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Language Variation: Perspectives on Lexis and Phraseology

Abstract

This paper provides an overview of the Special Issue. Following an outline of the themes and methodological standpoints discussed in the special issue, it offers an overview of the individual case studies selected for inclusion. While spanning several genres and domains, and discussing lexical and phraseological variation from multiple angles and perspectives, the dominant methodological standpoints in the Special Issue are corpus and discourse analysis. Small and large corpora are used along with lexicographic data to examine key lexical and phraseological questions in language variation, both quantitatively and qualitatively. In particular, special attention is devoted to language choice, linguistic constraints and linguistic innovation as observed in English, Italian, and across English and Italian.

1. *Introduction*

The *CLAVIER (Corpus and Language Variation in English Research)* centre¹ has been carrying out corpus-assisted research on language variation for 15 years. Series of conferences and seminars have been organized in order to provide stimuli and foster debate around the very many aspects and dimensions of specialized discourse. The present Special Issue gathers selected contributions from the CLAVIER 2021 conference, held 18-19 November 2021 at the University of Modena and Reggio Emilia, Italy, on *Exploring Words in the Digital Transformation. Tools and Approaches for the Study of Lexis and Phraseology in Evolving Discourse Domains*.

1 <https://www.fileli.unipi.it/2020/05/09/in-linea-il-nuovo-sito-del-centro-interuniversitario-clavier/> (accessed: 01.06.2024).

Our objective is to tackle the question of lexical and phraseological representation of meaning, choice and use, from different angles and multiple perspectives, as ultimately influenced by socio-cultural changes, transformations and fluctuations in time and space. The volume is intended as a companion to two more special issues stemming from the CLAVIER 2021 project: Bondi and Cacchiani (2023), focusing on *Positioning and Identity in Digital Discourse*, and Capra et al. (in press), on the impact of the digital transformation on language data and research methods for discourse analysis in Spanish, German and French linguistics (*Transformaciones de los enfoques de investigación en el discurso digital / Transformationen linguistischer Ansätze im digitalen Diskurs / Transformations des approches linguistiques des discours numériques*).

The dominant methodological standpoints in the Special Issue are corpus and discourse analysis. Small and large corpora are used along with lexicographic data to examine key questions in language variation, both quantitatively and qualitatively. In particular, special attention is devoted to language choice, linguistic constraints and linguistic innovation as observed in English, Italian, and across English and Italian.

While several questions can be asked, a few dominant strands emerge. Synchronically, lexical and phraseological diversity ensues from collocational constraints, interpersonal connotations, genre, register, stylistic and disciplinary restrictions. Variation is intricately connected to the verbal and non-verbal context in which words occur. Such variations can be highly indicative of the characteristics of a specific discourse community and its culture. Additionally, lexical and phraseological variation can be influenced by situational factors, with the need for change often driven by external events such as major events or technological advancements. This diversity is the focus of research in the lexis and phraseology of specialised genres and discourses. Semantic and pragmatic factors (co-)determine selection of one lexical or phraseological unit over the other member of a pair or other members of a set, which are never perfectly equivalent.

Diachronically, neologisms and neosemanticisms, also contact-induced, might enter the language, or only temporarily surface in the form of short-lived occasionalisms. This leads us to look into the longstanding question of cognitive motivation and meaning in new words and new word formations. Turning more specifically to recourse to new words and changing patterns at the intersection of English and Italian, the interest lies in what is often referred to as the Anglicization of Italian. Italian has favoured recourse not only to nec-

essary loans, but also to luxury loans (Öhmann 1961) from English, especially in media discourse and the press, politics, marketing campaigns and advertising (cf., among others, Iacobini 2015; Bombi 2017), and of course youth language. The close link between lexis, culture and ideology has also often influenced lexical choice and has guided the study of lexical meaning and lexical choice in texts, with special attention to point of view, the language of evaluation and appraisal (e.g., Martin and White 2005; Hunston 2011), and, more recently, words with diverse degrees of conflictual strength in the context of oppositional discourse (IPI 2013, 4; Culpeper, Haugh and Evans 2017; Kelly, Footitt and Salama-Carr 2019; Facchinetti 2023).

Another interesting domain of variation concerns uses of English as a contact language, as a lingua franca (ELF), which inevitably bears traces of cross-linguistic influence. Departures from the standard and differences in language use require promoting awareness of the pragmatics and lexicogrammar of ELF. Lexical and phraseological variation is crucial to the definition of ELF, with the diverse cultural and contextual backgrounds of its speakers. The emphasis on communication in ELF involves increased reflexivity (Mauranen 2023) and attention to endonormative use, essential for strategies that accommodate the diverse needs of communication. Points of interest concern the applied upshots and implications of ELF research – not only for ELF teaching habits in the course of activities, task design and planning, but also for non-native ELF students and future translators.

2. *Overview of the Special Issue*

The proposed Special Issue progresses through the following chapters, which variously address the points above. PART I gathers contributions that deal with phraseological and LEXICOLOGICAL ISSUES of lexicographic relevance, looking in particular at issues of lexical differentiation, new word forms, neologisms and contact-induced lexical changes.

Article 1, authored by BELINDA CRAWFORD CAMICIOTTOLI, reports on *An exploratory analysis of hyphenated phrasal expressions in English vs. Italian fashion writing*. The essay extends reflection on new words, meanings and patterns across English and Italian, with a view to the contact-induced move to a new standard for Italian word-formation in phrasal compounding.

Hyphenated phrasal expressions (Bauer, Lieber and Plag 2013; Fetzer and Weber 2019) have been analysed by linguists as complex phraseological features found in languages such as English and German. In the particular context of English fashion discourse, studies have highlighted their distinctive use by fashion writers to formulate richly articulated descriptions and evaluations, while expressing their own unique discursive identities. The contribution explores the use of hyphenated phrasal expressions in Italian fashion journalism, which may reflect cross-influence from its English counterpart. Extending previous corpus-assisted research on these expressions in English fashion journalism, the analysis is replicated using a corpus of Italian fashion journalism. Results indicate that hyphenated phrasal expressions are comparatively infrequent in the Italian fashion journalism corpus and tend to be conventionalized within the fashion world (e.g. *prêt-à-porter*) or appear in English within code-switching episodes. However, there were some cases of highly creative usage, for example, *il designer-dj-pr argentino* that highlights the multiple identities and talents of persons of interest within the fashion world.

Article 2, authored by MARIA SOPHIA FALCONE, looks into *Experiencing climate change: Phraseological patterns of perception verbs in GenZ climate activism online*. Quantitative and qualitative research methods combine to provide insights into how climate change and its related issues are perceived by activists in web texts from three youth environmental organizations (GCWebC). The initial quantitative analysis reveals relevant frequencies for perception verbs – which convey evidentiality (Palmer 2001; Whitt 2010; Joseph 2023) – compared to other verbal forms in the corpus. In accord with the hierarchy of sensory modality, *see* is the most prevalent, followed by *look* and *hear*. Therefore, visual and auditory perceptions can be considered more prominent. Analysis of phraseological patterns and concordances further suggests that *see* points to policies and forward-looking proposals related to climate change and sustainability. The phraseological patterns for the verb *look*, mainly in *look* at*, invite the reader to further examine climate issues by way of sight, emphasizing the shift from abstract concepts to concrete, observable impacts. *Seem*, often in combination with *might*, indicates actions to be taken or deemed necessary for solving problems related to climate change. *Hear* collocates with *voice* in order to signal the importance of recognizing the voice of young activists. Lastly, *appear* indicates observations or inferences, and a more cautious approach to making claims and expressing evaluations.

Looking at the productivity of English from a present-day perspective, in Article 3 ELISA MATTIELLO shifts attention to ‘*Covidiot*’, ‘*elbow bump*’, and ‘*frontliner*’: *Language change in the COVID-19 era*. The paper investigates Covid-19 vocabulary from the morphological (Mattiello 2017) and semantic viewpoints (Blank 1997). It explores a set of Covid-related words and phrases used in the news during the pandemic either as new lexemes or as novel meanings. First, a collection of new words selected from two British newspapers – *The Guardian* and *The Independent* – are described in terms of the word-formation and semantic processes forming them. Second, through a quantitative analysis conducted in the Coronavirus Corpus, the new words are classified either as neologisms and neosemanticisms that are going to be institutionalised and become a permanent part of the English vocabulary, or as nonce words that are destined to pass away once the pandemic is over. Third, through a qualitative analysis of the collocations with the term *Covid-19* in the corpus, the new meanings associated with Covid lexicon are investigated. In particular, the main metaphorical associations (Lakoff and Johnson 1980) are studied, resulting in three primary domains that are relevant to the pandemic: namely, ‘War’, ‘Fire’, and ‘Disaster’. The paper highlights the importance of a specialised corpus for the study of language change through a widespread phenomenon such as COVID-19, and, more generally, the key role of the digital transformation in the development of lexicography and lexicology.

In Article 4 – *Exploring Anglicisms in the digital transformation: Lexical evolution in Italian* – SERENA STILO looks at Anglicisms in Italian through the lens of sociolinguistics. The digital revolution has dramatically changed communication, and digital tools such as ICTs, social media and the Internet have channeled new vocabulary of English-based adaptations into everyday Italian (Bombi 2017; Gualdo 2019). While English has been the main donor language for Italian since the 1950s (Pulcini 2017), some Anglicisms have gone all the way to acquire the special status of most frequent lexemes in the core vocabulary of Italian (De Mauro 2016); others are being increasingly used by the youth and young adults. This motivates asking how young Italian adults perceive (pseudo-)Anglicisms, and, for that matter, how digital tools are seen to influence their vocabulary. To this purpose, data from questionnaires, interviews and English/Italian translation tasks is used, based on a sample of 35 graduate students and native speakers of Italian with intermediate knowledge of English. The ensuing wordlist points to recourse to necessary and luxury

loans, both integrated hybrids and foreign lexical units (Furiassi, Pulcini, Furiassi and Rodríguez González 2012), in the fields of communication technology (*chattare, email, web*), hobbies and leisure (*happy hour, selfie*), daily routines and feelings (*comfort/confort, mood*). Setting aside the case of new words that have entered the language along with new referents, among the pragmatic and stylistic reasons for adopting luxury loans are sociocultural prestige and coolness (Öhmann 1961).

The articles in PART II take a HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE onto lexical choice and change in meanings. The papers work within corpus-assisted discourse analysis (Partington 2015) aiming to investigate the language of evaluation (Hunston 2011) and the expression of ideology in English in old genres.

More specifically, the study by FRANCESCA DITIFECI is devoted to *Exploring the words relating to people and places in the correspondence of two British women travellers – Lady Lucie Duff-Gordon’s (1862) Letters from Egypt and Hilda Petrie’s (1942) Letters from the Desert*. Key evaluative discourse patterns used for the representation of people and places are identified and discussed in order to compare diversity in interests and points of view. This testifies to the expression of changing times, socio-historical context, and the attitude towards women-explorers. The authors’ letters are queried using quantitative analysis of evaluative keywords and key phrases with the data retrieved in (extended) concordance lines. The analysis of expressions and their collocates shows changes in lexical choice that may reflect changing perceptions of the country or changing attitudes in the gaze of travellers.. More particularly Duff-Gordon is predominantly interested in the inhabitants and their way of life, while Petrie develops a keen interest in Egyptian archaeological sites and nature, and a feeling of responsibility and urgency for their preservation. A parallel change in the observed timeframe concerns the shift of the colonial outlook of Europeans towards Egypt from a relatively more emotional way of looking at people and places to a more detached, objective and scientific one.

Attitude, evaluation and the expression of ideology in the context of culturally significant keywords (Williams 1983/1976) are the object of Article 6, a case study on *The Armenian question between 1914-1926 in letters to the editor – The Times*. As of today, Turkey has refused to call *genocide* the systematic massacre of potentially more than one million Armenians of the Ottoman Empire, despite international pressure and press coverage. The historical events and the fate of the survivors received a considerable and uninterrupted attention in

numerous letters to the editors of major English broadsheets, amongst which is *The Times*. ISABELLA MARTINI therefore investigates lexical and phraseological units used to refer to the 1915 genocide of the Armenians, before the word *genocide* itself was first used thirty years later. The analysis of recurrent clusters and extended co-text for *massacres*, the most frequent word used to refer to the genocide, shows that combination of *massacres* with negatively connoted evaluative language (e.g. *horrors, atrocities, violence*) pertaining to the news value parameter of emotivity (Bednarek and Caple 2019) make explicit the extent of the violence. On the other hand, however, lack of reference to the victims (the Armenians) and perpetrators (the Turks), as in *the massacres*, or metonymic reference as in *the massacres of Cilicia* or *the massacres of 1915*, appear to lessen the impact and extent of the event (Partington 2015), eventually contributing to reinforce the Turkish claims denying the Armenian genocide.

PART 3 of the Special Issue concludes our discussion of variation with three case studies that address key issues in the lexicogrammar, phraseology and pragmatics of ENGLISH AS A LINGUA FRANCA (Widdowson 2003; Seidlhofer 2011; Guido 2018; Mauranen 2018; Pitzl 2018).

In Article 7 LUCILLA LOPRIORE reports on research carried out on *Lexical variation and translanguaging in an ELF aware perspective: Attitudes and concerns* within the ENRICH (English as a Lingua Franca Practices for Inclusive Multilingual Classrooms) ERASMUS+ Project (2018-2021). Importantly, EU educational policy emphasizes the need to rethink language teaching (European Commission 2017, 2019) in multilingual classrooms and to help learners meet the demands of the increasingly globalized world. Pragmatics and lexicogrammar in ELF are interconnected, but teachers are only rarely encouraged to reflect upon this connection and to integrate it in their teaching. Inset (in-service training) courses for EL teachers, mostly non-native speakers, are therefore suitable contexts for enhancing awareness of authentic language use. In the light of this, the paper reports on the activities within the Continuous Professional Development ENRICH Course intended to raise language teachers' awareness of the emerging instantiations of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF), a multilingual means of English-medium communication, of its lexical variations, and of innovative language teaching practices, such as translanguaging. Samples of teachers' interventions on lexical variation in ELF during the course are presented, to illustrate how discussion of key notions such as 'Teachers' Perceptions of English Language Learners', 'Teachers' Perceptions

of their Use of English', 'Tranlsanguaging' and 'Linguistic Diversity' may be relevant in the English classroom.

Also working within the ENRICH project, in Article 8 SILVIA SPERTI explores *Variation in the English lexicon in educationmMediated ELF interactions*. The study sets forth to test the assumption that ELF speakers naturally tend to appropriate the English language according to specific pragma-linguistic goals and structural features conforming not only to native speaker norms, but also to those of their own L1. Specifically, it reports on how participants in the Professional Development Course ENRICH, who are based in five different countries, interact around course activities such as 'Using English', which was administered at the beginning of the course, and activities focusing on 'ELF', 'ELF-aware Teaching', and 'The Content of ELF-aware Teaching', which were discussed at later stages. In the specific pluricultural context, the teachers are shown to act as intermediaries, and activative multiple ELF accommodation processes and mediation strategies for mutual understanding, while conveying and integrating culturally-marked knowledge and beliefs. The analysis reveals the teachers' growing ownership of the ELF-aware transformative approach. Their agency emerges over time in their considerations about differences in the current use of English as a global lingua franca, as well as in the adoption of an ELF-aware approach in their teaching practices.

Article 9 – *When Medical English as a lingua franca becomes Medical English for research and publication purposes: A metacognitive approach to student dissertation revision* – brings our reflection of ELF to a close, shifting attention from English Language teachers to English Language learners. Medical English as a Lingua Franca is increasingly used around the world, yet the context of university education, and specifically, the publication of final dissertations, remains impervious to contact languages and requires native-like quality, thus creating demand for proofreading/revision services. The study, by JEKATERINA NIKITINA, overviews results of an applied-purpose collaborative interuniversity project, wherein final dissertations by intermediate-level English L2 students pursuing a degree in health sciences were revised by advanced-level English L2 students with a linguistic specialism, applying a metacognitive revision model. The theoretical-methodological framework relies on an eclectic combination of insights from English as a lingua franca, learner corpora and crosslinguistic influence, English for research and publication purposes and proofreading/revision services. The theses under scrutiny were revised in the

light mode (Teixeira da Silva 2021), which roughly corresponds to copy-editing and proofreading, and in full mode, adopting revision strategies such as addition, deletion, substitution, reordering, rewriting, recombining and mechanical alteration (Wiley and Tanimoto 2012). The findings reflect on the possible curricular interventions, both for healthcare students and for languages students, to enhance their specific skillset in the spirit of interprofessional communication.

3. *Conclusions*

Taken together, the contributions to the present issue exemplify the type of corpus-assisted research that is currently conducted on variation and use of English lexis and phraseology, as a result of socio-cultural changes, transformations and variation in time and space, as well as the emergence of new media. Spanning several genres and domains, the chapters contribute to advance the study of the specifics of lexis and phraseology as observed in English, Italian, and across English and Italian. While spanning several genres and domains, they discuss lexical and phraseological variation from multiple angles and perspectives, offering ample coverage of research methods and perspectives – from genre and discourse analysis, through English as a Lingua Franca, English for Specific Purposes and English Language Learning, to Morphology and Lexicology. This makes the Special Issue well suited for postgraduate students and researchers primarily with an interest in the specific themes and lines of inquiry presented in the individual case studies. They will appreciate the broad coverage of research objects, genres, methods and perspectives.

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