

META-DISCURSIVE FORMULAS

A SUBTYPE OF KEYWORDS AND ITS PRAGMATIC EFFECTS: THE CASE OF 'FAKE NEWS' IN THE FRANCOPHONE PRESS

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ABSTRACT

This article argues that, in socio-discursive studies on keywords, it is worth examining not only the fluctuating meaning of those keywords (which is what is usually thoroughly investigated), but also more basically their denotation: I thereby postulate that the type of realities to which keywords refer matters. Taking 'fake news' as a case in point, this contribution holds that keywords referring to forms of discourse can be considered to fall into a subtype of keywords, which thus have particular pragmatic implications. Using the theoretical framework that Krieg-Planque (2009) helped to establish for the notion of formula, I call this category *meta-discursive formulas*. The analysis of 'fake news' in the francophone press leads me to identify different levels of this metalinguistic feature. By drawing from a punctual comparison with other keywords of the same type, as well as by going back from the general notions of keyword and formula, I then focus on the performativity that might be specific to this meta-discursive type of formulas. Three interwoven rhetorical effects are briefly discussed in this regard: the participation in a process of categorisation of other discourses, a return effect of self-legitimation, and the creation of a specific interactional contract with the recipient of the text.

KEYWORDS

metadiscursive formulas; sociopolitical keyword; metapragmatics; "fake news"

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Meta-discursive Formulas A Subtype of Keywords and its Pragmatics Effects: The Case of 'Fake News' in the Francophone Press

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1. Introduction

This contribution¹ makes use of the case of 'fake news' to describe and illustrate the phenomenon whereby certain keywords operate at a meta-level since they refer to discursive realities. Therefore, I should point out that it does not provide an analysis *in extenso* of 'fake news' as a keyword (Jeffries & Walker, 2017; Schröter & Storjohann, 2015; Williams, 1976/1983).

The argumentation is divided into three parts. The first clarifies the theoretical approach and makes explicit the central proposition of the article, namely that keywords referring to forms of discourse can be considered as belonging to a subtype of keywords, which I call *meta-discursive formulas*, following the notion of formula proposed by Krieg-Planque (2003, 2009). Because the conceptualisation of formula is my chosen framework, I begin this first part by explaining the interactions between the two closely related concepts of keyword and formula, before suggesting that it might be productive to take into account the types of phenomena to which they refer (i.e. their denotation).

The second part seeks first to describe the meta-discursive behaviour of 'fake news' by differentiating the different ways in which the locution tends to be used in the francophone general press (French and Belgian). I then show that 'fake news' is not an isolated case and that other lexical items analysed as formulas or keywords can claim the status of meta-discursive formula.

Finally, the relevance of this sub-category can be assessed, I believe, in terms of its pragmatic implications. The third and final section looks first at what previous research says about the performativity of formulas and keywords in general, before moving on to the effects that are specific to, or at least made particularly salient by, the type of denotation that this kind of formulas endorses.

2. Theoretical Approach

2.1. Conceptual parameters: keywords and formula

The notions of keyword (as established by Williams 1983 and further developed in the wake of his seminal work) and of formula (Krieg-Planque 2003, 2009) emerge from two

1 I would like to thank Laura Gerday for proofreading this article and helping with the English language.

different fields, one area being mainly English-speaking, the other French-speaking, which to the best of my knowledge have not yet been brought together.

In very broad terms, the two concepts carry with them the heritage of a tradition — remarkably long, extensive, and transdisciplinary — focused on the uses of lexical items, on the roles and values with which words are assigned in the course of their political and cultural uses, once the socio-historical relationships at the root of their meaning are taken into account. While the fields linked to formulas and keywords have both been developing within discourse studies, which provide both concepts with their linguistic apparatus, the formula assumes a centralising role in French discourse analysis, whereas the keyword is embedded in a plural paradigm, opened up by Raymond Williams.

I personally make a distinction between at least four types of approaches to these keywords, which are not entirely self-contained: the (*cultural*) *keywords* of Raymond Williams (to whom most of the following refer) and his successors (Bennett, Grossberg, & Morris, 2005; The Keywords Project, MacCabe, & Yanacek, 2018; Williams, 1976/1983); the *cultural keywords* developed by Anna Wierzbicka and Cliff Goddard from the perspectives of linguistic anthropology and the comparative study of languages (Goddard & Wierzbicka, 1995; Levisen & Waters, 2017; Peeters, 2020; Underhill & Gianninoto, 2019; Wierzbicka, 1997); and, standing at the crossroads of some of these approaches and including the use of corpus linguistics (and statistical key words), the *sociopolitical keywords* of Lesley Jeffries and Brian Walker (2017) and the *discourse keywords* described by Melani Schröter, mainly in her work with Petra Storjohann or Marie Veniard (Schröter & Storjohann, 2015; Schröter & Veniard, 2016; Schröter, Veniard, Taylor, & Blätte, 2019).

As a result of this differentiation between contemporary works based on the understanding of keywords that their authors adopt, I consider the keyword to be a more encompassing notion (i.e. that can function as a hyperonym). Therefore, and with a view to connecting the two fields (anglophone and francophone), I regard the formula as part of this notional constellation, each of whose components develops its own disciplinary specificities and analytical perspectives. Before I detail the interaction between these two notions, I will first briefly describe the analytical category of formulas.

The term *formula* is used here in reference to the theoretical and methodological framework developed by Alice Krieg-Planque (2009) following her study of the formula ‘purification ethnique’ (‘ethnic cleansing’, Krieg-Planque, 2003). Her work builds on a tradition of studies on sociopolitical uses of lexical material — principally on philosopher Jean-Pierre Faye’s work on the formula ‘totale Staat’ (‘total state’) in German and ‘Stato totalitario’ (‘totalitarian state’) in Italian, and on Marianne Ebel and Pierre Fiala’s study of the words ‘Überfremdung’ (‘foreign control and overpopulation’) and ‘xénophobie’ (‘xenophobia’). As part of the overall theoretical framework of what is generally known as the French school of discourse analysis, Krieg-Planque provides a series of analytical tools to address the phenomena of discursive circulation and *reprise*, to which the notion of formula belongs.

The notion of formula is defined by the linguist as follows: 'By *formula*, we mean a set of formulations that, because of their use at a given time and in a given public space, crystallize the political and social issues that these expressions simultaneously contribute to shaping' (Krieg-Planque, 2009, p. 7 [I translate]). The notion thus refers to the way in which a verbal item or sequence behaves discursively in the public sphere at a given socio-political time and in a given space.

More precisely, the discursive functioning of a formula operates according to four properties, each of which can be met more or less completely: (1) the 'freezing' of the signifier;² (2) the discursive nature of the linguistic item; (3) its status as a social referent; and (4) its polemical character. To explain those four properties, one can basically say that the signifier has to be more or less frozen, thereby facilitating its recognition, reuse, and circulation. Almost as a consequence of the previous feature, the signified is blurred or even fluctuating, even though the formula refers at a given moment in a given space to a social referent known to everyone. It is definitely language usage rather than standardised language norms that is responsible for a word or group of words to emerge as formulas. Lastly, those discursive items inevitably display a polemical aspect since they are, at a given moment in time, at the centre of socio-political debates on given issues.

This general understanding of how formulas work is actualized by means of specific mechanisms that can be found in discourse: for instance, the fact that the formula constitutes a social referent can be observed through phenomena of presupposition or lexical productivity (speakers create new linguistic entities by modifying the 'original' formula); the polemical dimension can be spotted in the multiplication of metalinguistic statements about the formula; the importance of its formal stabilisation, in a relatively fixed signifier, can be assessed in its relationship to competing formulations, etc. (for the complete and systematic description of the criteria, see Krieg-Planque, 2009, p. 63–112).

There are obvious areas of overlap between the theoretical and methodological framework that Krieg-Planque helped to set and the studies in linguistics that have borrowed Raymond Williams's notion of cultural keywords. Another article would be needed to analyse the differences and convergences between these two fields. What I can say here is that both notions focus on the same type of phenomena, namely complex lexical objects, pointing to pivotal social, political, and/or cultural meanings in a given context. However, the most substantial difference lies in the way in which these lexical-discursive phenomena are analytically grasped. The connection of the formula with these neighbouring notions is restrained by the type of parameters the different notions take into account to a greater or lesser extent. The study of formulas does not adopt a compar-

2 It should be noted that the notion of formula applies not only to simple lexical units but also to more complex verbal sequences, or even autonomous ones (for instance 'discrimination positive' ['positive discrimination'], 'guerre contre le terrorisme' ['war against terrorism'], 'La France ne peut accueillir toute la misère du monde' ['France cannot welcome all the world's poverty?']). See Krieg-Planque, 2009, in particular pages 63–84. This feature distinguishes formulas from the keywords studied by Williams, by Jeffries and Walker, and in *Keywords for Today* as well as in *New Keywords*, which are all simple lexical items (except for 'political correctness', which can be found in *New Keywords*).

ative perspective on languages (in contrast to Schröter et al., 2019; Underhill & Gianinoto, 2019; Wierzbicka, 1997 for instance), does not seek to establish vocabularies or clusters (see Jones, 2006) representative of types of discourse or periods (Jeffries & Walker, 2017; Schröter et al., 2019; Williams, 1976/1983), and does not attempt to retrace the historical trajectory of ‘loaded’ words or to unfold long-standing culture-laden words ((Wierzbicka, 1997; Williams, 1976/1983). Neither is it primarily driven by semantic questions, nor does it use the tools provided by corpus linguistics (Jeffries & Walker, 2017; Schröter & Storjohann, 2015; Schröter & Veniard, 2016; Schröter et al., 2019). Instead, it devotes a great deal of attention to the materiality of language (particularly questions of morphosyntax) and its argumentative dimension (Amossy, 2021), and gives even more attention to the phenomena of enunciative heterogeneity (see the work of Jacqueline Authier-Revuz).

To clarify my own uses of the two notions in what follows, I do not distinguish here between formulas, in the sense of lexical units (empirical objects) designated as such, and keywords. If we take the word *sustainable*, it could probably be characterised as the ‘sociopolitical keyword’ of a particular political period, as the ‘discourse keyword’ of a set of texts brought together around a given topic, and as a ‘formula’ in a given public space. In other words, the distinction does not always come down to empirical considerations (although it can, in some cases), but rather to the parameters that each approach chooses to use to characterise a given lexical entity.

Ultimately, I will draw on both types of references but I prefer to use the term *formula* to refer to a specific theoretical framework, without overlooking the need to rely on the notion of keyword as a more general category, encompassing a series of variable contemporary approaches to Raymond Williams’s (1983) original concept.

2.2. Previous research and a slight shift in focus

As just mentioned, studies devoted to (cultural, sociopolitical, or discursive) keywords and formulas — from seminal works to case studies — present methodological specificities and are part of different disciplinary traditions. Despite these distinctions, they always seem to converge on at least one elementary aspect of what would be the ‘keyness’ of these discursive items, namely that keyness is probably perceived above all through the articulation, successfully achieved by these keywords, between a given socio-discursive function (their condensation power) and a particular semantic quality (their fluctuating meaning).

Whatever empirical, historical, or interpretative foundations one might try to provide, the keyness of these lexical items derives first and foremost from the fact that they are salient, representative, nodal, dominant in a given social, cultural, and political space and moment. If these lexical items circulate and have a high frequency of use, they also (and consequently) fulfil a function of condensation or concentration of the sociopolitical stakes of the debates currently underway. That function is expressed by the

metaphors of ‘tips of icebergs’ by Stubbs (2010, p. 23) or Schröter (2008), of the ‘tangled ball of wool’ by Wierzbicka (1997, p. 16), of the ‘shorthand’ by Schröter & Storjohann (2015, p. 48), of the ‘discourse in a nutshell’ by Schröter (2008), or of ‘a “capture of a capture”’ by Levisen & Waters (2017, p. 8). This functional feature is then directly combined with a meaning that is vague and complex, contentious and fluctuating according to the context of use.

The semantic dimension is one of the most recurrent and widely discussed concerns in keyword analysis (see, for example, the notion of ‘semantic prosody’ established by Louw [1993, 2000] and taken up by Jeffries (2003), Jeffries & Walker (2017), and Kranert (2020)). A series of linguistic tools are used to describe, with precision and at the very core of the discursive data, the various mechanisms of meaning production (emergent, competing, naturalized meanings and connotations, *instrumentalisation* of the common meaning, etc.).

Moreover, the general characterisations of what these keywords denote are broad and all-encompassing: they are ‘deeply culture-laden words’ (Goddard & Wierzbicka, 1995, p. 57); they ‘express important evaluative social meanings’ (Stubbs, 2010, p. 21); ‘they correspond to epistemically relevant phenomena that reflect frames of socially shared knowledge generated in and through discourses’ (Schröter & Storjohann, 2015, p. 48); they ‘are words that reflect significant cultural, social, or political discourses’ (Kranert, 2020, p. 33). To put it bluntly, according to these descriptions alone, which more or less draw on Williams’s (1996 [1983]) concept of cultural keywords, the candidates for keyword status could potentially be numerous. Indeed, the notion does not discriminate in terms of the type of reality to which it refers: (economico-)political events (‘Brexit’, ‘passage à l’euro’ [‘transition to the euro’] [see Modena, 2013]), individuals or groups of individuals (‘gilets jaunes’ [‘yellow vests’], ‘climatosceptiques’ [‘climate sceptics’] [see Schürgers, 2021]), economic, political, social, or environmental processes (‘globalisation’ [see Gerday, 2021], ‘développement durable’ [‘sustainable development’] [see Krieg-Planque, 2010], ‘radicalisation’, ‘integration’).

However, it seems to me that, in certain cases, one might benefit from looking at the matter from another linguistic aspect, leaving the subtle semantic fluctuations mentioned above in abeyance for a more basic understanding of what this type of discursive items refers to. In other words, this would mean taking into consideration not only the semantic instability that characterises keywords and formulas, but also their very denotation.³

While a multitude of socio-political realities can serve as referents of keywords, I would like to focus on one of them, namely, that of forms of discourse, and so in order to highlight how keywords may work in their referring process.

3 A recent article by Laura Calabrese, whose research focuses on semantico-lexical conflicts, is also written along these lines: she argues that it is important to distinguish between types of referents when studying nomination as a discursive and social act (discrete vs. non-discrete objects, or natural vs. social phenomena, for example). See (Calabrese, 2023).

2.3. Data approach: 'Fake News' as a case in point

I must emphasise that even if my propositions come from the analysis of the use of 'fake news' in a given set of data and context, I do not claim to conduct a systematic and exhaustive examination of those discourses. For the present paper, I have selected, in the spirit of a kind of purposive sampling approach, a series of statements that I judged to be helpful examples to understand the points made. I draw this series of examples from a large set of articles, i.e. all articles that contain at least one occurrence of the locution 'fake news', published between 2016 and 2019 in six generalist national dailies in France and French-speaking Belgium: *Le Monde*, *Le Figaro*, *Libération*, and *Le Soir*, *La Libre Belgique*, *La Dernière heure*. The aim is not to describe objectively the features of that corpus,⁴ inasmuch as I do not mean to adopt the perspective of empirical epistemology here. As I intend to provide a general model (of a specific type of formula and its metalinguistic referring processes), the way I use the corpus in this specific case amounts to choosing relevant examples that illustrate that model. I aspire to characterise a discursive mechanism, which certainly emerges from situated examples, but to which I wish to give an abstract value and a heuristic range, in the hope that this may shed light on (other) empirical data or lead to consider them in a different light.

3. The Meta-discursive Formula as a Subtype of Keywords

3.1. 'Fake news' as a meta-discursive formula

The linguistic reflexivity that accompanies the use of keywords or formulas is an important factor to take into account in order to understand how they behave in discourse, or even to be able to acknowledge their status as formulas — for Krieg-Planque, the metalinguistic element defines the formulas' discursive operation. She insists on the idea that the polemical character of a formula also, or even foremost, concerns the word itself: the enunciators using it 'argue for a way of describing reality' (Krieg-Planque, 2009, p. 104; my translation). Schröter makes the same point about discourse keywords: 'The most crucial characteristic of key words is that they refer to issues that are controversially debated in the public arena. This does not only add to the complexity of the internal semantic structure; it also triggers metalinguistic comments that are concomitant with the use of these key words' (2008, p. 51).

4 While I cannot expand here on the reasons for the selection of those newspapers and the chosen timeframe, I will simply say that the corpus is composed of these 'major reference newspapers', which have high visibility in France and French-speaking Belgium, and which one can consider to be representative (among what is available in this category of newspapers) of a relative diversity of political commitments and positions. These features of the corpus enable us to observe the circulation of the locution in part of the public sphere.

Here are some illustrative examples of these metalinguistic comments in relation to the 'fake news' formula:

- (1) C'est à cette occasion que s'est popularisée l'expression « *fake news* », qui désigne les informations volontairement trompeuses empruntant les codes et la présentation de la presse traditionnelle. (*Le Monde*, 2017-02-03)

(It was on this occasion that the expression 'fake news' became popular, designating deliberately misleading information using the codes and presentation of the traditional press.)⁵

- (2) Depuis, les experts hésitent entre « *fake news* » ou « *fantaisies* » pour qualifier ces performances, censées remonter le moral de la population. (*Le Figaro*, 2019-02-06)

(Since then, experts have been hesitating between 'fake news' and 'fantasies' to describe these performances, supposed to boost public morale.)

- (3) La campagne électorale a été marquée par la diffusion de beaucoup de désinformations favorables à Trump, que les Américains appellent « fake news ». (*Le Monde*, 2017-01-28)

(The election campaign was marked by the dissemination of numerous pieces of disinformation in favour of Trump, what the Americans call 'fake news'.)

- (4) « *Notre peur, c'est que certains nous associent à ces soi-disant "fake news"* » (Libération, 2017-02-03)

(*'Our fear is that some people will associate us with these so-called "fake news"'*.)

The metalinguistic comments that formulas are subject to give access to the enunciators' attitudes towards the word, towards those who use it, and towards its (in)adequacy to the realities to which it is supposed to refer.⁶ Clearly, there is a need to make room in the analysis for statements that comment on or 'surround' the formula.

However, even when it does not produce an explicit metadiscourse, the formula 'fake news' is always already a matter of metadiscourse. If one looks closely, 'fake news' refers to a form of speech in the public arena: news, information is indeed speech built on, as well as building (Mouillaud & Tétu, 1989), a matrix of events, through a media device. And if the news is fake, one does indeed judge a form of enunciation, a way of stating information that invalidates its very status. As a result, one can say that my corpus

5 The examples from the corpus are all in French; the English translation that directly follows is my own here and in the rest of the paper. By contrast, all the italicised items in the excerpts are not mine.

6 Krieg-Planque has even made it a selection criterion for the constitution of her corpus; occurrences of the formula 'purification ethnique' ('ethnic cleansing') that do not use the phrase 'transparently' are those included in the corpus, occurrences which she then precisely analyses as producing different 'registers of problematisation' (see Krieg, 2000; my translation).

is a *metadiscursive ensemble* whose texts outline another discourse and stamp it with a distinctive denomination.⁷

When one turns to the variety of uses of the formula in this metadiscursive ensemble, it seems possible to highlight a few different ways in which ‘fake news’ refers to forms of discourses. Those general tendencies in metalinguistic referring can be organised into a three-level distinction. (1) The first one is that of discursivity; it refers to the domain of ‘the said’,⁸ to a more or less generalised type of discursive phenomenon (e.g. ‘the dissemination of fake news’). (2) The second level consists of utterances that use the formula to designate an occurrence of discourse, meaning that the formula’s referent matches precise and identified content, *i.e.* particular pieces of fake news (e.g. ‘the biggest fake news of the campaign’). (3) The third level is that of enunciation: the formula here refers more to the phenomenon of fake news as a form of speech circulating in the public arena; in addition to the discursive type of reality it always refers to, in those cases, the formula refers above all to the act of enunciation — an enunciation potentially embodied by an enunciative instance or by a situation of enunciation (e.g. ‘the success of fake news on the internet’).

It has to be stressed that these three levels should not be understood as strictly independent of one another; each occurrence combines, in varying proportions, the characteristics of these different stages of metadiscourse.⁹ If we take the excerpt (9) from the table below (‘We live in a world of “fake news”, and this is particularly true when it comes to nuclear power. [I translate]), we see that the reference to particular occurrences of labelled ‘fake news’ (level 2) is not what is at stake here. ‘Fake news’ denotes a collection of discourses that the enunciator groups together under this designation (level 1). On closer examination, by speaking of ‘a world of fake news’, the enunciator is not only invoking ‘fake news’ as a given discursive product (level 1), but is also mainly referring to a form of speech that circulates, to a situation of enunciation in which saying fake news has become a characteristic of our environment: the formula ‘fake news’ designates the product as much as the production, ‘in a world of “fake news”’ means a world in which fake news *is being said*.

7 I use the term denomination in reference to the meaning it has been given for instance by Paul Siblot: denomination is an act of categorisation; it refers to the operation of giving a name to a thing in reference to a norm that makes this operation objective (Siblot, 1997).

8 In reference to Oswald Ducrot’s distinction between ‘the said’ and ‘the saying’ (Ducrot, 1984).

9 One could choose to present the threefold typology according to the type of content related to the different stages of metalinguistic referring. This alternative could be formulated as such: (1) a property of the content of certain discourses (of what is said in these discourses), as texts; (2) the false/misleading character of a particular piece of information; (3) the (enunciative and discursive) phenomenon of producing discourses/texts labelled as fake news, *i.e.* discourses as defined in (1) above. However, grappling with the point I am trying to make, what needs to appear in this distinction is the way those occurrences of ‘fake news’ ‘meta-refer’, so to speak. What matters here are the different linguistic levels of metadiscourse (*i.e.* discursive phenomenon, an occurrence of discourse, the act of enunciation), and not so much the fluctuations in the type of designated content (even if these considerations are of course interrelated).

The table below shows how occurrences of the formula can span the range of those different levels:

Meta-discursive	Examples
<u>DISCURSIVITY</u>	<p>(5) Bref, arrêter rumeurs et fake news, du moins en matière de santé. (Libération, 2018-01-02)</p> <p>(In short, stop rumours and fake news, at least when it comes to health.)</p> <p>(6) Le parti a montré au grand jour son vrai visage, celui d'une extrême droite haineuse et complotiste qui n'a pas hésité à relayer des « fake news » jusqu'au gong de fin de campagne pour tenter d'abattre son adversaire ou de boycotter des médias pour sa soirée électorale. (Le Soir, 2017-04-08)</p> <p>(The party has shown its true colours, that of a hateful, conspiracy-minded extreme right, which has not hesitated to relay 'fake news' right up to the final gong of the campaign in an attempt to bring down its opponent or boycott the media for its election night.)</p>
<u>DISCOURSE-OCCURRENCE</u>	<p>(5) Une finaliste à l'élection présidentielle qui, en fin de débat télévisé, balance une phrase anodine sur un supposé compte bancaire aux Bahamas que posséderait son adversaire (« fake news » entretenue sur les réseaux sociaux par des comptes authentifiés experts en complotisme); [...] (Libération, 2017-04-08).</p> <p>(A finalist in the presidential election who, at the end of a TV debate, drops a harmless line about her opponent's alleged bank account in the Bahamas (a piece of 'fake news' maintained on social networks by accounts certified as experts in conspiracy theories); [...])</p>
<u>ENUNCIATION</u>	<p>(8) Pour Mercier, la clé du succès des « fake news » n'est pas la malveillance ou la jalousie, mais le besoin irrépressible de beaucoup d'être confortés dans leurs convictions. (Le Figaro, 2018-06-13)</p> <p>(For Mercier, the key to the success of 'fake news' is not malice or jealousy, but the irrepressible need of many people to be reassured in their beliefs.)</p> <p>(9) Nous vivons dans un monde de « fake news » et c'est particulièrement le cas s'agissant du nucléaire. (Le Figaro, 2017-02-14)</p> <p>(We live in a world of 'fake news', and this is particularly true when it comes to nuclear power.)</p>

Table 1: A three-level distinction in the metalinguistic referring of the 'fake news' formula

The point of this tripartite categorisation, in my view, is to highlight the fact that, in some cases, the formula refers to the process of enunciation and not just to its result. This third stage is the trickiest to identify as it requires some interpretation of what happens on an implicit level. Yet, it seems to me that in a number of cases (when one talks about the ‘fake news phenomenon’, about a ‘world of fake news’, or when one says ‘in the age of fake news’, for example), one is referring to ‘the act of saying’ as much as to ‘the said’. In such utterance, the formula almost functions as a shifter: it refers to a situation of enunciation in that it always implicitly presupposes the existence of a locutor and a discursive production, a speaking subject — whether individual, collective, or institutional (Trump, the Front National, a website, social media, etc.) — and a discredited enunciative act. The formula thus refers to a situation of enunciation, which is distinct from the one in which the ongoing utterance is made. (I will come back to this point in section 3.2.)

3.2. *Additional examples of meta-discursive formulas*

I posit that ‘fake news’ is not an isolated case and that, in this respect, the meta-discursive formula characterisation can be promoted to the status of a subtype of keywords. There are indeed other meta-discursive items that have been identified as items that have acquired the status of formula.

In her theoretical framework, to illustrate how a sequence can pre-exist its use as a formula (as formulas are not always neologisms or new combinations of words), Krieg-Planque mentions, for example, the words ‘concertation’ (‘consultation’), ‘dialogue’ (‘dialogue’) and ‘négociation’ (‘negotiation’). In the context of the strikes and protests that took place in France at the end of 1995 over a plan to reform the social security system, these three words began to behave distinctively and to take on different meanings. Additionally, their use or absence of use (the members of the government refused to talk of ‘négociation’ and stuck to the other two words) became the subject of controversy (Krieg-Planque, 2009, pp. 85–87; my translation). These words refer to discursive forms whose stakes lie in the way they describe, and therefore shape, the interaction between social actors.

Another interesting example comes from the study carried out by Anabelle Seoane, who analyses the moment when the word ‘couac’ (‘blunder’) was used as a formula during the first two years of François Hollande’s presidency. An examination of the major newspapers that came out between May 2012 and May 2014 enables her to identify, through the use and reappropriation of the word, ‘the gradual construction of a shared, almost generalised, representation of the government’s action’ (Seoane, 2015; my translation). For my part, I note above all that ‘couac’ is a formula that refers to discursive content: it stands for a reformulation that, Seoane writes, ‘gathers into a single term the content of the narrative sequence’; it is ‘a condensed version of a narrative sequence with an explanatory scope of a precise political event that is given as badly managed by the government’ (Seoane, 2015; my translation).

While Seoane observes that ‘couac’ primarily refers to ‘a judgement on the government’s *communication*’ (Seoane, 2015; my translation and emphasis), the formula can also, by metonymy, constitute a comment not on the government’s communication but on its *action*. The meta-discursive content of a formula can therefore fluctuate; and, conversely, a formula that does not in itself refer to discursive content can nevertheless begin to function as a meta-discursive formula depending on the context. A prime example is the lemma ‘POPULISM’ which is used in three ways according to the study that Kranert conducted on journalistic discourse and the political discourse that it relays, in Germany and the UK, between 2012 and 2017: ‘stigmatization of a policy; stigmatization of rhetoric; naming of a (party-)political ideology or movement’ (Kranert, 2020, p. 48). Kranert also points out the difficulty of distinguishing between a reference to policy or rhetoric (Kranert, 2020, p. 49).

Building on the ambiguity in the uses of those keywords, let us look at one final example, namely the formula ‘politiquement incorrect’ (‘politically incorrect’), and the remarks made about it by Emmanuelle Prak-Derrington and Dominique Dias — remarks that seem to confirm the argument developed here. Described as an ‘exception amongst formulas’ by Prak-Derrington and Dias, the ‘politically (in)correct’ pair has the particularity ‘of referring to behaviour and ideas as much as to language’ (Prak-Derrington & Dias, 2022, p. 12; my translation). The two linguists therefore choose to call the pair a ‘meta-formula’ on the grounds that it has ‘the property of providing ordinary metalinguistic terms of great malleability’ (Prak-Derrington & Dias, 2022, p. 13; my translation). If one could find the term confusing,¹⁰ it still captures and highlights the meta-discursive property and establishes it as a sufficiently solid basis for separate classification.

I can also mention the morpho-syntactic particularity of this formula, composed of a combination of an adverb and an adjective (‘politiquement (in)correct’ [‘politically (in)correct’]) or a nominalised adjective (‘le politiquement (in)correct’ [‘political (in)correctness’]). If one allows for the possibility of distinguishing between the meta-discursive and meta-enunciative levels of referring, the formula ‘politiquement (in)correct’ (so in the adverbial version) clearly indicates a form of enunciation, since it serves as a modifier for a presupposed ‘saying’.

The question that now needs to be addressed is the relevance, or the heuristic value, of this class of referents of formulas. In my view, the answer lies in the pragmatic effects attached to the use of this type of formulas.

10 The term ‘metaformula’ appears to be potentially confounding, given that the authors talk about a pair of formulas — rather than variants of the same formula — and one might assume that they designate a sort of ‘squared formula feature’, as if multiplied by the ambiguity at work in the discourses using them.

4. Meta-discursive Formulas and Performativity

4.1. *Formulas: tools for language performativity*

Before looking at the pragmatic implications of ‘fake news’ as a meta-discursive formula, I feel that it would be useful to briefly outline the ways in which the notion of formula (and more marginally that of keyword) already presents performative properties in its conceptualisation. I adopt here a relatively flexible conception of performativity, in line with the social and pragmatic approaches to language that draw on Austin’s general idea, developed in his ‘speech act’ theory, that language does not merely describe or explain reality, but can also be operative in itself. The underlying objective here is to understand how language can perform certain actions and organise interactions (see for example, for a short overview, Marignier, 2021) by means of the discursive items that formulas are.

Generally speaking, the discursive operation of a formula induces performativity that is primarily linked to the formula’s role as a ‘social referent’: having a ‘framing function for the debate’ (Krieg-Planque, 2009, p. 100; my translation). Formulas act through discourse as an ‘obligatory passage when dealing with a given subject’ (Amossy et al., 2014; my translation). Formulas ‘shape’ the social world by singling out from it which referents will emerge or not as important and controversial socio-political issues — to the point where they can act even by their absence, through their ‘deliberate avoidance’ (Amossy et al., 2014; my translation). The active power of these discursive entities is therefore to contribute to the existence of a topic as part of the public debate and to establish this topic, framed by a specific keyword, as a catalyst for socio-political issues.¹¹ With reference to Maingueneau (1991, p. 85) and Courtine (1981, p. 107), Krieg-Planque (2009, pp. 99–100) explains that the formula, because it is dominant in a given socio-political time and space, constrains speakers to take a stance on its meaning, its uses, and the stakes at issue. Let us consider the two following examples:

(10) Nous évitons le terme « fake news », qui nous paraît dangereux. Il a été repris à leur compte par Trump, Erdogan (le président turc) et la classe politique chinoise. Nous préférons parler de désinformation. (*Le Monde*, 2018-03-14)

(We avoid the term ‘fake news’, which we think is dangerous. It has been taken up by Trump, Erdogan [the Turkish president] and the Chinese political class. We prefer to talk about disinformation.)

(11) À l’expression *fake news*, Mme Gabriel préfère d’ailleurs le terme de *désinformation en ligne*. « Car nous connaissons aujourd’hui les effets pervers de l’utilisation de l’expression *fake news* qui pourrait servir à des politiques pour décrédibiliser leurs adversaires et nuire à la liberté d’expression », reconnaît-elle. (*Le Soir*, 2018-03-10)

11 In this respect, one could read what Henri Boyer says in his second chapter about what he calls the ‘words-slogan’ and the ‘performance strategies’ (Boyer derives performance from performativity) whereby those words are loaded (Boyer, 1991, pp. 63–108 ; especially pp. 63–64, 80, 108)

(Ms Gabriel prefers the term online disinformation to *fake news*. 'Because we are now aware of the perverse effects of using the expression *fake news*, which could be used by politicians to discredit their opponents and undermine freedom of expression', she acknowledges.)

In both cases, even if the speakers are taking a stance *against* the locution, they are still positioning themselves *in relation to it* — in relation to actors, available meanings, issues, all of which are pre-defined elsewhere. In this way, formulas help to organise the discursive sphere, opening up and delimiting a zone of dissension, preventing ideological and discursive variety from completely slipping through its net. These two examples also illustrate the polemical dimension of formulas, inseparable from their dominant character. A complementary aspect to consider is therefore that the very nature of formulas leads to these phenomena of iteration and positioning. Grappling with Krieg-Planque's four-property definition, it is the polemical dimension of the formula that can in turn be highlighted to understand its performative potential. Performativity is assessed here in terms of reciprocity: it is a mutual performativity, that of discourses in confrontation, which delimit and construct one another in relation to one another (Maingueneau, 1983; see also issue 39 of the journal *Semen*). Ruth Amossy, a specialist in the rhetorical study of the notion of polemics, argues in that respect that polemics '*model communication*' (Amossy, 2014, p. 9; my translation and emphasis). This constraint to take a stance in the interdiscursive arena then exacerbates the dialogism at work, which Bakhtine described among other ways as a 'mutual reorientation in relation to others' discourse, which occurs on the way to the object' (Bakhtine, in Todorov, 1981, p. 98; my translation).

Ultimately, all formulas are performative through their referring process, which is fundamentally discursive, dialogical, and polemical. But the performative value of a formula can also be assessed at a narrower level, namely that of morpho-syntactic data. For example, when the formula is created by nominalisation (e.g. 'banlieurisation' ['suburbanization'] or 'clandestinisation' ['clandestinisation']), its iterative use amounts to 'accrediting the existence of a [social phenomenon] whose existence and nature should actually be discussed' (Krieg-Planque, 2009, pp. 80–81; my translation), notably by making explicit the actancial data¹² of the nominalised phenomenon (see the comment on the two examples cited in Krieg-Planque, 2009, pp. 80–81, and the two texts of Sériot, 1986b, 1986a).

Furthermore, through the act of naming that it endorses, but also through the recurrent profiling operations that work to stabilise its semantics,¹³ a formula is potentially capable of scripting a situation as well as distributing roles and collective identities. Still

12 *i.e.* in reference to Greimas's actancial model, the structural relationships between the actants involved in the process (that is, in a minimalist way: in this process, who does what, to whom/to what, with what benefits/interests?)

13 Julien Longhi refers to one of the three phases of meaning ('motive-profile-theme') in the study of semantic forms carried out by Cadiot and Visetti, whom he quotes: 'by profiling, we mean all the grammatical operations that contribute to the stabilisation of units, and at the same time construct a set of views on the theme' (Cadiot & Visetti, 2001, p. 127 in Longhi, 2015, p. 123; my translation).

taking into account the pragmatic impact of syntactic data, this is not without resonance with the observation that Jeffries and Walker make about a type of use of the word 'RE-FORM' in their dual corpus: the authors talk about 'bald, unmodified instances of the keywords where they are modified neither left or right' which translates into 'the tendency for some words to take on a meaning which is left undefined in the context and is therefore assumed to be agreed upon by the producer and recipient of the text' (109).

These processes of naturalisation of the meaning and value (positive, negative, desirable, of 'absolute good' [Walker and Jeffries], etc.) of formulas and keywords genuinely affect the order of representations by means of the morphological and syntactic procedures from which they arise and their very behaviour as formulas. As an example, Krieg-Planque shows how the contradiction found in the nominal phrase 'sustainable development' tends to be dissimulated by the dimension of formula that this phrase acquires: the formula "sustainable development" stands in for an opposition that it only represents in an erased mode'. This dissimulation is also to be found in linguistic freezing: 'the suspension of the combinatory opening in the order of language [...] relates to the suspension of contradiction in the order of arguments and contents of discourse [...]' (Krieg-Planque, 2010, pp. 18–19; my translation).

To bring things back to a much more general level, and to return to Williams's founding perspective on cultural keywords, I recall that he considers keywords significant for two main reasons: they are 'binding words in certain activities and their interpretation' as well as 'indicative words in certain forms of thought' (Williams 1983, p. 15). Their performative potential also lies, according to a constructivist perspective on language, in the fact that 'keywords do not just label, but help create, conceptual categories', as Michael Stubbs puts it (Stubbs, 2010, p. 24).

From the general and abstract characterisation of keywords and formulas to their discursive and morpho-syntactic features, the performativity operators mentioned above must be kept in mind in the following section. If the definition of the notion makes it possible to understand that a formula makes a topic exist as part of the public debate, what happens when this topic relates to an exogenous utterance, to another act of saying taking place in the public sphere?

4.2. *A pragma-enunciative lever?*

To organise the description of my/a meta-discursive formula's pragmatic implications, one can use the argument put forward by Seoane in an article focusing on the use of the meta-discursive expression 'petite phrase' (literally 'little sentence')¹⁴ in journalistic discourse. The author establishes that this categorising phrase can acquire a 'primary meta-active function in discourse' in that 'it shapes an underlying system of cross-representa-

14 The term 'petite phrase' is used by social actors to describe fragments of discourse [usually political], more or less decontextualised, which are repeated in and by the media because of their remarkable or controversial nature' (Seoane, 2018, p. 91; my translation, referring to Ollivier-Yaniv, 2011, p. 18).

tions' (Seoane, 2018, p. 104; my translation). This 'system of crossed representations' refers to the way in which the expression produces a categorisation of the designated discourse on the one hand, and of the discourse in the making on the other hand, with both categorisation procedures interacting with each other.¹⁵ In the same way, the pragmatic implications of the meta-discursive formula under consideration have, as it were, a double impact spot: they concern both the discourse designated by the formula and the discourse that employs it.

Those pragmatic implications can be formalised in three different effects, which imperfectly overlap with the threefold distinction of metalinguistic referring stages presented in section 2.2. The first one (more established but still crucial) is that of the effects of categorisation. Even if this categorisation process is common to all keywords, what is specific to meta-discursive formulas is that this process applies to a discursive type of reality. This first effect fits the first two levels of referents (discursivity and discourse-occurrence). Conversely, the other two pragmatic effects apply particularly in cases where the formula is used meta-enunciatively (referents pertaining to level 3) and act, not directly on the designated discourse, but rather on the ongoing discourse, that utters the formula. Hence, I talk about *return effects*, where the use of the meta-enunciative formula, spills over onto the discourse that utters it, so to speak (in a feedback loop sort of way). So I turn now to each of these three effects in turn.

The first 'meta-active' function, to use Seoane's term, of the 'fake news' formula is that of participating in a process of classifying and categorising discourses. Each time the formula is used, the speaker creates an enunciative alterity, from which they distinguish themselves and which they discredit (or presuppose the discredited status). Depending on the context of use, but also on the metalinguistic referring stage (discursivity or discourse-occurrence), this enunciative alterity and the role it plays in the organisation of discourses in the public sphere are made more or less explicit and axiologised. Compare example (7), which, through the mention of a particular piece of 'fake news' and its visibility register ('maintained on social networks by accounts certified as experts in conspiracy theories'), implicitly draws on an already existing hierarchisation of discourses and media devices, and example (5), which I reproduce *in extenso*:

(5) [...] *au-delà du vaccin, c'est l'illustration d'un enjeu essentiel : redonner du crédit à la parole rationnelle, que le discours scientifique reprenne sa place dans la société. Lutter contre une forme d'obscurantisme. C'est d'ailleurs une des raisons pour lesquelles j'ai accepté ce poste.* » Bref, arrêter rumeurs et *fake news*, du moins en matière de santé. (Libération, 2018-01-02)

([...] *Beyond the vaccine, it illustrates an essential issue: to restore credit to rational discourse, for scientific discourse to regain its place in society. Fighting against a form of obscurantism. In fact, that's one of the reasons why I accepted this position.* In short, stop rumours and *fake news*, at least when it comes to health.)

15 'The meta-discursive judgement brings out an event-based utterance and enables the enunciator-journalist to instigate an interdiscursive dialogical dynamic that provides them with a position of authority, based on an already axiologised doxical foundation' (Seoane, 2018, p. 104; my translation).

In this example, the utterance truly constructs this axiological classification of different public speech forms through the use of the formula, which acts as an anaphoric reformulation of the statement quoted: through the analogy produced by the summarising reformulation ('In short stop rumours and *fake news*, at least when it comes to health'), the enunciator explicitly transfers to the formula and the fight against 'fake news' the divisions expressed in the statement quoted ('rational speech', 'scientific discourse' *versus* 'a form of obscurantism') and the desirable value attributed to one of these forms of thought/discourse.

To take other examples of keywords already mentioned and from which a similar analysis has been drawn, I can mention Kranert's observation about the fact that, in his corpus, the 'denotative contextualization' of the word 'POPULIST' makes it a 'stigma term' (Kranert, 2020), or Prak-Derrington and Dias's remark on the idea that 'politically (in)correct' formulas, by 'reducing the individual to his or her words', 'enclose the other in a necessarily enemy camp' (Prak-Derrington & Dias, 2022, pp. 14–15; my translation). In a similar vein, 'fake news' is a disqualifying formula that acts as a referee of discourses; it implicitly produces a hierarchy at least of the forms of information speech (but, through the narratives and value systems called in, it also produces an evaluation of media practices, ideas, experiences, and individuals).

As I said above, this process of categorisation and (de)legitimation applies to keywords in general. However, I argue that the fact that the denoted referent is discursive must be taken into account, as it implies that the (de)legitimation process comes from one discourse to categorise another. Following a similar idea, the observations previously made are also potentially relevant to any meta-discursive unit. So what difference does it make that one is dealing with formulas? In other words, and to take up the question asked in the introduction to this issue: what can speakers do with keywords that they could not do without? One way of answering this question lies in the densification offered by formulas and keywords; through this immediately recognisable signifier, speakers are able to categorise a distinct discourse and develop an axiological stance using very few linguistic resources. At the same time, the repeated use of these meta-discursive formulas generalises and standardises speech contents, types of discourses, and situations of communication (I will come back to this in the conclusion).

The point that I would like to make here is that the characterisation of the other's discourse by means of a meta-discursive formula has a performative reach in that it has an impact on the utterance in the making. In other words, I posit that a labelling discourse (that is, a discourse using a meta-discursive unit) acts on its own enunciation process, particularly when this labelling item reaches the status of formula.

This leads to the second effect, which is reflexive: through the use of the meta-discursive/enunciative formula, the discourse designates itself, by implicit distinction. And, insofar as 'fake news' is a disqualifying categorisation, one can say that the return effect is reversed, i.e. legitimising (*cf.* the system of cross-representations explained by

Seoane, see footnote 15 in this article). So, in accordance with this reflexive effect, ‘fake news’ serves as a pragma-enunciative lever by generating a self-legitimising process.

In the context in which it appears, the use of the locution ‘fake news’ by journalistic discourse demands that this same journalistic discourse creates the conditions for it to be able to talk about fake news. By saying ‘fake news’, the discourse validates itself as a discourse that indirectly claims to utter a piece of information that has the real status of information, according to enunciative codes that it reestablishes by means of this very utterance. While the status and conditions of felicity of these enunciative acts differ, the actual enunciative process bears a resemblance to that in which a policeman declares the passport presented to be a fake passport, or the banknote to be a fake banknote — each time this enunciation takes place, it validates the ability to say what is authentic and legitimate according to established codes shared by a specific community in specific circumstances. In a context that is said to be marked by deep mistrust towards journalistic institutions, the formula ‘fake news’ would appear to be a lever enabling a certain journalistic discourse to assert the legitimacy of its own enunciation.¹⁶

Finally, the third pragmatic effect underlies the other two mechanisms identified, and consists in creating what can be named an interactional contract¹⁷ of collusion (i.e. of connivance). Indeed, the characterisation of the other’s discourse using a formula is based on a set of values and an axiology that are already shared by the enunciatee (or that the text endeavours to establish as such): the use of the formula thus constitutes a call to validate the interpretative community on which the text is based. In Seoane’s articles mentioned above, the author shows how the two meta-discursive expressions ‘couac’ and ‘petite phrase’ are used to construct a distanced and collusive ethos (Seoane, 2015, 2018). Relying on the knowledge of both the different types of discourse that circulate in the public sphere and the credibility and legitimacy that should be attributed to them, meta-discursive formulas can be said to be among the linguistic tools capable of generating this type of interactional contract with the addressee.

In the end, it is important to outline that the three pragmatic effects that have just been highlighted are interconnected and mutually reinforcing. Moreover, it is easy to imagine that since some of the three stages of the meta-linguistic referring process can be cumulative, they do not strictly coincide with the three pragmatic effects. The distinction is not unhelpful, though, since it allows one to notice, for example, that these three effects are less salient when one is dealing with uses of the formula that refer to occurrences of discourse, as, for instance, in the following headline from the newspaper *Libération*: ‘« Attaque » de la Pitié-Salpêtrière. La fake news venait de l’Intérieur’ (*Libération*,

16 This specific point has been developed in Flas & Schürgers, 2021.

17 The interactional contract refers to an enunciative and interactional conception of discourse, which emphasises the role of the fundamental interaction between enunciator and enunciatee in any type of speech production. Enunciator and enunciatee are interactants internal to the utterance and co-construct its meaning and effects (this goes back to literary reception theories such as the ones developed by Wolfgang Iser, *L’Acte de lecture*, or by Umberto Eco, *Lector in fabula*; see also what Kerbrat-Orecchioni calls ‘the interpretative machine’ [Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 1998, p. 399-340])

2019-05-03) ('Attack' on the Pitié-Salpêtrière hospital. The fake news came from the Home Office). By contrasting the levels of meta-linguistic referring, I have come to pay particular attention to these meta-discursive and meta-enunciative actualisations of the formulas.

5. Concluding remarks

My general aim has been to suggest that a look at the kinds of realities that keywords or formulas refer to could be fruitful. Taking 'fake news' as a case in point, this contribution has focused on the phenomenon according to which some keywords operate at a meta-level since they refer to (qualities of) discourse(s). Hence, I have argued that, as it has particular pragmatic implications, this type of lexical items can be considered to fall into a subtype of keywords (namely the *meta-discursive formulas*). This constitutes an addition to the way in which these key lexical units are usually considered: in addition to semantic variation, the very nature of the realities that the keywords and formulas designate tells us about their behaviour and utilisation and about the worldview that they help to shape.

I would like to emphasise the extent to which the series of pragmatic implications previously mentioned draws its strength from the way formulas work. If one considers that the meta-discursive formula occupies this role of pragma-enunciative lever, it is because it is a linguistic entity which fundamentally belongs to and activates the interdiscourse. Seoane speaks of 'un mouvement de mise en interdiscours' (literally, 'a dynamic of setting in interdiscursive motion' [Seoane, 2018, p. 100]) : 'each use becomes a reactivation of an existing paradigm that brings the enunciation into the realm of public discourse, with its power and opinion dynamics' (Seoane, 2015; my translation) 'and,' she adds in 2018, 'a to-be-constructed together ['un à-construire ensemble'], which shapes the reading' (Seoane, 2018, p. 100; my translation).

Therefore, each speaker is not individually accountable for these pragmatic implications, but every actualisation of the formula is burdened with what is said and has been said, before and elsewhere. The performativity leverage of the formula lies in its propensity to bring about a way of apprehending the world that exists all the more because it circulates, is repeated, and is finally condensed in this key sequence.

Finally, I can highlight one or two avenues for future reflection. For instance, it is worth mentioning that the implicit interdiscursivity of the formulas that I have just highlighted (as well as the evaluative nature of these meta-discursive formulas) echoes Michele Zappavigna's description of the linguistic functioning of hashtags:

Hashtags are also textual metadiscourse in the sense that they draw on the affordances of metadata to make meanings about the rest of the body of the post (i.e. the untagged parts of the post), as well as about other potential posts in the social stream that might use the same tag [...]. In this way they are both 'inward' and 'outward' facing discourse [...]. Hashtags make meanings not only about themselves (in the 'discourse about discourse'

sense) but also about the potential co-presence of other texts in the social stream.
(Zappavigna, 2018, p. 36)

It seems to me that the characteristic of this subtype of keywords (i.e. the combination of a meta-discursive referring and the functioning as a formula) may help to explain the productivity of certain lexical items as hashtags. The interferences between the linguistic functions of hashtags and of meta-discursive formulas are worth investigating.

Moreover, I have here concentrated on characterising a socio-discursive phenomenon, barely touching on the analysis of the 'fake news' discourse as such. Beyond the pragmatic implications outlined here, I can imagine that the meta-discursive status of this type of formulas makes it an excellent vehicle for language ideologies (Silverstein, 1979), or for collective imaginary about media and communication. The next step would be to explore what this category of analysis, i.e. the meta-discursive formula, gives rise to, to observe whether it proves to be productive, and whether it can be associated with other socio-discursive features.

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