

All Things New in Singapore: On creativity, complexity, and usage associations in Englishes

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What a simple phrase can teach us on linguistic creativity and on how language works

1. Introduction: *All Things New* – a starting point

In January 2021, Singapore's national performing arts center 'Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay', known especially for the high-quality acoustics of its concert hall, ran a special program called 'All Things New', featuring concerts and other art performances. It was advertised on location (see [Figure 1](#)), by a leaflet ([Figure 2](#)), and in a one-minute video (<https://www.esplanade.com/festivals-and-series/all-things-new/2021>) also shared on YouTube (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7U-7Yw9sTPs>), and introduced young artists and bands who performed on the institution's 'Concourse' and its open stage called 'Outdoor Theatre' (for an example, see [Figure 3](#)).

The phrase *All Things New* attracts attention, and that is its purpose. It is not wholly irregular and certainly not 'ungrammatical' – but I believe most speakers of English will agree that it is somewhat unusual, not quite conforming to mainstream rules, somehow marked. It plays with linguistic creativity, for a special effect – that of attracting attention and thus attracting spectators, of promoting the program.

The question I would like to ask, starting from this observation, is: why? What makes this phrase interesting and effective? And, more generally and more importantly, what can such an inconspicuous phrase teach us that is of wider interest to linguists and language lovers, teachers and observers?

There are two perspectives that, I suggest, can be fruitfully adopted. One is: What can this phrase tell us about linguistic creativity, a topic that has seen some prominence in linguistics recently (Pitzl,

2018, Widdowson, 2019)? And secondly, I would like to employ this phrase to teach us something even more fundamental, namely 'how language works', advocating a theoretical approach to language that is growing in contemporary linguistics but has hardly ever been applied to World Englishes research and analysis (cf. Schneider, 2020a for a survey) so far.

2. Perspectives

2.1. Background I: Creativity

Why is the sequence *All Things New* perfectly understandable, and nevertheless interesting?



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Figure 1. On-site poster for All Things New

It is generally agreed that languages and language users can be ‘creative’, i.e. produce texts or structures that are innovative, that had not

existed before. Literary creativity, the production of works of language art by authors, is highly respected in most cultures, and in the ‘World Englishes’ paradigm as developed by Braj Kachru it counts as an important indicator of the independent, ‘norm-developing’ character of new varieties of English. It was important to Kachru to highlight the fact that authors from what he called the ‘Outer Circle’ were equally or even more creative than native-speaking writers from the ‘Inner Circle’ (Kachru, 1995). Consequently, this component has been built into the ‘Dynamic Model’ of the evolution of postcolonial Englishes as one indicator of phase 4, a variety having achieved ‘endonormative stabilization’ (Schneider, 2007). Widdowson (2019), following the model of and earlier work by Pitzl (2018), expanded this attribution of literary and linguistic creativity to ‘lingua franca’ uses in the so-called ‘Expanding Circle’, including the formation of novel linguistic patterns and ‘the creativity of common talk’. This is distantly reminiscent of circumstances which I referred to as ‘grassroots English’ usage (Schneider, 2016), with speakers producing situation-specific functional utterances as best as they can, disregarding norms of correctness, and certainly in a highly ‘creative’ fashion. Clearly the title and topic phrase of this paper, *All Things New*, deviates a bit from mainstream linguistic habits and expectations, and exhibits some degree of creativity in this sense.



Figure 2. Leaflet for All Things New



Figure 3. All Things New live performance by Saints Amongst Sinners

2.2. Background II: How does language work? A minimal survey of linguistic theory (/ -ies)

Observing such instances of creative language usage and asking to what extent speakers have to conform to linguistic rules or can bend or even disregard them ultimately touches upon the fundamental question of: How does language work? Grammar books and teachers will tell us it conforms to rules. However, observing real-life linguistic usage clearly shows that every rule can be bent and modified or even violated under appropriate circumstances – the ‘rule-based’ character of language is valid only to a certain extent; almost every rule allows for an exception at times. Precisely one hundred years ago Edward Sapir, an early influential structuralist, stated that ‘All languages leak’ (1921: 196). And such creative and innovative usage can then become the cradle of something new, the starting point of processes of language change (which all languages undergo, at all times).

So, let me frame this against a very brief rundown of what I consider the most important linguistic theories of the last century and how they would answer the question of how language works, what it is, with implications for how it may change.

Describing the grammar of English started centuries ago, in the Early Modern English period, with what is now called ‘traditional grammar’. For the first time scholars of that period became

interested in living languages and started describing them, using the conceptual framework of language description that they were familiar with and perceived as ideal languages of learning, namely the categories of ancient Greek and especially Latin. Consequently, words were classified into ‘parts of speech’ (nouns, verbs, adjectives, etc., down to the small and strange class of ‘interjections’) which then displayed grammatical categories (such as number, person, gender or tense) by means of inflectional endings. However, since the character of English historically has changed from a basically synthetic language like Latin to a largely analytic language, with very few endings left, many traditional categories (like gender or mood) are no longer really useful and applicable, while others that have emerged and been strengthened language-internally, like aspect, word order, or the role of an operator in the verb phrase, have tended to be disregarded. Traditional grammar has shaped approaches to language teaching until the very recent past or to the present day, with no tolerance for deviance or creativity (simply marked as errors).

Structuralism, founded by de Saussure (1916) and established in various regional schools, notably in North America (Bloomfield, 1933), posited language to be a purely synchronic system consisting of abstracted units of various kinds (phonemes, morphemes, lexemes, etc.) which on the basis of functional equivalence in building higher-ranking

structures (paradigmatic relations) jointly, in chain-like syntagmatic relationships, build higher-order entities (like phrases, clauses and sentences). It described language-specific sequences of units categorized into paradigmatic classes that behaved equally in context (e.g. the typical structure of a noun phrase as 'Det + Adj + N'). It has inspired highly influential and useful, objectively observable methodological approaches (including corpus linguistics), but the question is whether this purely surface-oriented, categorizing, somewhat reductive and compositional approach is sufficient to grasp more complex, possibly 'underlying' linguistic relationships.

Chomsky's 'generativism', beginning with his 1957 *Syntactic Structures* and developing over the next few decades into an ever-more abstract account of the human language faculty, saw linguistic 'competence', the language knowledge of an 'ideal speaker-listener, in a homogeneous speech community' (Chomsky, 1965: 4), as a set of innate rules, manifestations of a 'universal grammar' emerging from a genetically endowed 'language acquisition device' which unfolds despite input characterized by 'poverty' (i.e. never providing the full set of possible sentences as models). Later versions then see this process as built upon a limited set of principles and the process of language acquisition (and consequently, change across generations – to the extent that this is considered at all) as varying parameters to be set (e.g. head-first or head-last, or whether or not a language allows pro-drop). However, this approach is devoid of all interest in social and pragmatic contexts of usage. It separates human language from cognition, and it has not found support in neuroscientific evidence (regarding the assumption of an independent modular language faculty, for instance). It has increasingly developed into a highly abstract rule-rewriting exercise with limited grounding in empirical observation of behavior (since it broadly rejects 'performance', including sociolinguistic circumstances and socio-pragmatic settings, as irrelevant).

2.3. Background III: Complex Dynamic Systems, the Usage Paradigm – and similar lines of thinking

In contrast, I believe two younger schools of thought offer a more convincing account of the essence of language and thus, indirectly, of the questions initially asked regarding the character of the target sentence and the slight puzzle that it offers.²

The idea that language is a 'complex dynamic system', like many other systems and organisms in the natural and social world (see, e.g., Johnson, 2009; Mobus & Kalton, 2015), is gaining ground in linguistics (see, most recently, Kretzschmar, 2015; Schneider, 2020b, 2020c) but does not represent mainstream thinking as yet. Complexity theory has been found to account for the properties of many natural systems which are complex by integrating very many agents, associations and hierarchy levels and by building new entities which are more powerful than the sum of their parts. They are perpetually in motion, evolving and oscillating between sub-systems characterized by relative stability and order (possibly approximating so-called 'attractor' states) and sub-systems which are simply chaotic. They are self-organizing and auto-emergent, in constant interaction with many environmental factors and typically to be described as non-linear processes (and, mathematically, equations), thus potentially magnifying developmental processes by cybernetic internal feedback loops to the point of allowing qualitative leaps at times. I believe (with others) that languages originate, are organized and operate like that as well, and obviously that equally applies to all language varieties, which are component parts of the overarching set of linguistic options. Varieties such as Singaporean English are thus emerging, self-organizing sub-systems of the overarching frame of 'Englishes' (or, presumably, 'Language' in general), evolving in time, magnifying some developmental trends to re-organize, strengthen or weaken (or disrupt, for that matter) specific linguistic sub-systems, in interaction with other sub-systems (for example through dialect contact and language contact, triggered by human agency and accommodation).

The way such principles and sub-systems manifest and organize themselves is through usage, constant interaction, an ongoing feedback loop of language production (which thus contributes to the modification of language habits shared in a speech community) and perception (thus shaping an individual's engrained knowledge and storage of structural options). This line of thinking is known as functional, usage-based linguistics, viewing language as a product of its (communicative, social and situational) functions, produced and steered by ongoing usage and based on domain-general cognitive principles and thus closely related to a branch known as 'cognitive linguistics' (see Bybee, 2010; Diessel, 2017; Schmid, 2020). Employing these principles, humans develop their communicative potential, beginning

(in first-language acquisition) with simple symbolic expressions grounded in bodily experience and perception, and then increasingly expanded and complexified via processes such as metaphor, analogy or grammaticalization to build increasingly complex and abstract schematic constructions (the currently fashionable and influential school of ‘construction grammar’ thus represents another closely related manifestation of this line of thinking; cf. Goldberg, 2006; Hoffmann & Trousdale, 2013; Hilpert, 2014). Usage, the entire set of everyday utterances made anywhere, stands at the center of this. Language knowledge and shared structural behavior originate in constant interaction between intake (forms and utterances heard from others, processed and integrated into one’s own mental knowledge system) and performance (one’s own utterances which contribute to the shaping of others’ intake and thus shared language knowledge, conventions). Repeated and regular relationships between situation-bound communicative needs (intended meanings) and contextual factors on the one hand and conventionalized ways of encoding and expressing them in context (through suitable language forms, speech acts and other forms of expression) on the other build incrementally through interaction and usage. A complex set of associations between intentions and meanings and formal expressions and communicative habits thus emerges in a complex, perpetually changing, ‘self-organizing’ fashion. On the community level this happens through conventionalization, the growth and spread of shared associations; and on the individual level these shared conventions manifest themselves and get strengthened through the process of entrenchment, physiologically realized through the build-up of neural connections between synapses in different regions of the brain (‘neurons that fire together wire together’). Usage builds associations - between intended meanings and linguistic forms available to express them, and between situations/contexts and characteristic linguistic forms (consider utterances like *Good morning!* or *One for the road*, associated with specific situational settings). Language is thus understood as shared conventions as to how to express situation-grounded meanings and individual communicative needs as cognitively entrenched patterns, and its material basis are these associations – recognized similarities and relationships between situations, utterance types, and structural options, activated and connected in human brains in similar ways across individuals in a speech community. ‘Grammar’ describes these shared associations, with a focus on the

strongest, most regular associations – but as observed earlier it also allows for some degree of creativity and variability, the production and perception of utterance types which to a limited extent deviate from established conventions and are not yet fully licensed (Schmid, 2020) – and that is what we are confronted with here.

3. *All Things New*: Analysis & associations

3.1. Preliminary structural analysis

In purely structural terms, the phrase *All Things New* consists of a syntagmatic sequence of an indefinite quantifying pronoun (*all*), a noun plural form (*things*), and an adjective in its base form (*new*). The relationship between *all* and *things* clearly constitutes the core of a noun phrase, a determiner plus its head noun. But the position and relationship of *new* is unusual and marked because of the adjective’s postnominal position. In prenominal position it would be an expected constituent sequence ‘Det + Adj + N’; *all new things* would be a prototypical, perfectly normal and unmarked noun phrase. But that’s not what we see – we get ‘Det – N – Adj’ instead.

3.2. Current usage: corpus analysis

The first question to ask obviously is: Can the claim be substantiated that this phrase is structurally unusual, rare, noticeable? For an answer we need to look into real-life, natural usage; and such language production is nowadays richly available as electronic text corpora, representing a diverse range of varieties, styles and text types (see, for example, Biber & Reppen, 2015).

For a start, the assumption that this sequence is extremely infrequent gets backing simply by looking into so-called ‘megaword’ corpora, consisting of one million words (not a small number in itself), which for a long time constituted a standard magnitude in the analysis of text corpora. For British standard English, for instance, the donor variety of Singaporean English, the word sequence ‘all things new’ is not to be found at all in the most widely analyzed megaword corpora, neither in the ‘Lancaster–Oslo–Bergen’ (LOB) corpus of written texts from 1961, nor in FLOB, its 1991 counterpart, nor in the British component of the ‘International Corpus of English’ (ICE) project with written and spoken texts from the 1990s. Therefore I screened two of the most recent and equally well known huge corpora, of an entirely different magnitude, for this sequence – the

Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA; <https://www.english-corpora.org/coca/>) of one billion (!) words' size, and the corpus of Global Web-Based English (GloWbE) with 1.9 billion words from 20 nations (<https://www.english-corpora.org/glowbe/>).

At this point there is a need to precisely circumscribe the target of my investigation, which henceforth, in the spirit of construction grammar, I will call 'the ATN construction'.³ It is characterized by the three words *all things new* in precisely this sequence in which *new* clearly modifies (relates to, 'belongs to') *things*, presumably representing an adjective as a postmodifier in a noun phrase (but let us take this as a preliminary analysis without presupposing a specific structural parsing).

In COCA, the surface sequence 'all things new' occurs 79 times, but this figure includes a number of instances (the vast majority, in fact) which, I argue, do not represent the ATN construction but other (possibly related) patterns.

One of these is the representation of a phrase from the book of Revelations of the bible, stating that God (or Jesus) will *make all things new* (always with the verb *make*), or slight variants of this phrase. This is quite a different syntactic structure, to be analyzed (following the classic grammar by Quirk et al., 1985) as a complex transitive verb *make* followed by its object (here: *things*) and object complement (here realized by an adjective phrase and its head *new*). For convenience, I will refer to this construction as the 'Revelation construction'. Interestingly, and in line with usage-based thinking as developed in Schmid (2020) where it is highlighted that extralinguistic, situational context also plays a central part in linguistic processing, this pattern is also tied to a specific cultural (and co-textual) context, religious (Christian) writing and thinking (it is known that religious mindsets and related phraseology are relatively prominent in American English).⁴ Not surprisingly, in COCA as many as 65 of the 79 tokens referred to above represent this type (and are thus excluded from my analysis). In addition, nine other tokens represent simple coincidences of these words, chance surface sequences not licensed by a constructional relation, with *new* not modifying *things*, for example *a graduate education in all things New York*. This leaves (only) exactly five tokens of the target ATN construction *all things new* with *new* postmodifying *things* in the billion-word COCA corpus, represented here in (1) to (5):

(1) *restaurants have become hyper-aware of diners' appetites for all things new,*

- (2) *a 'monolithic screed against all things new'*
- (3) *their natural advantage: superior knowledge of all things new and trendy.*
- (4) *spring is filling the air with all things new,*
- (5) *I'm still drawn to the worn and weathered over all things new, level, and plumb.*

It is noteworthy that of these two represent instances of the adjective being coordinated with other adjectives (*new and trendy*; *new, level and plumb*).

Five tokens in one billion words corresponds to a 'word per million' (wpm) frequency (a widely used 'normalized' measurement for comparison in corpus linguistics; Lindquist, 2009: 41–42) of .005, clearly an extremely low frequency.

In the GloWbE corpus, findings and proportions are similar. The overall frequency of the phrase sequence *all things new* is 211; but again, the vast majority of these are either variants of the biblical Revelation construction with *make* or coincidental sequences without direct syntactic relation between *things* and *new*. Still, the overall number of target structures (*new* related to *things*, and not a rendering of the religious object complement Revelation construction following *make*) is somewhat higher, with 35 distinct tokens, i.e. .018 wpm (excluding five duplicates in the corpus), 12 of which show further postmodification or coordination of *new*. (6) to (10) exemplify both sub-types.

- (6) *I love learning and discovering all things new, especially if. . . (Canada)*
- (7) *The Matariki star constellation marked a time for starting all things new (New Zealand)*
- (8) *But as with all things new, you need to. . . (Pakistan)*
- (9) *I have cast my net out across the internet, trawling through all things new and Steampunk and shareable. (Sri Lanka)*
- (10) *. . . interested in telecoms, ICT, social media and all things new in technology! (Singapore)*

I cannot discern any regional or variety-specific bias – both types of the construction occur in Great Britain and other 'Inner Circle' countries as well as in corpora from various postcolonial 'Outer Circle' Asian and African countries.

Hence, in sum we can state that the ATN construction is not radically new, and it did not have to be freshly coined in the Singaporean context outlined in the beginning. The token numbers just quoted, which in themselves might give the slightly distorted impression of repeated occurrence, need to be set in relation to the magnitude of the corpora screened (remember I specifically

looked for this structure in about three billion words of text!). The result is straightforward: the *ATN* construction is clearly extremely rare and thus not entrenched or institutionalized as such.

The interesting question then is what the effect is that using this construction is likely to have on recipients (readers or listeners), that is which associations it will trigger.

3.3. Associations – syntactic and structural

Since the syntactic constituent sequence of the *ATN* construction is unorthodox, unlicensed by familiar and frequent syntactic patterns, recipients will have to actively parse it in order to fully understand it. Based on their acquired knowledge of possible or conventionalized construction sequences and, accordingly, paradigmatic options, speakers will recognize the class membership and associated behavioral options of the words in question. Note that this does not imply at all that they need to be familiar with terms of grammar analysis such as ‘quantifiers’, ‘noun’ or ‘adjective’ – but they will subconsciously ‘know’ that *all* behaves similarly or identically to *some* or *several*, that *things* could be compared to words like *facts* or *thoughts*, and that *new* is similar to *old* or *nice*. (In what follows I will use the conventional word class categorization terms without implying that such technical terminology needs to be available to language users.) So, what about the understanding of the sequence?

There are essentially two related syntactic analyses which the *ATN* construction invites.⁵

Given that *all things* constitutes the core of a noun phrase, determiner plus head noun, and *new* obviously relates to and semantically provides pertinent information on *things*, clearly the understanding of the sequence as a noun phrase and of *new* as a modifier of *things* is invited. However, as pointed out earlier, adjectives typically pre-modify a noun and are placed before it, while here *new*, in its position following the noun, needs to be understood as a postmodifier. Unlike in other languages (e.g. French, where the unmarked adjective position is indeed behind the noun) this is typologically dispreferred due to the right-headed structure of English and highly unusual – but not impossible (which is why the *ATN* construction is conventionally not perceived as ‘wrong’). There are a few fairly precisely defined options in English in which an adjective can postmodify its head noun (all page references to Quirk et al., 1985): with indefinite compound pronouns (*somebody tall*: 379, 418); in institutionalized designations (*president elect*, *attorney*

general: 418) and a few set phrases (*sum total*); after a superlative (*the best person available*: 419); and, as stated above, in contexts which make the adjective phrase ‘heavy’ and thus prone to postposition; with further adjective complementation (*an instrument difficult to play*: 1220; *a mistake typical of beginners*: 1294–5) and coordination (*a man hesitant and timid*: 1295). Tokens of the *ATN* construction in corpora with complements or further co-ordinated adjectives, such as examples (3), (5), (9) and (10) above, are licensed by the last of these types, but the ‘plain’ *ATN* construction satisfies none of these conditions – yet it triggers associations with many of them.

In a slightly wider perspective (pointed out by an anonymous reviewer) it is also noteworthy that the postnominal position of an adjective is also a common feature of poetic and quasi-poetic discourse, where it has a long-standing tradition. Here are two examples (offered by the reviewer):

- (11) Glory be to God for dappled things – [. . .]
All things counter, original, spare,
strange; [. . .]
(Gerard Manly Hopkins, ‘Pied Beauty’,
poem, 1877)
- (12) All things bright and beautiful, All creatures
great and small,
All things wise and wonderful, The Lord
God made them all.
(Cecil Frances Alexander, Classical
Poems for Children)

Variants of (12) can be found in some religiously inspired children’s poetry, also as book titles of childrens’ books. Hence, a syntactic structure is specifically tied to a stylistic and cultural context – more on this below. It is also interesting to note that in these examples the sentence-initial position of the construction seems characteristic, something not found in the prose examples quoted earlier. Thus, very specific syntactic properties are associated with (or even signaling) specific stylistic, cultural or semantic domains and implications.

Secondly, another reasonably natural parsing invited by the *ATN* construction is that of a subject (*all things*) plus subject complement (*new*) construction with the copula verb *BE* missing, i.e. as very similar to and possibly derived from *All things [are] new*. This pattern, often called ‘copula omission’, is not licensed by and considered acceptable in the grammar of standard English, but it is known to be widespread in informal and nonstandard usage, like some dialects of English, learner usage, and pidgins. Obviously leaving out a copula is a syntactic option which comes natural very

widely in human languages, conforming to a basic cognitive principle of simple predication (i.e., attribution of a property simply by juxtaposition). In the grammar of standard English the deletion of the copula in this kind of relation becomes formally acceptable in the closely related object complement construction, that is when the subject – subject complement relation becomes embedded, dependent upon another matrix verb – compare *consider things to be new* > *consider things new*. Notice that this is the underlying syntactic pattern of the fairly common religious Revelation construction mentioned above: *make all things new* can be understood semantically as ‘cause all things to be new’. So indirectly and more distantly the *ATN* construction can be assumed to trigger syntactic associations to this construction type, supporting its understanding, as well (and vice versa).

More fundamentally, English speakers are aware of the option of employing marked word order of various kinds by moving constituents to unusual syntactic positions for a specific (e.g. highlighting) effect (compare a pattern such as *Linguistics I love*, where the direct object is placed clause-initially rather than in its customary post-verbal position following the mainstream subject-verb-object (SVO) word order of English). They may also associate the *ATN* construction with the principle of ‘end-focus’, which highlights syntactically final constituents (and is therefore known to be preferred with ‘heavy’, i.e. long, constituents, as in the examples quoted above). The *ATN* construction can be viewed as a variant of (and cognitively associated with) such syntactic behavior as well.

3.4. Associations - semantic and situational

Language is not only, or primarily, syntax, however. The effectiveness of Esplanade’s phrase *All Things New* also derives from the fact that it activates and resonates with a few semantic and situational strings (associations) that are vibrant and timely. As Schmid (2020) emphasizes throughout his book, conventionalization and entrenchment in usage also strongly build upon connecting linguistic utterances with their respective situative settings and extralinguistic associations. After all, language is primarily anchored in real life needs.

As stated initially, Esplanade’s *All Things New* program was featured in January – and I am sure this is not a coincidence: January is the first month of the new year, in which people are culturally expected to look ahead into the future year to come, forging good resolutions and hoping for positive, new developments, changes to the better. The *ATN* phrase epitomizes this invited attitude,

and the video mentioned in the first paragraph explicitly connects the program with new year’s resolutions (just three seconds into the video). (In contrast, for instance, the February 2021 program of Esplanade focuses on traditional Chinese music – connecting with the Chinese New Year celebrated in that month.)

And it is not only January, it is the January of 2021: the year following the global Covid-19 pandemic, marked by lockdowns, safe distancing and severe other reductions of human activities and socializing once considered normal. Singapore’s government permitted some new behavioral options beginning on the 28th of December 2020 (called ‘Moving into Phase 3 of Re-opening’) – so the very simple fact that musical concerts were possible and permitted (if only with severe safe distancing measures in place) was ‘new’ in January 2021, and of course most welcomed as a step back to normalcy at that point in time. The promotional video indirectly also builds this association by setting the program off against being ‘frugal when the time calls for it’ (after 48 seconds).

Thirdly, the selection of artists selected for this program was fully in line with the two previous points: mainly young, fresh local bands were performing in this festival, thus embodying the spirit underlying *All Things New*, as it were. Figure 3 is a picture taken during the concert of a young Singaporean band named ‘Saints Amongst Sinners’ on 31 January 2021 on Esplanade’s Outdoor Theatre.

From a slightly wider perspective, then, it is not a surprise to observe that the ‘semantic prosody’ (Cheng, 2013), the emotional directionality of words and constructions, of the *ATN* target phrase is thoroughly positive and uplifting (and note that this is a linguistically engrained condition, a strongly associated expectation). By necessity *All Things New* invites a positive, supportive attitude (towards the performing bands, for instance) and the expectation of something pleasant (and again, the promotion video builds that in, too, by inviting the young artists to ‘dream big’ – after 19 seconds). It is instructive to look into the examples from the GloWbE corpus summarized above. In three of the tokens of the *ATN* construction (plus two duplicates) the phrase is syntactically dependent upon *passion for*, an expression of a maximally positive attitude; and the coordinated adjectives or dependent constituents also tend to express something welcome and positively evaluated (e.g. *trendy* in [3], *sharable* in [9] and *in technology* in [10]; cf. *appetite for* and *spring fills the air* in the above COCA examples).

The related, superficially similar Christian Revelation construction *make all things new*, referred to above in section 3.2, comes in here as well as another possible association. It is difficult to assess how strong this particular association resonates specifically in Singapore, where only a relatively small proportion of 18.8 percent of the population adhere to the Christian faith (according to the 2015 census). On the other hand, a substantial proportion of Christianity in Singapore stems from or is inspired by relatively conservative American churches (like Methodists, the strongest of all Protestant denominations in Singapore, Baptists, ‘New Creation’ or other ‘charismatic’ churches). In these denominations and communities the Book of Revelation and the Old Testament figure relatively more prominently than the New Testament, and familiarity with a phrase stemming from this context may consequently be assumed to be relatively higher than in the roughly one-third of Roman Catholics among Singapore’s Christians (let alone all non-Christian religions, where it is likely to be unfamiliar). So some association between the *ATN* construction and the Christian Revelation construction clearly is also a possibility in the public culture of Singapore. Two detailed observations appear to support such a connection: one is the thoroughly positive, hope-inspiring semantic prosody that both the *ATN* construction and the Revelation construction inspire and trigger; and the other one, marginal but still, is the name of the band performing in Figure 3, ‘Saints Amongst Sinners’ – presumably meant playfully but lexically clearly employing Christian vocabulary. In a wider perspective, there are clearly also supportive connections and associations with the poetic use of postnominal adjectives (similar to the *ATN* construction but with different lexical fillers) illustrated in examples (11) and (12). And it is noteworthy that this construction type is also tied to a religious interpretation (in fully religious texts or religiously-inspired applications for children) and projects the same thoroughly positive, hope-raising semantic prosody that is strongest in the Revelation construction and clearly also, if more indirectly or weakly, projected in the *ATN* construction. The *ATN* construction thus turns out to be embedded in a wide network of related, broadly similar construction types with similar properties and associations.

Finally, it is noteworthy that Esplanade’s use of the linguistic phrase *All Things New* is integrated in a support system which by its very nature is multimodal. This ties in with a recent trend in linguistics

to recognize that language is always built into a wider context which involves and integrates other senses (e.g. Vigliocco et al., 2014), and it is well known that such multi-sensory activation strengthens a memory effect. Clearly this applies to a music festival, which is primarily about sounds and lyrics. In the present case it features and is further supported by visuals including a brochure, a large on-site poster and an on-stage banner (see Figures 1 and 2), various other multimodal expressions including verbal announcements during the concerts and promotion in local media, and of course, epitomized most effectively, the promotion video mentioned before (including a few short and nice music clips). The target phrase *All Things New* is thus integrated in a rich network of activating various human senses.

4. Conclusion

Starting from a rather minute linguistic observation this essay has broadened its scope to become an exemplary study which addresses fairly fundamental questions in linguistics. There is no real point in asking what type of a structure *All Things New* really ‘is’, and how it has to be analyzed ‘correctly’ (as we would be tempted to do as linguists and language teachers), and this is also not about an assessment on whether or not or to what extent this sequence (or any other comparable one) is ‘correct’ or not. Of course we can analyze the pattern in conventional structural terms and weigh possible syntactic analyses. But my essential point has been to show how this structure activates various associations and how these associations contribute to the understanding and effectiveness of the phrase, and thus showcase central aspects of linguistic usage. It has been argued that the phrase, investigated from a variety of perspectives, is not ‘radically new’ but highly unusual, and in its understanding and interpretation it relies on these associations and activates a variety of mental connections. These associations centrally relate to our linguistic knowledge and processing, but they also invite attitudinal, emotional reactions and extralinguistic expectations (and are in turn supported by these). And these multiple associations build upon linguistic creativity, project and instantiate the message intended, and attract attention, which in the given context was desirable.⁶

In conclusion, I hope I have been able to show that zooming in to what at first seems an almost inconspicuous phrase and asking where it may come from, which associations it triggers and how it is possibly processed linguistically and

beyond raises a number of interesting questions and invites pertinent observations on the nature of language processing and the establishment of a shared mental grammar in a community and in individuals (Schmid, 2020). And of course I hope I have also been able to convince some readers that the complex systems and usage-based framework(s) are attractive ways of understanding how language works, in need of further application in various contexts. This has been just a minimal case study – but the theoretical perspective that has motivated it deserves attention and needs to be pursued more generally.

Notes

1 I thank Kerstin Richter for directing my attention to this. The program type as such was not brand new: Between 2016 and 2020 the same format at the same location, always 1–31 January and with an emphasis on ‘new music’ and ‘fresh faces’ (website Esplanade), had taken place (thanks to Lee Qing Ping for pointing this out to me).

2 Similarly to the previous sections on linguistic theories, the following two paragraphs represent my attempt to provide a maximally concise but hopefully accessible summary of these complex and rich theories. It is impossible, given space constraints, to represent wider facets and branches and to do justice to the many scholars who have built and substantially contributed to these paradigms. Complex systems theory in linguistics has been spearheaded by Diane Larsen–Freeman (with an applied focus; e.g. Larsen–Freeman & Cameron, 2008) and others, notably Nick Ellis (see Ellis & Larsen–Freeman, 2009; Ellis, 2011) and the so-called ‘Five graces’ group (Beckner et al., 2009). Kretzschmar (2015) provides a general survey; my own contributions (|Schneider 2020b, 2020c) offer short summaries and applications. Functional linguistics builds on André Martinet’s and M. A. K. Halliday’s work; usage-based and cognitive linguistics owe essential steps to Charles Fillmore, Talmy Givón, Ronald Langacker, William Croft, Joan Bybee, and many more. Bybee (2010) is a wonderfully accessible survey, and Schmid (2020) a masterly, immensely comprehensive manifestation. Construction grammar has been shaped by George Lakoff, Adele Goldberg (e.g. 2006), William Croft, and others. Hilpert (2014) offers an informative introduction from an English perspective, and Hoffmann and Trousdale (2013) is a comprehensive handbook showcasing a range of components of and perspectives on the theory.

3 A follow-up question for later investigation might be whether there are closely related variant constructions with other shell nouns or adjectives, but for now I look into only and precisely this lexical sequence.

4 The phrase also appears fairly commonly in elevation hymns by American Christian bands, for example, and specifically in a conservative Christian cultural

context in the United States (also as a book title and as the name of a contemporary Christian band in Florida). See, for instance, songs (or hymns) entitled ‘All Things New’, performed by bands called ‘Elevation Worship’ (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yb1h4nxyVtU>) and ‘Planetshakers’ (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UDFD9SCJhLk>, both accessed 1 June, 2021). Note, however, that these are manifestations of the Revelation construction, not the *ATN* construction (though obviously both are related, as is argued above).

5 As stated earlier, the grammatical framework and terminology applied here derives from the monumental grammar by Quirk et al. (1985), to my mind still the most comprehensive and authoritative description of the structural properties and potential of English.

6 Incidentally, when considering these properties and connections I find the *ATN* phrase reminiscent of the slogan *I’m loving it!* coined and propagated by McDonalds almost two decades ago. By slightly violating an expectation derived from a linguistic habit (‘rule’), namely that stative verbs do not appear in the progressive form, this phrase also once was innovative and attracting attention by employing a certain, unusual language form. I suspect that by now, after years of having been used in the company’s advertisements, it has become entrenched and bleached, having lost its attraction and innovative character. Googling the pattern *I’m loving it* shows, however, that the structure still seems conspicuous, inviting many language commentators to state that ‘technically’ this phrase represents ‘bad grammar’.

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