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978-0-521-77309-6 - Formulaic Language and the Lexicon

Alison Wray

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Formulaic Language and the Lexicon

A considerable proportion of our everyday language is 'formulaic'. It is predictable in form and idiomatic, and seems to be stored in fixed, or semi-fixed, chunks. This book explores the nature and purposes of formulaic language and looks for patterns across the research findings from the fields of discourse analysis, first language acquisition, language pathology and applied linguistics. It gradually builds up a unified description and explanation of formulaic language as a linguistic solution to a larger, nonlinguistic, problem, the promotion of self. The book culminates in a new model of lexical storage, which accommodates the curiosities of non-native and aphasic speech. It proposes that parallel analytic and holistic processing strategies are able to reconcile, on the one hand, our capacity for understanding and producing novel constructions using grammatical knowledge and small lexical units and, on the other, our use of prefabricated material which, although less flexible, also requires less processing. The result of these combined operations is language that is fluent and idiomatic, yet crafted for its referential and communicative purpose.

Dr. Alison Wray is a Senior Research Fellow at the Centre for Language and Communication Research, Cardiff University, Wales. She is the author of *The Focusing Hypothesis: The Theory of Left Hemisphere Lateralised Language Re-Examined* (1992) and the coauthor of *Projects in Linguistics: A Practical Guide to Researching Language* (1998).

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Preface and Acknowledgements

This book began with a mystery. I had been reading about formulaic language in the context of language proficiency, and had been struck by three observations made in the literature. The first was that native speakers seem to find formulaic (that is, prefabricated) language an easy option in their processing and/or communication. The second was that in the early stages of first and second language acquisition, learners rely heavily on formulaic language to get themselves started. The third observation, however, seemed to fly in the face of the first two. For L2 learners of intermediate and advanced proficiency, the formulaic language was the biggest stumbling block to sounding nativelike. How could something that was so easy when you began with a language, and so easy when you were fully proficient in it, be so difficult in between?

I set myself the challenge of finding out, and focussed on two possibilities, both of which I now judge to be true. One was that the formulaic language described in the various areas of study was not quite the same thing in each case. The second was that there was some other key to understanding the nature of formulaic language, one which would be difficult to spot by looking only at the different types of data in isolation. The common link between formulaic language across different speakers might even not be linguistic at all.

Very little attempt had been made up till then to draw together what was known about formulaic language in the native adult population, first language acquisition, second language acquisition of all types, and language pathology. A critical synthesis was a prerequisite for getting a sense of how they differed, and what they had in common. The second stage was developing a theoretical model – or rather a series of models – which would account for the similarities and differences. At first, I imagined that a single journal article would be adequate to

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tell the story, but it was soon very evident that much more space was needed.

The result was this book. The “big picture” that I present, will, I hope, provide useful ideas for others to explore. However, it will undoubtedly disappoint some. Those still wedded to the idea that lexis, grammar, interaction and discourse structure can be understood in mutual isolation will be frustrated by my proposal that language knowledge and language use are highly sensitive to the moment-by-moment influences of mind and environment, so that we are able to switch with ease between processing modes to match the requirements of efficiency and accuracy in message delivery and comprehension. And those who place their faith in frequency counts as the only valid arbiter of formulaicity will not welcome my call for the reinstatement of native-speaker intuition as the best witness to the part of our lexicon which we use with most creative flexibility.

The models which I propose are a beginning. My aim is to stimulate debate across the relevant disciplines and subdisciplines and to encourage research within each area to take into account what the others have to offer. The goal is a full integration of the wealth of insights currently imprisoned within each field, and this book is a first attempt at such an integration. The detail may be challenged – indeed, I hope it will be – but the inclusive approach to explaining what language is and how we manage it is, I believe, here to stay.

A great many people have been generous with their time, advice and material during the preparation of this book. I am particularly grateful to the following:

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Alison Wray
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