

Formulaic language – linguistic, psycholinguistic and sociolinguistic perspectives

Błażej Gałkowski (Institute of English, University of Warsaw)

In recent years scholars across a number of disciplines have demonstrated increased interest in linguistic prefabrication. It is now generally recognised that various types of preconstructed or semi-preconstructed units (set phrases, collocations, ritualised formulae, idioms, etc.) play a central role in linguistic competence. The overall phenomenon is commonly referred to as ‘formulaic language’, though there is as yet no agreed definition and researchers differ widely in what they consider to be ‘formulaic’.

The present paper reviews three major approaches to formulaicity:

- (1) a formal (linguistic) approach, where formulae are seen as lexical or lexico-grammatical patterns or constructions;
- (2) a processing (psycholinguistic) approach, where formulaic language is considered to be a product of a special processing mechanism, based on lexical retrieval, which entails little or no involvement of the grammatical component;
- (3) socio-cultural (sociolinguistic) approach, focusing on cultural embeddedness of linguistic exemplars and their contextual predictability.

It is argued that the externally observable ‘symptoms’ of formulaicity, such as high frequency of occurrence characteristic of particular word strings, their idiomatic feel, phonological coherence and contextual predictability, result from an interplay of these three components.

Addressing the difficulties related to the definition and identification of formulaic sequences, I present a model of ‘formulaic competence’, which integrates the three perspectives and makes visible the relationship between the linguistic, psycholinguistic and sociolinguistic (pragmatic) dimensions.