



## The role of formulaic language in ESL social context in Nigeria

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### Abstract

Formulaic Language has in recent years been the object of investigation due to its importance and widespread use among speakers of English around the world. Formulaicity is a generic term which converge an array of phrases in applied linguistics denoting a non-generative and unproductive system of deriving meaning but a reliance on holistic one based on the culture of the speech community. In the present study, an attempt is made to define what formulaic language is, a review of the existing current literature and a discussion on the phenomenon in a social environment. The study captures three potential functions which make formulaicity thrive among speakers in L<sub>2</sub>, namely the ease with which the loading processing of language is carried out, clarity of ambiguity in language production, and the use of same in manipulating and controlling persons and things within one's environment.

**Keywords:** formulaicity, language processing, social context, holistic, interactional goals

### 1. Introduction

Formulaic language, research has shown, recently constitutes an essential and integral component of the linguists' investigation due to the ubiquity of its use in our daily lives. Not only do L<sub>1</sub> communities use formulaic language, speakers of English as L<sub>2</sub> need adequate knowledge of the phenomenon in their repertoire to enhance a wide range of their communicative ability. In a research carried out by Biber, *et al.* (1999) [3], it was reported that in a normal conversation and academic prose, a significant proportion of discourse is made up of these lexical bundles. Mention must be made that a few decades ago, Chomsky's view on language was entirely a rule-governed phenomenon, but recently within linguistics, sociolinguistics and applied linguistics it has been reported that ready-made Chunks of language are equally important aspects of the productive rule (Nattinger and DeCarrico, 1992) [12].

In the language that we use, it is easily discernable that there are certain expressions which are relatively fixed and are accessible through the lexicon holistically. Similarly, their meanings too are not analyzed word for word, but in Chunks, for example, the expression, "Tension in the two communities is mounting as *the knives are out* since the deadlock on the mediation table". *The knives are out* here connotes hostility against each other in a particular situation. These ready-made chunks are vital elements of language because by their nature, they ease the processing overload of the speaker/hearer and their salient meanings are easily accessible in online production and procession (Kecskes, 2015) [9]. A significant feature of the fixed expression is that they contain a package of meaning which are shared by a particular community. Research clearly shows the importance of communication of speech formulas such as proverbs, idioms, and other formulaic expressions are not only in speech but also in texts. In the same vein, the role of formulaic language in enhancing fluency and native-like mastery of L<sub>2</sub> has been undertaken by Wray (2008), Schmitt (2010) [16], and Wood (2010) [20] among others. The present work examines the role of formulaic language in ESL social context in Nigeria.

### 2. Defining Formulaic Language

The phrase 'formulaic language' remains a loose term among researchers in the various domains relating to language which does not prove homogenous in terms of practical use and embodying the numerous components in a simple definition. The seeming result therefore is the parting of ways of such interested professionals, who however maintain some elements in the centre of such definitions. Wray and Perkins (2000) [25] write that well over 40 terms are used to designate the very idea which formulaic language represents. Some of them are chunks, fixed expressions, ready-made expression, and so on. However, Richards and Schmidt (2012;210) [14] define the term as 'a sequence of words that are stored and retrieved as a unit from memory at the time of use, rather than generated online using the full resources of the grammar of the language'. These authors note that formulaic sequence may be of various types, such as the semantically transparent and grammatically regular, e.g. "*I will see you tomorrow*", and "*thank you very much*". It may also be irregular in their form and meaning as are realised in the idioms of the language, e.g. *don't beat about the bush*. Wood (2010:30) [20], uses formulaic sequence to mean "multiword units of language which are stored in long term memory as if they were single lexical units". Wray (2013:317), on his part believes that formulaic sequences are 'sequences of words that are in some regard not entirely predictable, whether on account of a meaning that is widely or subtly different from the words they contain. Still, in trying to x-ray what formulaic sequence is, Schmitt (2010) [16] attempts a psycholinguistic approach and notes that formulaic language is holistically stored in the mind and uses the criteria of sequences of lexis and the proportion that mind handles as the defining yardstick.

Formulaic sequence refers to multiword strings of at least two morphemes, which are stored and retrieved holistically from memory at the time of production, and which are not instantly generated and subjected to the linguistic analysis of language. Formulaic sequence readily coheres phonologically to be identified as a formula and

fundamentally aids fluent language expressions. In the main, formulaic sequences are used to express messages, functions, social solidarity, and so on. These fixed forms often have non-literal meanings and express communicative-pragmatic contexts. Collocations, proverbs and phrasal verbs are examples.

Going by the foregoing, it becomes very clear that no one single definition can boast of a satisfactory account but are part of the story. The significance of the numerous definitions points to the fact of the very existence of the multi-faceted dimensions of the phenomenon which is evident in its forms, functions, semantic, syntactic and lexical properties (Wray and Perkins 2000) [25]. Corroborating with the above, Nation and Webb (2011) [13] are of the view that a definition may necessary change according to the research focus at hand and that what matters is clearly describing and persistently applying same in a particular study.

### 3. Discussion of literature

Available records show that formulaic language is a form of expression used by native speakers as well as L<sub>2</sub> speakers and it is a means of distinguishing them due to the native speakers' proficiency and their widespread use (Uysal and Cakmakci 2016) [19]. As said earlier, because of the nature of formulaic language, such terms as the followings are used to describe it: formulaic speeches, conventionalized forms, fossilized forms, frozen phrases, Holophrases, lexical phrases, chunks, multiword units, and ready-made expressions, among so many others (Wray and Perkins 2000) [25]. Formulaic language manifests in strings of linguistic items such as *let off steam*, componential relation is relatively fixed as in the case with, *by and large*, and substitutability constrained as in *hit the sack*, meaning 'to go to bed to sleep.' Uysal and Cakmakci (2016) [19] argue that the expression *hit the sack* is not flexible enough to tolerate a change as in 'hit the bag'.

It is for these reasons formulaic expressions encompasses, according to Kecskes (2015:3) [9], "short routinized interchanges where we do not always mean what we say". Therefore tightly idiomatic and immutable strings of items, semantically opaque and irregular syntactic linguistic items, lexical collocations, phrasal verbs, metonymy and others which embody non-literal meaning form part of formulaic expressions. Formulaic sequences by this very nature are a short-cut in language processing there-by contrasting with productivity. Raichle, (1998) [15]; McCrone, (1999) show in their reports that once the brain is familiar with a linguistic task, it is capable of by-passing the route that it used in processing it. That short-cut which formulaicity takes entails the ability to use structural systems in combinatory manner in creating and understanding novel utterances in the language.

Barr and Kensar (2005) [11] are among others who emphasize the cultural dimension of formulaicity and believe that it is the shared knowledge that gives the phenomenon its advantage over productivity in language use. Uysal and Cakmakci (2016) [19] give an example of how the catchphrases, *go ahead, make my day*, first used in 1983 in the movie *sudden impact* is ubiquously now in use in American society and with other speakers of English in the world. Speakers of the phrase use it to manipulate situations to their advantage because of the common shared

knowledge of what it means and on which they rely. Misunderstanding and confusion arise if the speaker and hearer do not share the same experience due to the variety of their speech communities. In that case, instead of the adoption of formulaicity with a holistic meaning, the participant in a speech event may resort to the other way of linguistic productivity in expressing his thought.

Due to the nature of formulaic sequences, a number of research studies have offered categorization explanations which have not offered holistic satisfaction but cannot be ignored. Some of them include Becker (1975) [2]; Bolinger (1976) [5]; Yorio (1980) [26]; Moon (1992) [11]; Howarth (1998); Schmitt and Carter, R. (2004) [17]; and Wood, D. (2010) [20]. The early work of Becker (1975) [2] advocates six categorical taxonomy of adult- native speakers which include, polywords, eg for *real*;\_phrasal constraints, e.g. *by sheer coincidence*;\_meta-messages, e.g. *for that matter*; sentence builders, situational utterances, e.g. *how dear you are to me?* And verbatim texts, e.g. *better be late than never*. This taxonomy is form-based with its merits and demerits when critically commented.

Yet in others, it is a semantic irregularity that is the focus as formulaic sequences relinquish their compositional meaning to holistic one (Nattinger and DeCarrico, 1992) [12]. These have metaphorical meanings, e.g. *to beat about the bush*; *to pull one's leg*. In another, syntactic irregularity forms the focus of their categorization. Flavell and Flavell (1992) comment on their restricted scope and exemplify that expression such as, *be out of print or beat about the bush* cannot be pluralized or passivised without the sequences losing their formulaic statue. Many researchers follow the fixedness categorization, but the function-based account of formulaic sequences is worthy of note.

In Nattinger and DeCarrico (1992) [12], the authors offer three main areas in which formulaic sequences in English are utilized as a target language for L2 learners. They include:

- Social interactions which embody conversational maintenance, such as summons, e.g. *how are you*, and clarifying, e.g. *what do you mean by that*; conversational purpose, including, questing and refusing, e.g. *do you feel X?* and *I am sorry but X*.
- Necessary topics that mark topics which learners are often asked, such as autobiography, e.g. *my name is X*, and time, e.g. *what time X?*
- Discourse devices, such as temporal connectors, examples are summarizers, e.g. *year before*, *in other words* and *to make a long story short*.

Wood (2010) [20] proposes in clear terms that a learner can considerably improve and sound native-like if maximize benefits from formulaic phrases provided for the speaker. Wood's quantitative and qualitative six-month intensive English program was carried out at a Canadian University. The overall results show that the spoken fluency of the students improved during the six-month program where students were involved in working and retelling of three silent movies. Wood therefore, unequivocally makes a case in support that utilization of formulaic language increases speech fluency. Also, Jones and Haywood (2004) [8] studied the teaching of formulaic language in an EAP context where they analysed textbooks used in academic writing. Despite the inherent short falls in the project, for instance, the textbooks were not able to address sufficiently the issues of

single words as well as formulaic phrases, learners stand to benefit to produce essays in a more acceptable manner in the academic world. The foregoing, by implication means that by the use of formulaic sequences, learners will be able 'to express technical ideas economically, to signal stages in their discourse and display the necessary level of formality' (Jones and Haywood 2004:273) [8]. Succinctly put, such phrases and sentence connectors as may be exemplified by '*in addition to, it is clear that, to a certain extent, at this stage, in view of, as soon as* will feature appropriately in students' academic writing.

Formulaic sequences are of varying types; they range from phrases in grammatical unit to idioms of the language. Kecskes (2015:35) [9] gives the continuum of formulaic sequences as embodying six types. These include: grammar units such as, *going to*; have fixed semantic units, e.g. *as a matter of fact, suffice it to*; phrasal verbs, e.g. *put up with, getting along with*; speech formulas, e.g. *going shopping, not bad you know*; situation-bound utterance, e.g. *welcome aboard, help yourself*; and idioms, e.g. *kick the bucket, and spill the beans*. Now, from a critical look at these phrases, their meanings are non-literal and are fixed, and only in learning and immersion that one in an L<sub>2</sub> situation comes in terms with their resources. We may therefore conclude that the full potential of formulaic sequences lie in mutual knowledge and making sense of the discourse requires pragmatic skills in any communicative event.

#### 4. Formulaic Language in Nigerian ESL Social Contexts

The significance of formulaic sequences in the promotion and production of fluency in written and spoken language is common knowledge and this is not peculiar to L<sub>1</sub> speakers but L<sub>2</sub> speakers of language. Boers, Eyckmans, Rappell, Stenger and Demecheler (2006) [4] propose the primary functions of formulaic language in promoting fluency and enabling the speaker to hold the floor. In an L<sub>2</sub> situation, they give three distinct reasons why such benefits are outlined. Those authors argue that in formulaic sequences, meanings are highly unpredictable and taught grammar rules are ignored, still pragmatic knowledge are used and the sequences increase competence. A mastery of formulaic sequence is known to aid and increase language production in real time. Above all, use of these sequences represent being in secured zones as they are used with confidence since their meaning is holistic. These and other peripheral factors increase a learner's linguistic competence and performance in an L<sub>2</sub> situation.

In Nigerian social context, knowledge of formulaic sequences in the target language will greatly improve production and understanding of communication which will enhance mutual interaction among participants. The claim of this assertion is that users of English in a social context need rich resources of formulaic sequences to meet the demands to understand others in a social interaction. Wray *et al.* (2008) postulate that there are three central functions which formulaic phrases can perform as a tool for social interaction. Then include-the things an individual cannot do at some point but would require others to achieve then. That is, they relate to the speakers' manipulation of his world by engaging others to achieve their outcomes and commands, requests, bargain structures, etc. are used as the carriers of those directives. The other two, though not as ubiquitous in use as the first, are – asserting individual and group identity all within the human social network.

However, for one to get the best of these language resources, users need to be well informed culturally for their appropriate use. The absence of sufficient knowledge of the target language will result in breakdown of communication among participants and its attendant consequences. Wray (1999) [21] notes that lack of knowledge of formulaic sequences will turn to be a mix of target language sequences used appropriately or inappropriately and allowing the inter-language to come and fill the gaps. At this point, it will be necessary to examine some of the formulaic sequences often used among the people of Nigeria and identify whether or not these lexical bundles enhance interaction.

#### Ext. 1

- A. I got the letters from the mailbox yesterday to distribute to the respective invitees to partake in the events. But the letters were all mangled and wet so I could not distribute them.  
I was....
- B. *Could I say something here?*  
a) Yes, you cannot.  
b) What do you mean?

In the above, was a discussion between A and B, and A was trying to explain why he could not do what he was delegated to do-the distribution of the letters to the invitees. But from the extract, we discovered that A's explanation was getting boring to B, and therefore made a request to shift turn to Speak – *could I say something here?*. The answer to B's request should have been either *yes, you can*, or *no, you cannot*, but an obviously lacks knowledge of the nature of these expressions, and gave a response which amounted to a communication breakdown and B asked 'what do you mean'.

#### Ext. 2

- A. Whereas in Ext. 1, we notice the expression used to manipulate others to satisfy an emotional need as a request, in Ext.2 we see the formulaic phrases asserting group identity. Example – John, Mary and Jones visited a friend (B) on his 25<sup>th</sup> birthday and once they got to his residence and sighted him,  
All Shouted: Happy Birthday!
- B. Thanks  
All: Dearly beloved, we gather here at this moment to wish you a happy birthday. We wish you all that you wish yourself-long life, prosperity and many more returns. Consequently, the song started-  
Happy birthday to you,  
Happy birthday to you,  
Happy birthday- happy birthday,  
Happy birthday to you.

The above is an institutionalized form of words where the overall membership of group identity is asserted. A set of formulaic sequence quite widely used and which an L<sub>2</sub> speaker must be fluent in is that of idioms. In interacting with other members of the community one needs a wide range of idiomatic expression both within Nigeria and beyond. An example suffices here.

#### Ext. 3

- A. National Electoral Commission has performed creditably well.



- B. Yes, it is improving in its performance.
- a) In the last general elections, the two Chairmanship candidates were all popularly supported although the candidate for the minority party won.
  - b) The candidate of the ruling party did not win because he was not a resident of the metropolis and that proved to be a *millstone around his neck* in the elections.

In the above extract, the ensuing conversation was between two friends on the last chairmanship elections in the state. The use of the idiom, *a millstone around his neck* mean 'a great obstacle' and is neither generated nor an architect of the creative linguistic ability of speaker B. Its meaning as an expression is fixed and culturally bound within the English speaking Community. The Word string is stored and retrieved as a whole from the memory at the time of use and not amenable to grammatical analysis. Others commonly used with metaphoric meaning need a substantially pragmatic or direct implicational context include- *Straight from the horse's mouth; to pull one's leg; better late than never-* a verbatim text, while *how can I repay you* is a situational utterance.

### 5. Formulaic language: its role

Cowrie, (1992)<sup>[6]</sup>; Wray, *et al.*, (2000)<sup>[25]</sup>; Wray, (2003); Wood, (2010)<sup>[20]</sup>; Schmitt, (2010)<sup>[16]</sup>; Kecskes, (2015)<sup>[9]</sup>; Turker, (2016)<sup>[18]</sup>; and Uysal, *et al.* (2016)<sup>[19]</sup> are among others who have been on the role of formulaic sequences in the promotion and production of fluency in language. The concern of this paper is the role of these lexical bundles in L<sub>2</sub> social contexts. By that I mean, how these Chunks enhance communicative effects whenever there is social interaction among human participants in L<sub>2</sub> situations. Research has shown that the use of these sequences in their various forms is very rife. In language, all types of speakers use formulaic sequences to achieve specific interactional goals. Some of the goals include; greeting, chastening, back channel ling, commands, bargaining and so on.

A significant role of formulaic sequences is the ease with which cognitive burden is manipulated by both speaker and hearer (Schmitt 2010)<sup>[16]</sup>. It has been noted that these memorized chunks have the facility capable of withstanding them from the long-term memory store and slotting them in the speech of the user. The implication of this process implies that knowledge and use of formulaic sequences can alleviate the language users their problems by relying on these chunks and bypassing the difficulties of processing (Wray *et al.*, 2000). In this sense, storing and use of such universally-known lexical bundles of language clearly undercuts the needs for the generative principles of language where novel structures are the hallmarks.

Use of formulaic sequences, especially culturally embedded chunks obviates ambiguity in messages in the course of communication. The reason is that the above mentioned phrases are rooted in the speech community and their meaning well known to all adults to the extent that they are used with confidence. Therefore, slotting such phrases in speech saves the speaker and smoothen understanding. For instance, *to beat about the bush* and *to beat black and blue*, are known and generally acceptable expressions which meanings are unhidden in the English speaking world and which the L<sub>2</sub> speaker can use with an ease of precision.

An established fact about the use of formulaic phrases is its

role in making the hearer to do something, feel something, or even think something in satisfying the needs of the speaker (Wray, 2002). In the example, *keep off the lane* the speaker commands the listener to perform an action. On the other hand, *would you care for a drink?* is a polite request made on the hearer by the speaker, all of which are unambiguous and can be carried out directly. This role that formulaic sequences play is considered as manipulating others and situations to the advantage of the speaker in a social context. Wray (2002); Wood (2010)<sup>[20]</sup> note that the role of such language is inevitable to man, very appropriate, and of the speakers' interests, yet the later believes that these sequences serve to help one cope with the complexity of many social situations, help structure orderly and unambiguous communication, and help with a sense of group identity (pp 52).

There lies the potency of these linguistic sequences based on shared knowledge and culture as speakers and hearers go the same way.

### 6. Conclusion

In this study, the researcher attempted to bring to fore the value of the use of formulaic sequences by language users in L<sub>2</sub> social situations. But before coming in to face the thrust of the investigation, it is necessary to reiterate the widespread use of what could be referred to as formulaic language among L1 as well as L<sub>2</sub> speakers of English around the world. The age-long and increasing use of formulaic sequences in both speech and writing point to its relevance as an inevitable component of the language we use. Formulaic sequences are of variance with the other theory of language in that whereas the Chomskyian theory considers the generative ness of novel sentences, the former relinquished their semantic componential meaning in favour of a holistic one(Nattinger nad DeCarrico, 1992)<sup>[12]</sup>.

Studies have shown including Wood (2010) the relevance of utilizing formulaic sequences in increasing fluency in speech and writing, but also the use of these phrases eases the loading processing of the language users. In a nutshell, it has been acknowledged that what formulaicity affords is not just a luxury, but that which is crucial to managing an over demanding needs of a tedious on-line processing dynamics. Again, we also identified that formulaicity clarifies ambiguity in language users because of their directness and holistic meaning imbued in the speech community. Finally, it is concluded that formulaicity has unwelcoming potential in manipulation and controlling the affairs of things within one's social environment and are a secured zone for both speakers and listeners.

However, since our language is replete with formulaicity both in writing and speech, the English as second language student has to be vast in it in order to meet his communication needs within and outside his environment. In that case, the ESL student requires the need of exposure which will enable him accumulate sufficient input in language. Equally of note is the recognition of the teachers' effort in this direction. Explicit instructions in the classroom on formulaic sequences in their numerous dimensions will bridge the gap. What needs to be done is the introduction of this unit of language in the school curriculum right from the primary level to the professional so that speakers of English as L<sub>2</sub> are naturally part of their study and use, as in the case with comprehension, summary, writing and so on. In this vein, it is strongly suggested that educators, language

programme designers as well as text-book writers should come to terms with the importance of this linguistic component and see to its accessibility in the English as second language environment.

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