

Developing formulaicity: memorisation and production of formulaic expressions in L2 speakers of English

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Abstract

Research suggests that the use of formulaic language is a key feature of fluent and 'natural sounding' speech, but it is not used extensively by second language (L2) speakers, despite the potential benefits. To provide further insight into the acquisition and use of such language in L2 speakers, this thesis explores the operational and psycholinguistic processes by which targeted expressions become formulaic for the speaker. Building on ideas by Myles and Cordier (2017), formulaic expressions are here defined from a psycholinguistic perspective as multi-word strings that are either stored holistically in the mental lexicon or processed automatically as a single unit. This approach recognises that a target sequence, even if considered formulaic 'in the language', may not be immediately formulaic for the individual learner.

A series of experiments is undertaken, focussing on the speech of intermediate/advanced Japanese speakers of English. The first set of studies explores the use of formulaic expressions in speech, using samples collected from semi-structured interviews and a longitudinal case study. Subsequent studies concern the memorisation and reproduction of targeted multi-word expressions. The effect of various factors is investigated, including the memorisation process (whether it encourages a unitary or reconstructive approach to recall), the sentential context in which expressions are delivered and the degree and type of repetition and retrieval. Formulaicity in the target sequences is identified principally on the basis of fluency, but the analyses also incorporated measures of accuracy and ease of recall. Various methods (natural speech, cued responses and psycholinguistic methods) are used to extract and analyse output. The extent to which fluency is a sufficient indicator of processing advantage in formulaic expressions is also explored. Building on this, a further psycholinguistic method for assessing formulaicity is introduced for the final study and compared with fluency to give a fuller picture of the stages of acquisition.

The overall findings suggest that targeted expressions may become internally formulaic in different ways depending on the learner, specific characteristics of the expressions and the method of memorisation. Two particular routes are identified: the 'fusion' over time of component words and sub-sequences, and 'holistic acquisition', where an expression is internalised as a single unit from the start. In the former case, expressions appear to go through stages of initial reconstruction, via fluent (but not necessarily formulaic) production, to full holistic processing. With holistic acquisition, the development stages are more associated with strengthening semantic and contextual links to the expression and improving recall. Drawing on existing models of speech production, particularly the 'superlemma' model of Sprenger, Levelt, and Kempen (2006), a tentative model for how target sequences may be stored and processed at different stages of acquisition is proposed. Key implications of this for the acquisition of formulaic expressions in L2 speakers are discussed.

References

- Myles, F., & Cordier, C. (2017). Formulaic sequences (FS) cannot be an umbrella term in SLA. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 39, 3-28.
- Sprenger, S. A., Levelt, W. J. M., & Kempen, G. (2006). Lexical access during the production of idiomatic phrases. *Journal of Memory and Language*, 54(2), 161-184.