

Formulaic Sequences: a drop in the ocean of constructions or something more significant?

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Constructionist approaches to grammar are a family of theories that see grammar as an inventory of constructions. A construction is understood in terms of a Saussurean sign – a linguistic form with one or more associated meanings. Constructions are thought to exist at various levels of abstraction, from fully lexically substantive to fully schematic constructions (such as the passive construction), as well as mixtures of these levels (cf. Hoffmann and Trousdale 2013). Formulaic sequences, here understood as word sequences that recur again and again in largely the same form, easily fit into a constructionist framework as lexically substantive constructions, but may end up merely as particular constructions among many others. This paper considers whether formulaic sequences represent a phenomenon that is sufficiently different to warrant special status or whether they might best be studied in terms of the larger set of all constructions: first it is considered how clearly the boundaries between formulaic sequences and more abstract constructions can be drawn (i.e. how well formulaic sequences present themselves as a bounded phenomenon). Then, theoretical considerations are drawn upon to ascertain whether substantive constructions have properties that mark them out as a type of construction different from others. Based on data from large-scale extractions of formulaic sequences from corpus data, it is argued that it is extremely difficult to form a distinct class of lexically substantive constructions without creating highly arbitrary boundaries. On the other hand, it is argued that from a theoretical point of view, formulaic sequences as a (proto-)type of largely lexically substantive constructions nevertheless have theoretical significance that renders them not only capable of being the focus of research but marks them out as a theoretical category which merits particular attention.

Hoffmann, T., & Trousdale, G. (2013). Construction grammar: Introduction. In G. Trousdale & T. Hoffmann (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Construction Grammar* (pp. 1-13). Oxford: Oxford University Press.