BOOK REVIEW

**Understanding Formulaic Language: A Second Language Acquisition Perspective**

Anna Siyanova-Chanturia, Ana Pellicer-Sánchez (Eds.), New York & London/Routledge, 2019, 290 pp. ISBN 978-1138634978, GBP £42.99 (paperback)

Jiaoyue Chen

*School of Foreign Languages, Huazhong University of Science and Technology, Wuhan 430074, China*

*E-mail address:* jiaoyuechen@hust.edu.cn

David Oakey

*Department of English, University of Liverpool, Liverpool L69 3BX, UK*

*E-mail address:* David.Oakey@liverpool.ac.uk

The phenomenon of formulaicity plays a central role in pragmatics. Institutionalized speech acts in public ceremonies are performed following repeated linguistic sequences; social interactions are facilitated by appropriate forms of language; second language (L2) learners can achieve native-like proficiency, or fluent pragmatic competence, through use of the many phrases and collocations which are preferred over other possible word combinations. Formulaicity is also ubiquitous in language: rote-learned chunks play a crucial role in early language acquisition; use of formulaic language reduces the demands on speakers’ cognitive processing during communication.

This has therefore led to formulaic language becoming a prominent topic for scholars working in a variety of linguistic sub-disciplines in addition to pragmatics. These include theoretical and applied linguistics, educational and corpus linguistics, psycholinguistics and cognitive linguistics, neurolinguistics and language pathology. The fruits of such research have been gathered in various edited volumes over the last two decades (Corrigan et al., 2009; Granger and Meunier, 2008; Schmitt, 2004; Wood, 2010), monographs (Wood, 2015; Wray, 2002; 2008), and a special issue of *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics* in 2012, although these collections have often focused more on the psycholinguistic or lexicological aspects of the phenomenon. The volume under review here, however, is broader in scope and summarizes recent research which is particularly relevant to L2 pragmatics, making connections between the use, processing, and acquisition of formulaic language. This volume will accordingly be of interest to both experienced scholars and graduate students in the various sub-disciplines already mentioned.

The volume contains an introductory chapter and 13 chapters organized into three parts: cognitive and psycholinguistic perspectives are dealt with first (Chapter 1-4), then socio-cultural and pragmatic perspectives (Chapter 5-7), and finally pedagogical perspectives (Chapter 8-13). The introduction by the two editors (Anna Siyanova-Chanturia and Ana Pellicer-Sánchez) provides an extensive and informative discussion of terminology, characteristics and definitions used in formulaic language studies drawing upon different research strands and proposes a loose but inclusive working definition, with a sensible choice of “formulaic language” (FL) to refer to the phenomenon in general and “formulaic sequences” (FSs) to refer to specific forms discussed in each chapter. This prepares the ground for the following chapters that explore FL theoretically and methodologically.

Part I of this book offers an overview of the acquisition and processing of various instances of FL by L2 learners from the cognitive and psycholinguistics perspectives. Chapter 1 (Stefanie Wulff) reviews research into the acquisition of FL from Usage-Based Linguistics and concludes that the FSs with frequent occurrences and semantic transparency can facilitate L2 acquisition by serving as “kick-starters”, whereas those rare and opaque FSs are hard to acquire and may account for “the ceiling effects” (p.57). Wulff also notes that more studies with a longitudinal research design or on other L2s are needed. Chapter 2 (Anna Siyanova-Chanturia and Diana Van Lancker Sidtis) advances our understanding of compositional and figurative FL regarding comprehension and production. By employing eye-tracking and event-related brain potentials (ERPs), the factors that may influence FL processing are identified. Chapter 3 (Kathy Conklin and Gareth Carrol) focuses on cross-linguistic influence and congruency associated with idioms and collocations. They suggest that other types of FL remain to be explored, and more powerful models to be established to explain the complex relationship between FL in L1 and L2 processing. Chapter 4 (Phoebe Lin) redefines FSs as strings of sounds rather than strings of words. Drawing upon cognitive, psycholinguistic and corpus linguistic evidence, Lin argues that prosody plays a fundamental role in the acquisition and representation in an L1, and it can offer reliable cues in the learning of FL in an L2.

While the majority of the chapters in this book are concerned with L2 acquisition, the three chapters in Part II are included in recognition of the fact that the acquisition of a language needs to be accompanied by the learning of appropriate social behaviors, and these chapters will thus be of most interest to readers of the *Journal of Pragmatics*.

Kathleen Bardovi-Harlig (Chapter 5) reviews research into both the acquisition of second language FL and the acquisition of L2 pragmatics. She notes that the appropriate use of FL may mark speakers’ membership within particular speech communities, and so L2 learners need to recognize the sociopragmatics of a communicative situation, and know the appropriate phrase to use at a particular point. Bardovi-Harlig reviews research, much of which she was involved in, into L2 pragmatics acquisition, the establishment of conventionality, and the evaluation of L2 learner FL knowledge. She suggests that further research in this area should include languages and contexts other than those pertaining to English, the order of acquisition of conventional expressions, and a broader range of selection criteria for pedagogy, such as transparency, salience, frequency, and composition.

Nancy Bell and Stephen Skalicky (Chapter 6) target the interesting but long under-researched area of humor in L2, in which FL can play two roles. First, humor can arise from a hearer’s dashed expectations when an utterance partially conforms to, and then deviates from, a conventionalized expression. Research into this kind of humor applies various corpus-derived frameworks such as Sinclair’s open choice and idiom principle (1991), Hoey’s lexical priming (2005), and Hanks’s norms and expectations (2013). The second aspect of FL in humor, they report, arises either from an ironic adherence to formulae, e.g. *X is not his/her forte*, or through similes which, while creative, still follow formulaic configurations, such as *as X as a Y*. The chapter closes with suggestions for pedagogy and a research agenda to explore the intersection between conventional language and humor in L2.

Moving from FL in binary L1/L2 acquisition research, Chapter 7, by Istvan Kecskes, examines research into the role of FL in intercultural communication. This is when none of the speakers are using their L1, and so the traditional SLA criterion of “native-like proficiency” is less relevant. The role FL plays in such situations is a central question in Kecskes’ field of intercultural pragmatics; communication partly follows speakers’ existing L1 cultural pragmatic norms, while at the same time pragmatic features emerge which are co-constructed by the participants. The intercultural pragmatics research he discusses is based on a socio-cognitive approach focusing on the interplay between speakers’ actual experience of the communicative situation and the prior experience which they bring to the interaction.

Part III sets off from pedagogical perspectives and contains six chapters on FL learning, teaching, assessment, and the use of technology in L2 instructed settings. Chapter 8 (Ana Pellicer-Sánchez and Frank Boers) examines the incidental, semi-incidental, and intentional interventions used to accelerate the acquisition of L2 FSs. The intentional approach is found more effective, but its effectiveness depends on the exercise type. The researchers note that due to the multifaceted and complex nature of learning and teaching conditions, a one-size-fits-all approach might not be possible. Chapter 9 (Henrik Gyllstad and Norbert Schmitt) focuses on the assessment of FL knowledge and reviews the existing tests. The main issues and principles regarding developing FL tests are also discussed.

Chapter 10 through Chapter 12 examine the applications of corpora in teaching, learning and use of FL in L2. Chapter 10 (Tom Cobb) demonstrates the use of computer-assisted language learning in the teaching of FL as a massive exposure of FL to L2 learners. Chapter 11 (Phil Durrant) explores issues around the role of FL in English for Academic Purposes in university settings. He further notes that the relationship between the use of FL and perceptions of linguistic proficiency remains unclear and FL research can be expanded at the language-thought interface more broadly. Chapter 12 (Sylviane Granger) focuses on collocations and lexical bundles in learner corpora. Granger comments that the exploration of individual learner trajectories, mixed-method design, other L2s and more replication studies can feed into future research. To facilitate this, a fact sheet for collocations and lexical bundles is provided.

As a commentary chapter, Alison Wray (Chapter 13) closes this book by drawing on the previous chapters to address the question of why, if formulaicity is ubiquitous in all languages, learners seem not to look for FSs in the L2 that map on to the FSs from their L1. She discusses several reasons, particularly different types of formulaicity: FSs can be ideational and referential or pragmatic and functional, and so need different pedagogical approaches. The factors she discusses are intended to stimulate further research into different aspects of learners’ acquisition and use of FSs in their second language.

Overall, this volume contributes to FL research by providing an inclusive and up-to-date examination of theoretical issues, empirical research and pedagogical implications of FL in a range of L2 contexts. The findings gleaned from different domains of L2 not only demonstrate the vast wealth of knowledge accumulated in this field over the past four decades of investigations but also lay a solid foundation for future empirical and pedagogical explorations.

Unlike many other edited volumes with multiple contributors, which might be organized in a loosely thematic manner and hard to follow or assembled from disparate conference papers, consistent efforts have been made throughout this volume to establish a clear, unifying thread for readers to follow. First, this book opens with an introductory chapter that clarifies the definition and terminology used to refer to formulaicity throughout and sets the scene for the following studies. This also means less repetition, as previous collections have had the tendency to allow authors to start their chapters by reviewing the same literature and elaborating their position on the use of the terminology. It finishes with the thought-provoking commentary chapter by Alison Wray. In this way, studies from different perspectives are attuned in this book. Moreover, it is worth noting that the sections on “Conclusions and Future directions” in each chapter also reflect the joint efforts shared by the contributors. Across the book, this section may offer readers reflective thinking about the topic and guide researchers who are looking for research topics.

Some parts of this book can be further elaborated. First, the editors and authors could be more specific about the term “language”, as the term is used a lot without it being clear that the L2 most studied in the chapters in the book is English. Most chapters appear to use “language” and “English” interchangeably, with the exception of Durrant (Chapter 11), who specifically mentions “English” since his chapter is on English for Academic Purposes; Wulff (Chapter 1) and Granger (Chapter 12), who point out insufficient research on other L2s. Second, there are still some limitations regarding the theoretical perspectives and methodological concerns. For the theoretical positions, this book includes studies with three broad but independent perspectives. However, the intersection among these perspectives could have been highlighted and discussed. Methodologically, including more studies or discussions on the acquisition and use of FSs over time with a dynamic perspective would have been helpful (Chapter 3, 5 and 13).

On balance, this book provides a deep and interdisciplinary understanding of FL with an L2 acquisition lens. Given its wide-ranging and rich content, it is undoubtedly an important work of reference for researchers and graduate students in SLA and pragmatics in particular and applied linguistics in general.

References

Corrigan, R., Moravcsik, E. A., Ouali, H., Wheatley, K. (Ed.), 2009. Formulaic language: Volume 2. Acquisition, loss, psychological reality, and functional explanations. John Benjamins Publishing, Amsterdam.

Granger, S., Meunier, F. (Ed.) 2008. Phraseology in language learning and teaching. John Benjamin Publishing, Amsterdam.

Hanks, Patrick, 2013. Lexical analysis. MIT Press, Cambridge, MA.

Hoey, Michael, 2005. Lexical priming: a new theory of words and language. Routledge, London.

Schmitt, N. (Ed.), 2004. Formulaic sequences: Acquisition, processing, and use. John Benjamins Publishing, Amsterdam.

Sinclair, John McHardy, 1991. Corpus, concordance, collocation. Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Wood, D. (Ed.), 2010. Perspectives on formulaic language: Acquisition and Communication. Continuum, London.

Wood, David, 2015. Fundamentals of Formulaic Language: An Introduction. Bloomsbury Academic, London.

Wray, Alison, 2002. Formulaic language and the lexicon. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Wray, Alison, 2008. Formulaic Language: Pushing the boundaries. Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Biographical notes

Jiaoyue Chen is a lecturer in the Department of College English. Her research interests focus on the acquisition and use of formulaic language by L2 learners of English. She is the author of *An Exploration of Formulaic Language in Chinese University Students' Written Texts* (Peter Lang 2020).

David Oakey’s current research interest is in the description, acquisition, teaching and learning of lexis, formulaic language, and phraseology, particularly in interdisciplinary discourse situations where users encounter unfamiliar meanings of familiar words. He uses corpus linguistics and usage-based approaches to look at the behaviours of forms, meanings, and patterns, and has published on various aspects of this work. He has taught undergraduate and graduate classes in English lexis and corpus linguistics at universities in China, Turkey, the UK, and the USA.