Wray, Alison. **Formulaic Language: Pushing the boundaries**. Oxford Applied Linguistics. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2008. ISBN 978-0-19-442245-1. 305 pp. Price: GBP 26.

It is well-known that we use a number of phrases functioning as ready-made units when we communicate. What comes to mind are idioms and polite phrases such as *thank you* and *I'm sorry*. Such phrases are retrieved from the mental lexicon and processed as units. Any language contains a plethora of such phrases as has been shown by the search for recurring multiword units in large corpora. However there are many mysteries surrounding these items. It is far from clear how to define the multiword units, what to call them and why we use them. Alison Wray discusses these and other questions in her recent book *Formulaic language: Pushing the boundaries*, a follow-up of her earlier book *Formulaic language and the lexicon* (2002). In this book the focus is also on applied linguistic issues e.g. how formulaic language can help people with functional disorders, facilitate language learning or be a help for Machine Translation. The overall purpose is to study what we can learn about communication and formulaicity if we 'push the boundaries' and look at cases where language users prefer or are constrained to use formulaic language.

The book consists of four parts investigating different aspects of formulaic language at the boundaries. Part 1 (Determining the boundaries) is concerned with 'setting the boundary'. In Chapter 2 some key concepts used to define and explain formulaic language are introduced. Wray's term Morpheme Equivalent Unit (MEU) is defined as 'a unit processed as a morpheme' without recourse to any form-meaning matching of the subparts. The MEU unit is aligned with theoretical models where formulaic items can themselves be reduced to smaller units. The motivation for using formulaic language is associated with the 'Needs Only Analysis' (NOA), i.e. the speaker only engages in analysing a word string into smaller units if there is a need for it.

Chapter 3 gives examples of what happens when there are collisions between formulaic and non-formulaic language e.g. in humour where the reader is forced to read a meaning into a MEU in order to understand the joke. Other examples where reference needs to be made to a MEU for an explanation are speech errors.

Chapters 4 and 5 examine formulaic language in relation to speech and writing. Chapter 4 reviews how formulaic language is used in creating oral narratives in non-literate societies, epics, narrative songs, fairy stories, etc and how the use of formulaic language is affected by the transition from orality to literacy. Chapter 5 argues that formulaicity is a measure of the autonomy of the text. In closed societies where the speaker anticipates shared cultural and contextual background there are advantages in using MEUs (Wray refers to the communication in such societies as esoteric). Conversely when the communication is exoteric or outwards-facing e.g. if the speaker and hearer are

strangers it is likely to contain fewer MEUs. In this perspective the written medium offers more favourable opportunities for autonomy since it operates within an outwards-facing society.

Part 2 is concerned with locating the boundaries for example how MEUs are accommodated in different theories. The challenges confronting the theoretical model are that it should account for three key features of formulaic language: its patterns of manifestation, the principles underlying the patterns and motivation for its use (Chapter 6).

In Chapter 7 a number of theoretical models are evaluated with regard to how well they can account for Wray's key features (generative theory, functional grammar, corpus-driven models, cognitive approaches). The problems identifying or defining formulaic units are addressed in Chapter 8. The problems are described as 'rather like trying to find black cats in a dark room. You know they're there but you can't pick them out from everything else' (p. 101). However depending on the purpose of the study the focus can be on defining what is definitely and unequivocally formulaic (a narrow definition) and a more inclusive definition where it does not matter if the formulation is not idiomatic or fixed in normal usage. Alternatively a particular formulaic expression or MEU can be characterised with regard to its frequency, form (e.g. length), phonological characteristics and intuition. Intuitive judgements are particularly risky 'but probably there is no way to escape the need to use intuition'.

Chapter 9 discusses the MEU (morpheme equivalent unit) in more detail. Unlike the definitions based on external criteria its definition captures the way in which formulaic language is processed and analysed according to certain principles. Eleven different criteria can be used to tap the researcher's intuitive judgements whether a particular unit is stored holistically. By applying the criteria the researcher can explain his or her intuitions similar to 'explaining why one considers a particular painting to be a masterpiece' (p.126)

Part 3 shows the importance of formulas by providing a number of case studies 'at the boundaries'. Chapter 10 describes the TESSA system, an interactive translation system designed for the UK Post Office. The system identifies and matches large internally complex items with lexical units in order to facilitate the translation from spoken English into British sign language. The software program TALK (Chapter 11) was developed to facilitate fluency in non-speaking individuals. Prefabricated turns were used by the informant (a person affected with cerebral palsy) as the most fluent alternative even if they do not fully reflect what the speaker wants to say.

Much can be understood about formulaic language from its uses in language learning situations (Chapter 12). One rather extreme case study describes how a participant in the television programme *Welsh in a Week* learnt to give a cooking demonstration in Welsh in a week by memorizing particular phrases and sentences. Another experiment showed that even advanced learners can profit from reproducing memorized material as a learning method and that memorization was especially successful with less proficient learners of English

(Chapter 13). Chapter 14 gives an example of how formulaicity can play a role in forensic linguistics.

Chapter 15 illustrates the tension between formulaicity and naturalness by studying how an actor memorizes a script and then conveys spontaneity when delivering it.

Part 4 examines the boundaries. Chapter 16 discusses the hypothesis that MEUs are analysed as units by default and that the analysis into subcomponents only takes place if there is a need for it as predicted by the Needs Only Analysis. Evidence for the hypothesis comes from communication disorders such as autism, Alzheimer's Disease and aphasia. For example, it is well known that people affected with (certain kinds of) aphasia use formulaic sequences as their fall-back option.

Another question engaging scholars has to do with the origin of formulaic language (Chapter 17). Wray argues that formulaic language has its origin in a holistic protolanguage which can develop into a full human language characterised by compositionality and the possibility to express novel ideas. In this process the need to communicate with outsiders can be assumed to play an important role (language being used in exoteric rather than esoteric use).

Chapter 18 considers the centrality of formulaic language in adult foreign language and second language acquisition. Is formulaically based language teaching a viable option for adults? There is evidence from teaching situations in communities unfamiliar with western teaching methods that the 'phrase-book approach' can be successful. What can we deduce from this about the role of formulaic language learning in the mainstream western classroom situation? Current research indicates that formulaic sequences need to be taught in a range of different context types. As Wray points out, it is generally accepted nowadays that learning isolated words is of little value and that new vocabulary needs to be learnt within its collocational and phraseological context. The larger question is to what extent formulaic language can function as a bridge to learning to formulate new information.

In addition (Chapter 19) it is important to develop means for modelling language for Machine Translation. It is suggested that the computer can be exposed to multiword form-meaning pairings and extrapolate from these to new data.

Chapter 20 returns to some situations where the use of formulaic language was particularly useful and valuable in terms of risk-taking and achieving a successful balance between formulaicity and creativity. Chapter 21 discusses some cases where formulaic sequences are used for social control and extreme cases such as visual signal systems where there are constraints on what can be said and not only on what is likely to be said.

Wray draws attention to the fact that what is formulaic and can be stored as a unit for one speaker may be created 'on the fly' by another speaker. Formulas have mainly been identified in natural communication on the basis of external criteria such as idiomaticity. Wray on the other hand regards formulas as units

which can be used in the communication depending on what the speaker has stored in the long term memory and what is social or cultural knowledge. Speakers formulate new messages by assembling MEUs according to certain combinatory principles (or as constructions) when they are needed according to the Needs Only Analysis. Formulas are used in a large number of contexts. According to Wray we can learn much about formulaic sequences by looking at extreme situations where language users are constrained to use formulaic language rather than novel phrases to achieve their goals.

Following the lead in this book we can envisage a number of empirical studies of how formulaic sequences are used and why they are used. Wray's book will be an indispensable companion and inspiration for such studies. The analysis of formulaicity in different communication situations also draws attention to the practical applications of an approach centred on the use of formulaic expressions. As illustrated by the rich number of case studies, formulaicity plays an important role in many areas of life such as language learning, forensic linguistics and communication disorders.

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References

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