kind described here.

The study showed that British and American speakers of English differ considerably with respect to many word combinations which they typically use very frequently. The clusters reveal interesting phenomena on all levels of linguistic description. In most cases, the word combinations studied here are not restricted exclusively to one of the two varieties, but there are usually strong tendencies for them to occur predominantly in either American or British English. A number of these differences between the varieties have been noted in passing by other researchers, but many of them should be new.

Most of the highly frequent word combinations are conversational routines or parts of them. They range from greeting and thanking formulae to hedges, discourse markers and general extenders. Frequent multi-word expletives can also be considered to be types of routine formulae.

A large number of clusters points to what one might call the ‘fuzzy edges’ of phraseology. On the borderline between phraseology and syntax there are, for example, tag questions, periphrastic constructions such as the present perfect, semi-modals, and valency patterns. On the borderline between phraseology and word formation, on the other hand, there are adjectival combinations consisting of participle and particle, as well as complex prepositions, conjunctions, adverbs, or pronouns.

Only a small part of the material has to do with what one might consider to be ‘classical idioms’, but the corpora contain many other pre-assembled multi-word chunks that function as linguistic building blocks. Some items (such as the reporting construction *BE like*) are indeed idiomatic in character. Others – like time adverbials or recurrent responses – are

not generally regarded as fixed expressions so that their formulaic character may come as a surprise. Even they fall within the scope of phraseology.

Traditionally, phraseology is mostly concerned with idioms. However, it is necessary to widen the scope of what is studied in this field. This means including not only routine formulae, support verb constructions and word combinations such as phrasal and prepositional verbs, but also other kinds of prefabricated expressions.

The British-American differences reported on in this study provide further proof for the fact that everyday language is to a great extent conventionalised. It consists largely of ready-made chunks consisting of several words which are presumably stored in the speaker's memory as entities. Thus, idiomaticity pervades language.

On the whole, the research carried out here suggests that claims concerning linguistic manifestations of differences in national character should indeed be challenged. In particular, Algeo's assumption that there is a "greater tendency of British to qualify and make tentative its statements" is not supported by the material contained in the corpora.

The methodology used in the study is also described in: Brigitta Mittmann (2000): "A method for finding and assessing differences in lexical clusters and cluster frequencies between spoken British and American English", in: Heid, U. (et al.) (eds): *Proceedings of the Ninth EURALEX International Congress, EURALEX 2000, Stuttgart, Germany, August 8th-12th, 2000*, Vol. II, Universität Stuttgart: IMS, 579-590.