

The idiom principle and the open choice principle

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Sinclair 1991

The corpus linguist John Sinclair introduced the distinction between ‘the idiom principle’ and the ‘open choice principle’.

The open choice principle “is a way of seeing language text as the result of a very large number of complex choices. At each point where a unit is completed—a word or a phrase or a clause—a larger range of choice ends up, and the only restraint is grammaticalness.”
[from Moon 1998: 28]

The principle of idiom is that a language user has available to him a large number of semi-preconstructed phrases that constitute single choices, even though they might appear to be analyzable into segments.
[Sinclair 1991: 110]

Erman and Warren 2000

Definition of prefab:

A prefab is a combination of at least two words favored by native speakers in preference to an alternative combination which could have been equivalent had there been no conventionalization.

[Erman and Warren 2000: 31]

The most important criterion for the definition of a prefab is 'restricted variability':

By restricted exchangeability is meant that at least one member of the prefab cannot be replaced by a synonymous item without causing a change in meaning or function and/or idiomaticity.

[Erman and Warren 2000: 329]

Erman and Warren 2000

Examples of 'restricted variability':

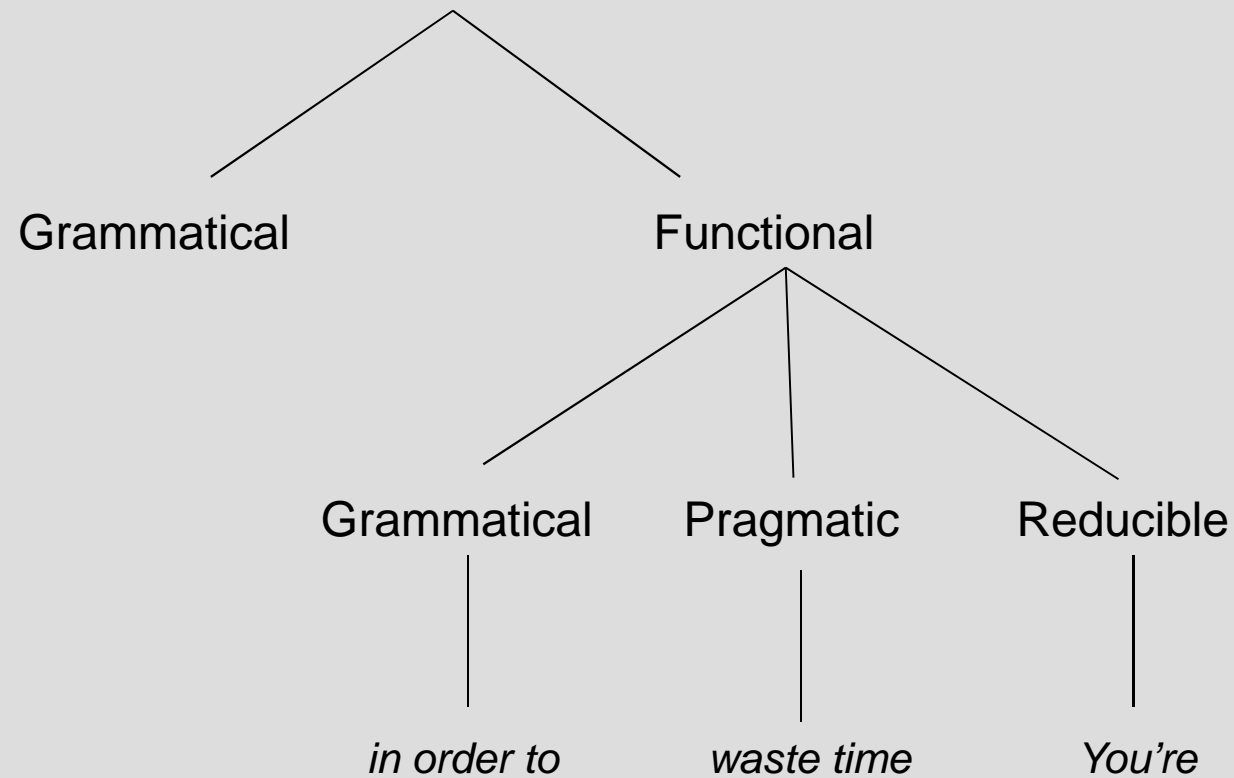
- (1) *good friends* vs. *nice friends*
- (2) *not bad* [in the sense of 'pretty good'] vs. *not lousy*
- (3) *I can't see a thing* vs. *I can't see an object*
- (4) *I'm a afraid I can't help you* vs. *I am frightened I can't help you*

Restricted syntactic exchangeability:

- (1) *I guess* – (* *I don't guess*)
- (2) *It will do* cannot lose its auxiliary (* *It does*)
- (3) *up here* cannot have reversed order (* *here up*)

Erman and Warren 2000

Prefabs can be divided into four basic types:



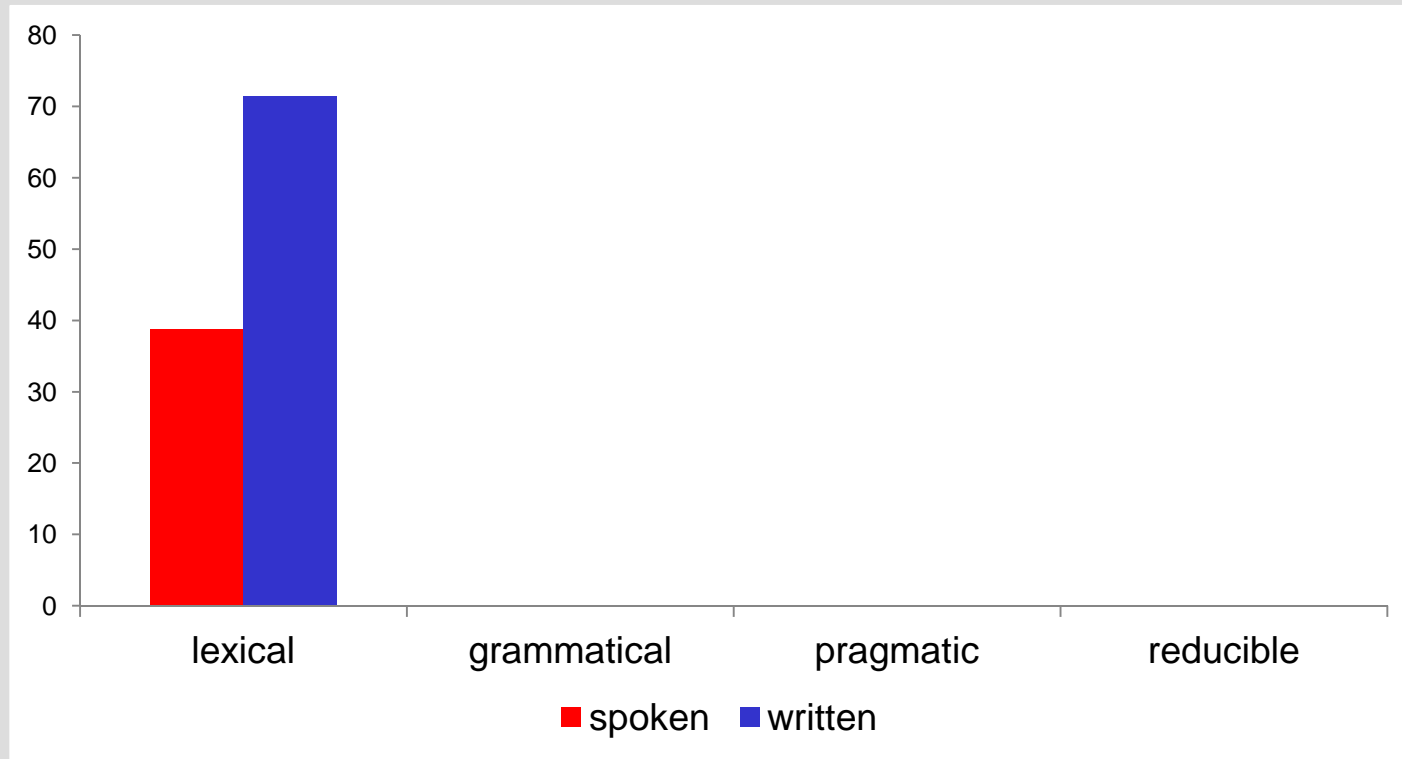
Erman and Warren 2000

Prefabs are equally frequent in spoken and written discourse.

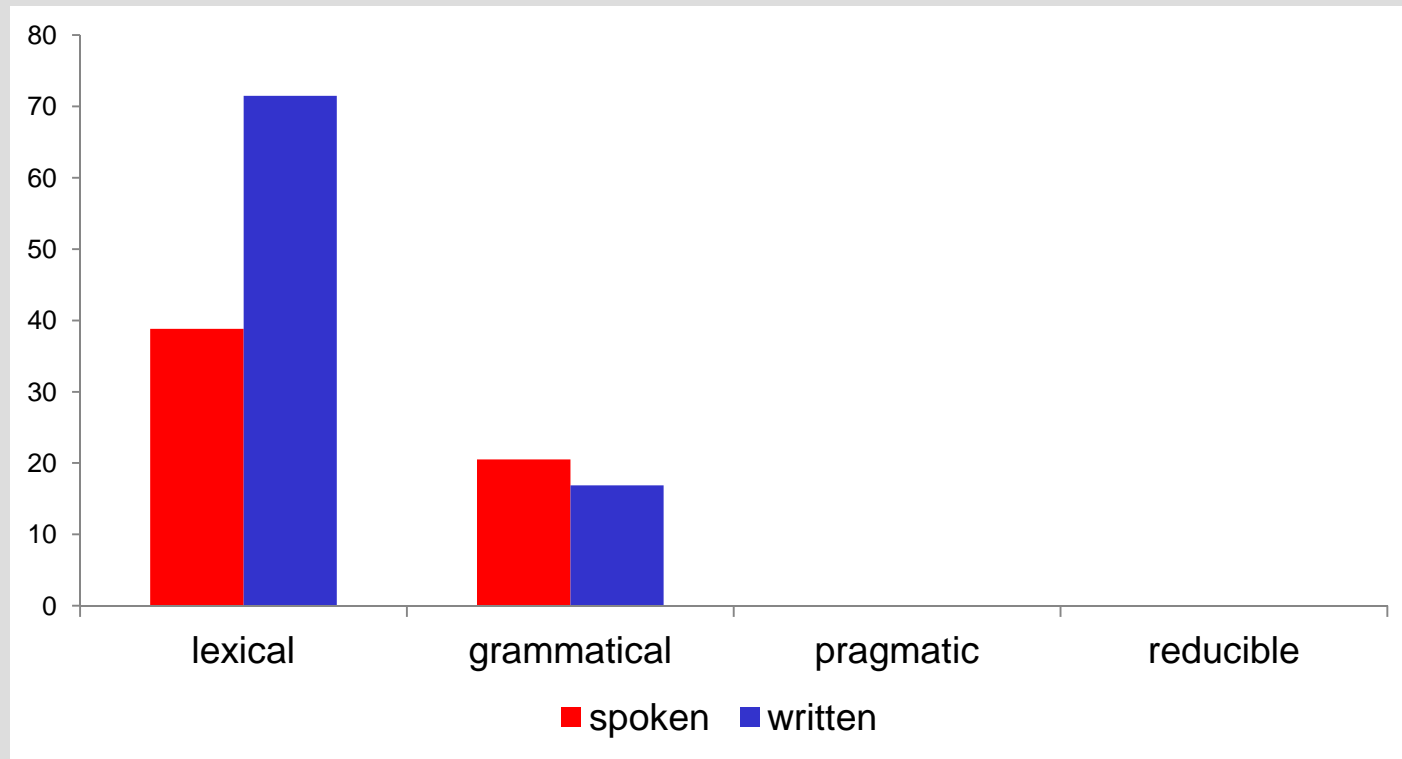
	Slots	Filled with prefabs
Spoken	5,000	2,930 (58.6%)
Written	5,246	2,745 (52.3%)
Total	10,246	5,657 (55.4%)

But the proportions of the different types of prefabs vary across genres/modality.

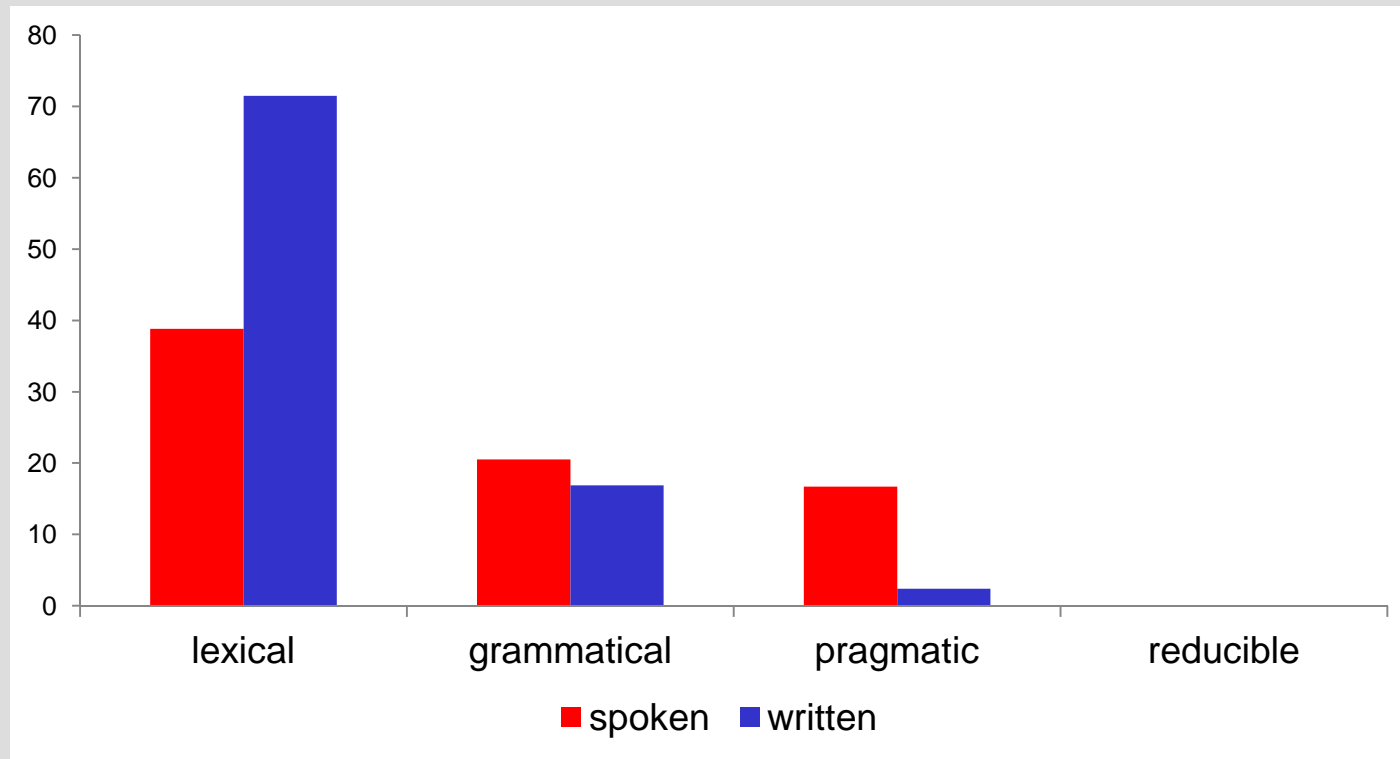
Erman and Warren 2000



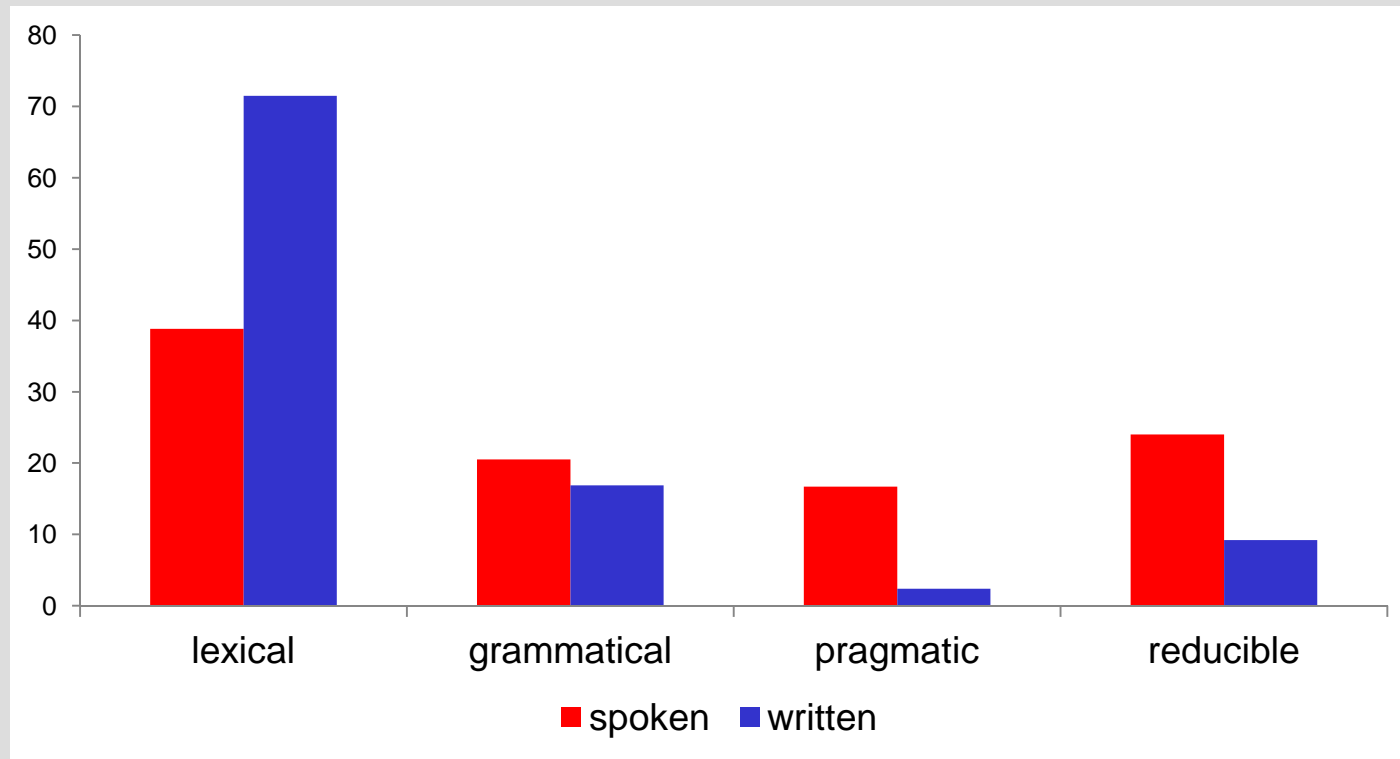
Erman and Warren 2000



Erman and Warren 2000



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Erman and Warren 2000

Average length of prefabs

	average number of words of prefabs
Spoken	2.61
Written	2.80

	average number of words of prefabs
Lexical	3.03
Grammatical	2.26
Pragmatic	2.29
Reducibles	2.00

Lexical prefabs: Semantics

Properties and states

out of date
be of help (to s.b.)
different from s.th.
have got s.th (=possess)

Entities (abstract and concrete)

sketch pad
modern furniture
permanent job
intensive care

Situations and events

find one's way (out of s.th.)
go out of s.th.
it's terrible weather
make s.th. sure

Places and positions

here and there
to the right
in industry
on paper

Period or point of time

at the time
by then
in the end
a long/short time

Lexical prefabs: Formal

Noun phrases

rule of s.th.
great days of the past
a waste of time
the present state of our knowledge

Verb phrases

regard s.th. as s.th.
be in touch with
get the hand of s.th.
switch on the lights.

Adjective phrases

able to do s.th.
enough of s.th.
all right
suitable for s.th./s.b.

Prepositional phrases

for some reason
to the naked eye
on a clear night
in touch with s.th./s.b.

Clause structures

That doesn't wash
Where have you been?
I've got to run.
Don't worry (be happy).

Emerging prefabs

Emerging grammatical prefabs

in reply to
on the basis of
on these grounds
in response to
in front of

provided that
let alone
is going to
be just about to
due to

Emerging pragmatic prefabs

that's true
it's all my fault
that's a good idea
what's it all about
don't bother

I think
I guess
I wonder (if)
(Do you) remember
How do you know

Ich sag ma(I)

Lexical prefabs

Many lexical prefabs include **slots**:

look forward to ____

be in tune with ____

bring ____ to a conclusion

get in touch with ____

take into ____ account

The slots of lexical prefabs are often **semantically constrained**:

to waste **time**

to waste **effort**

to waste **money**

to waste **words**

Lexical prefabs

Drive sb ____

drive ____ crazy

drive ____ insane

drive ____ mad

drive ____ up the wall

*drive ____ sane

*drive ____ happy

*drive ____ sad

*drive ____ depressed

We see this variability of prefabs as an outcome of two opposing forces constantly influencing language use: on the one hand there is a pull towards creating norms, facilitating communication, and at the same time there is a pull towards flexibility to allow expressibility, since expressibility increases with nonpredictability.

[Erman and Warren 2000: 41]

Grammatical prefabs

Types of grammatical prefabs:

Determiners:	of some kind, (the) kind of
Quantifiers:	a bit (of), a little bit (of)
Proforms:	each other, things like that, the kind of things
Introducers:	there is, that is
Tense forming:	be going to, have been
Aspect forming:	begin to, be about to
Mood forming:	could be, have got to, would rather
Prepositions:	in front of, due to, on the basis of, on behalf of
Conjunctions	provided that, on condition that, let alone
Intensifiers:	very much, more or less, if anything

Some grammatical prefabs have slots:

- On the basis of ___
- There is ___
- Of some kind of ___

Grammatical prefabs in German

Determiners:	so ein
Proforms:	der da
Introducers:	es gibt
Auxiliaries:	wird schon
Prepositions:	in der Nähe von
Conjunctions:	unter der Bedingung dass
Intensifiers:	mehr oder weniger

Pragmatic prefabs

Text monitors

Discourse markers:	and finally, as I said, I mean, the thing is that
Turn regulators:	well you know, you see, well I think
Repair markers:	I mean, you know, well you know

Social monitors

Interactives:	hasn't she? wouldn't you? you see what I mean
Feedback signals:	I see, well no, suppose so
Hesitations:	what's the word, I mean, you know
Responses:	yes I think so, well no, yes I see
Performatives:	thank you, good luck, why don't you

Metalinguistic monitors

Hedges:	sort of, or somewhere, and all this
Epistemological signals:	I must say, I think, I should think

Reducibles

PRO am/is/are

I'm, You're

AUX not

don't, haven't

AUX + AUX

would've, should've

let + us

let's

Combinations

Prefabs can be embedded into each other:

- (1) [the preparations for [launching their rockets]]
- (2) [the average of [forty miles [an hour]]]

Prefabs can also occur successively

- (3) /I gather/ /(you've) been at it / /for nine years/

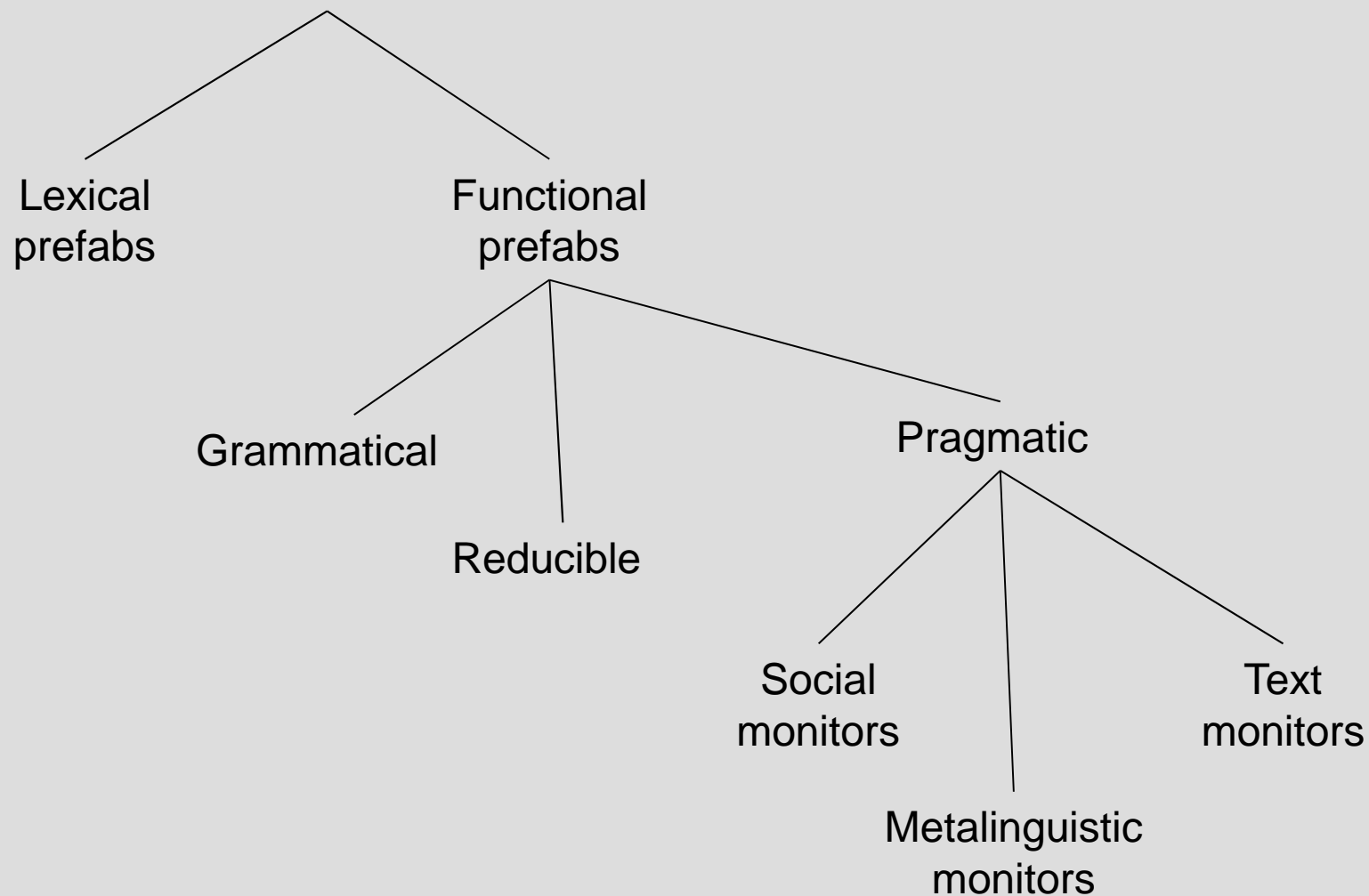
Prefabs and nonprefabs are often interspersed

- (4) /that's true/ -- --/it's/ -- /a long time/

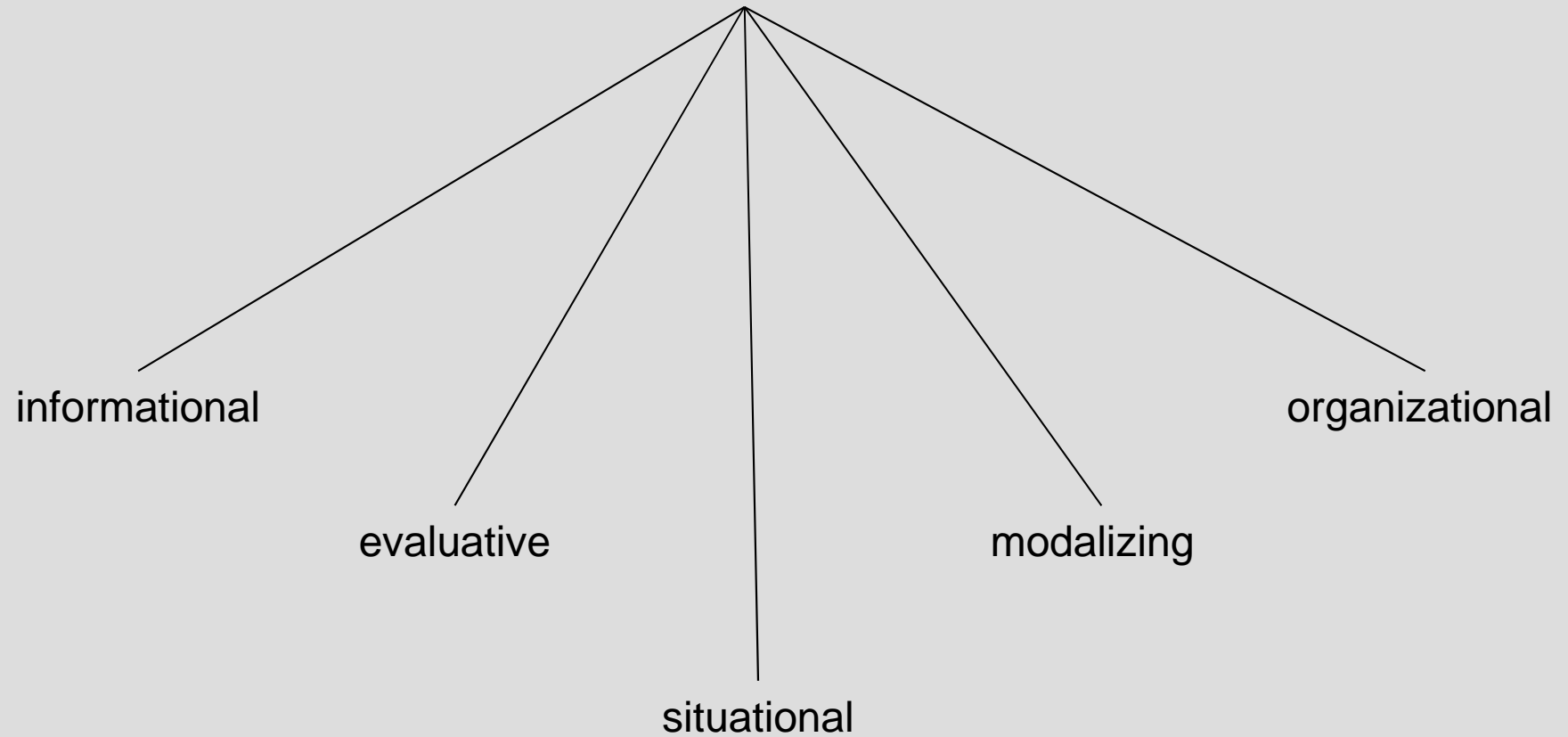
The discourse function of fixed expressions [Moon 1998]

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Erman and Warren 2000



Moon 1998



Informational prefabs

- (1) It was a great thrill **to catch sight of** my team mates as I got
- (2) Bill is still **in the running**.
- (3) The gunman opened the fire **at close range** from behind some foliage.

- Informational prefabs convey information, i.e. they describe processes, states, or qualities.
- They typically consist of a clause or verb phrase.
- 31 percent are metaphorical .

- (1) behind bars
- (2) by default
- (3) face to face
- (4) on sale
- (5) clear one's throat

Evaluative prefabs

- (1) For him, this is only the **icing on the cake**.
- (2) He is **a lame duck**.
- (3) Bill remains **second to none**.

- Evaluative prefabs express the speaker's opinions and evaluations.
- 47 percent are metaphorical.
- Many occur in copular constructions.

- (1) do the trick
- (2) over the top
- (3) strike a balance
- (4) down to earth
- (5) get off to a flying start

Situational prefabs

- (1) Hello, **good afternoon** Mr. Pit.
- (2) **Excuse me**, but this is yours.
- (3) **Thank you very much** for your help.

- Situational prefabs are typically found in spoken discourse.
- They usually refer to the extralinguistic context.
- They often function as independent speech acts.
- Syntactically, they are often expressed by full clauses.
- Some situational prefabs are old and deviate from grammatical rules.

- (1) go for it
- (2) good luck
- (3) no problem
- (4) so long
- (5) long time no see

Modalizing prefabs

- (1) These rules are **by and large** irrelevant.
- (2) **Believe you me.**
- (3) **It stands to reason that**

- Modalizing prefabs indicate modality.
- Many modalizing prefabs have anomalous structures and are formulaic.

- (1) as we know it
- (2) in effect
- (3) at any price
- (4) I mean
- (5) just trust me

Organizational prefabs

- (1) **For examples,**
- (2) **In spite of** the harsh conditions, I
- (3) **Once upon a time**

- Organizational prefabs indicate links between linguistic elements.
- Some indicate links between elements of sentences (e.g. *in spite of, let alone*), others indicate links between larger chunks of discourse (e.g. *moreover, however*).
- Like modilizing prefabs, organizational prefabs are often syntactically anomalous and formulaic.

- (1) all in all
- (2) by the way
- (3) let alone
- (4) on the one hand
- (5) with regard to

Moon 1998

Category	Function	Example
informational	stating propositions, conveying information	<i>rub shoulders with in the running catch sight of sth</i>

Moon 1998

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Moon 1998

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modalizing	conveying truth values, advices, requests	<i>you know what I mean</i> <i>at any price</i> <i>needless to say</i>
organizational	organizing text, signaling discourse structure	<i>by the way</i> <i>talking of ...</i> <i>be that as it may</i>

Moon 1998

Type	Frequency
informational	41%
evaluative	38%
situational	5%
modalizing	10%
organization	6%