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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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## Contents

<i>List of Figures and Tables</i>	<i>page</i> vii
<i>Preface and Acknowledgements</i>	ix
<b>Part I. What Formulaic Sequences Are</b>	
1 The Whole and the Parts	3
2 Detecting Formulaicity	19
3 Pinning Down Formulaicity	44
<b>Part II. A Reference Point</b>	
4 Patterns of Formulaicity in Normal Adult Language	69
5 The Function of Formulaic Sequences: A Model	93
<b>Part III. Formulaic Sequences in First Language Acquisition</b>	
6 Patterns of Formulaicity in Child Language	105
7 Formulaic Sequences in the First Language Acquisition Process: A Model	128
<b>Part IV. Formulaic Sequences in a Second Language</b>	
8 Non-native Language: Overview	143
9 Patterns of Formulaicity in Children Using a Second Language	150
10 Patterns of Formulaicity in Adults and Teenagers Using a Second Language	172

vi	<i>Contents</i>
11	Formulaic Sequences in the Second Language Acquisition Process: A Model 199
<b>Part V. Formulaic Sequences in Language Loss</b>	
12	Patterns of Formulaicity in Aphasic Language 217
13	Formulaic Sequences in Aphasia: A Model 247
<b>Part VI. An Integrated Model</b>	
14	The Heteromorphic Distributed Lexicon 261
	<i>Notes</i> 283
	<i>References</i> 301
	<i>Index</i> 327

## Figures and Tables

### Figures

1.1. Advice on using prefabricated chunks of text	<i>page</i> 6
1.2. Terms used to describe aspects of formulaicity	9
2.1. Hickey's "Conditions for formula identification"	40
3.1. Hudson's "Levels of interaction in fixedness"	61
3.2. Van Lancker's "Subsets of nonpropositional speech and their common properties, presented on a hypothetical continuum from most novel to reflexive"	64
4.1. Formulaic structure of part of the New Zealand weather forecast	80
4.2. A comparison of the structure of the first half of three Shipping Forecasts from the British Meteorological Office	80
4.3. Comparison of a BBC Radio 4 weather forecast with one 24 hours earlier and another one hour later	82
4.4. Kuiper and Flindall's "Greeting formulae of individual checkout operators"	86
5.1. The functions of formulaic sequences	97
5.2. Schema for the use of formulaic sequences in serving the interests of the speaker	98
6.1. Uses of <i>no</i> in a two year old	120
6.2. Predicted fate of different types of analytic and holistic language	123
6.3. Agendas and responses of the young child	125
7.1. The balance of holistic and analytic processing from birth to adulthood	133

viii	<i>Figures and Tables</i>	
9.1.	Distribution of child L2 studies in Table 9.1, by age	152
11.1.	The creation of the lexicon in first language acquisition (including the effect of literacy)	207
11.2.	The creation of the lexicon in classroom-taught L2 (after childhood)	208
12.1.	Code's "Preliminary model of initial and subsequent production of aphasic lexical and nonlexical speech automatisms"	234
13.1.	Normal production using a distributed lexicon	249
14.1.	Notional balance of three types of lexical unit (formulaic sequence) in distribution: The Heteromorphic Distributed Lexicon model	263

### **Tables**

3.1.	Howarth's collocational continuum	63
4.1.	Formulaic sequences as devices for situation manipulation	89
9.1.	Studies of formulaic sequences in young children acquiring L2 in a naturalistic environment	151
10.1.	Studies examining formulaic sequences in adults acquiring L2 'naturally'	174
10.2.	Studies examining formulaic sequences in adults and teenagers acquiring L2 in the classroom	178

## 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



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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xi

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Alison Wray  
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