

Formulaic Language: Pushing the Boundaries

Alison Wray. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press 2008. Pp. xv+ 305.

As the construct of formulaic language gains sway in language acquisition theory and pedagogy, the number of publications on corresponding theoretical treatises and empirical research has also been on the grow. *Formulaic Language: Pushing the Boundaries* is the most recent monograph of one of the field's authoritative figures, Alison Wray. Formulaic expressions or sequences, in simple terms, are linguistic units composed of multiple words. According to Sinclair (1991), they are subsumed under a model of language processing called the *Idiom Principle*, which postulates that "a language user has available to him or her a large number of semi-preconstructed phrases that constitute single choices" (p. 110). These single, multi-word choices in effect are mediators for human language competence and idiomatic language use.

In her previous publication, *Formulaic Language and the Lexicon*, Wray (2002) developed a theoretical model in which formulaic sequences, or *formulae*, are a "linguistic solution to a non-linguistic problem [of communication]" (p. 100). In other words, Wray conceives of the human imperative to communicate more broadly as an aspect of cognition – and language is only one way to meet this imperative. In this monograph, the author endeavors to better define the nature of formulae by looking at what she deems extremes of language use (e.g., live performance, computer translation, and second language acquisition scenarios). She contends that communicative pressures and differing contexts have implications for the identification of and reliance on *formulaicity*. Wray surveys these outliers of her theoretical domain in order to better understand this issue, stressing that the boundaries of formulaicity must be studied such that a better definition of what is contained therein would be more attainable.

Part 1 presents the concepts that underpin the remainder of the text. In the first chapter, Wray provides a map of the text by presenting five questions that motivate her areas of investigation over the remaining twenty-one chapters. These questions are: 1) do we use formulaic language by default? 2) what determines the level of formulaicity in a language? 3) how central is formulaic language in natural language learning by humans? 4) how central should formulaic language be when modeling such learning for computers? and 5) does formulaic language constrain what we say and what we think? Depending on the reader's pedagogical or research interests, the questions will hold varying appeal; as such, a reader may dip in and out of the book as desired.

The second chapter is of significant theoretical interest for the fact that it takes a stance on the nature of the heteromorphic mental lexicon, one that stores multi-word wholes as well as single-word parts. Also, the chapter introduces the Morpheme Equivalent Unit (MEU), which is a unit of linguistic representation, and Needs Only Analysis (NOA), which is a processing principle. MEU as a construct describes a sequence of morphemes or lexemes with a single meaning, regardless of internal composition, and is intended to capture a wide range of linguistic phenomena that fall under the rubric of formulae: phrasal verbs, slot-and-frame patterns, idioms, and full constructions. It is a useful construct in that it supplants the various linguistic terms (e.g., formulae, holiphrases, lexical phrases, idioms, chunks, prefabricated chunks, collocations, and routines) that have been utilized in the literature. Clearly, the emergence of a common nomenclature is likely to assist with ease of discussion and even operationalization. The significance of the MEU in

pragmatic terms is to allow the speaker to select language that can be more readily decoded by the listener, thus offering a processing advantage.

Needs Only Analysis, building on the conceptualization above, describes how we, in language processing, opt to decompose an MEU with grammatical parsing only when the Idiom Principle derives an unsatisfactory interpretation, or if the communicative circumstance requires. This is to say that an idiom is only subject to a part-whole analysis when necessary. For example, it is suggested that we store the idiom “kick the bucket,” meaning “die,” as a single unit and we most often process it as such. However, should the context suggest that “die” is not the appropriate interpretation of the sequence, we resort to an analysis of the internal components for meaning. The NOA processing principle essentially offers an explanation for various observations of language competence and behavior, such as why some formulae are processed and stored more analytically than others. The MEU and NOA, for that matter, constitute the pillars of Wray’s model.

Chapters 3, 4, and 5 examine how and why formulaic and non-formulaic language occur in language use, including regular discourse between two speakers, oral traditions of poetry, song, or narrative, and written texts. Chapter 3 probes how certain instances of language use might be processed holistically rather than analytically and addresses the question of novelty with regard to formulae: If one chooses the formulaic option, is one creating a novel utterance? Under the representation and processing model espoused by Wray, the distinction between novelty and formulaicity is a moot point. Whether we assemble a word or a phrase from single choices of morphemes or combine several multi-morphemic units, the linguistic machinery is the same. Chapter 4 evaluates the oral-written text dichotomy from a historical perspective, and how formulaic features manifest themselves in each. Oral traditions are particularly reliant on formulaic sequences in order for speakers to accommodate large amounts of information using limited processing capacity. Written texts, in contrast, do not pose the same processing constraints and therefore may require less formulaic use. Chapter 5 explores the relationship that speech and writing have with formulae more deeply. In this chapter, Wray synthesizes several different frames of interpretation: individual motivations for achieving novelty (as opposed to cliché) in the talk or written text, pragmatic notions of shared knowledge between speaker and listener, or writer and reader, and processing notions pertinent to pressure created by the discourse context. This synthesis presents a plausible explanation of why formulae may appear in oral or written discourse.

Part 2 of Wray’s book focuses on more theoretical points of her model. Wray first discusses how her theoretical model has possible interfaces with generative and functional theories of grammar in chapters 6 and 7. She asserts that “formulaic language can – and must – be viewed from all of the perspectives . . . psychological, social, neurological, acquisitional, grammatical, and textual (as revealed in corpora)” (p. 69). This stance is a natural outcome of the model’s tenant that language must be considered within a broad framework of human communication. Chapters 8 and 9 tackle the problem of identifying formulaic language in texts. In chapter 8, Wray evaluates a number of terms and approaches to linguistic analysis, including phonological-based and frequency-based approaches, and their implications for identifying formulae. Chapter 9 culminates in the reiteration that formulae are tied to a notion of processing, and that we can infer the nature of such processing through a criterion-based approach.

Part 3, which comprises chapters 10 through 15, includes studies that speak to the boundaries of Wray's theoretical model, observing in each case how formulae are situated in various communicative contexts. Among such studies are a case study in machine translation, the use of formulae in computerized support for the speech-disabled, studies of beginner and advanced second language learners, a summary of a court case in which two speech communities interpret an MEU differently, and a discussion on the relationship of formulae and script to the notion of naturalness in a comedy sketch broadcast on English television. In presenting these studies as the boundaries of language use, Wray makes a point as to how the particular communicative restraints therein serve to exemplify the essence of formulaicity.

Finally, part 4 provides a theoretical discussion of the implications of the studies explored in part 3, and returns to the five motivating questions of the book. It relies on examples and studies from the previous three parts to frame the discussion, and delves into the centrality of formulae in language learning and thought. Wray recounts evidence demonstrating that the use of formulae is the default processing option. She then cites evolutionary evidence and theories to lend credence to a formulae-as-default position. In chapter 18, Wray turns to the field of adult second language acquisition to support her position. This chapter is more a call to research than a factual substantiation of her argument; Wray acknowledges the limited data in this domain, and discusses the putative pedagogical implications with adequate hedging. Chapter 19 is characterized by a similar hypothetical tone, dealing with how formulae might be used in teaching language to computers. Chapter 20 evaluates the advantages and disadvantages of using formulae in communication, reassessing the nuances of choosing formulaic use in human and computer-based communication. Chapter 21 examines the relationship between formulaic language use and formulaic thought. This final chapter has Whorfian overtones on the one hand, and pragmatic considerations of speaker-manipulating-listener on the other. This chapter makes a practical evaluation of the study of formulaic language, examining such questions as how an understanding of this area might benefit society. For example, can communicative challenges in nursing homes be mitigated by more thorough knowledge of formulaic usage?

As with her last book, *Formulaic Language and the Lexicon*, Wray's discussion in the current volume deals with concepts outside the linguistic realm, and she situates her model within the more general framework of human communication. Depending on the reader's theoretical stance, this decision may or may not be satisfying. For readers marginally interested in formulae, Wray provides food for thought. For those interested in a deeper understanding of how formulae relate to discourse analysis, textuality, phraseology, or human and computer language acquisition, Alison Wray's authoritative *Formulaic Language: Pushing the Boundaries* is a "must cite."

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