

THE POWER OF THE WORD – THE EVALUATIVE FUNCTIONS OF PREFABRICATED LANGUAGE

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1 Introduction

We are all aware of the existence of set expressions in every language, especially in ritualized routines such as greetings, requests, and leave-taking. However, further study has shown that native speakers make greater use of set expressions and “prefabricated language” than we had realised (Cowie, 1988: 126; Wray 2002: 101; Conklin & Schmitt, 2008: 72). We may expect prefabricated language in speech because of its performative nature, but Cowie also discovered in his study of the use of multi-word units in journalistic prose that newspaper journalists “drew very heavily on verb-noun collocations that are widely established and well-known” (Cowie, 1992: 10). He had postulated that this was due to the pressures of looming deadlines; however, he found that the editors, who did not face similar restrictions also made considerable use of prefabricated language.

These set expressions have been labeled differently by different authors: they have been called *formulaic language/sequences* by Wray; *multiword units* by Cowie; *fixed expressions* by Moon; *restricted collocations* by Aisenstadt, and *lexical phrases* by Schmitt. The term *prefabricated language* is used in this paper (sometimes abbreviated as ‘prefabs’) as an umbrella term to cover the range of set expressions from fixed collocations to idiomatic language.

2 The functions of prefabricated language

It was believed at first that prefabricated chunks of language were used as scaffolding for language learners during the interlanguage stage, but research has shown that native speakers also tend to use a significant amount of prefabricated language (Aisenstadt, 1979: 72). Cowie also acknowledges this, pointing out that native speakers seem to be “predisposed to store and reuse units as much as, if not more than, to generate them from scratch” (1988: 136). In fact, Granger reporting on a study done on prefabricated language patterns in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) writing found that learners used fewer prefabs than their native speaker counterparts (1998: 151). Wray proposes that the use of formulaic language is a central part of the language of a normal adult. She defines it as “the accessing of large prefabricated

chunks and not the formulation and analysis of word strings, that predominates in normal language processing” (2002: 101). As Conklin & Schmitt point out “research suggests that at least one-third to one-half of language is composed of formulaic elements although the percentage is affected by both register and mode” (2008: 72).

Conklin & Schmitt (2008) explain that prefabricated language units or as they call them *formulaic sequences* are used in a wide variety of ways. “They can be used to express a concept (*put someone out to pasture* = retire someone because they are getting old), state a commonly believed truth or advice (*a stitch in time saves nine* = it is best not to put off necessary repairs), provide phatic expressions which facilitate social interaction (*Nice weather today* is a non-intrusive way to open a conversation), signpost discourse organization (*on the other hand* signals an alternative viewpoint), and provide technical phraseology which can transact information in a precise and efficient manner (*blood pressure is 140 over 60*)” (p. 72).

Wray agrees that prefabricated language (formulaic sequences) plays various roles in discourse. She proposes that these roles can be reduced to three basic functions: reduction of the processing burden on the speaker; manipulating the hearer and his/her picture of the speaker’s identity; and management of the structure of the discourse (2002: 101). This elaborates on Moon’s earlier stand which posits that expressions such as those included in the category of restricted collocations serve evaluative functions, in that no overt evaluation is needed when they are used. Instead, “there is a retreat or sheltering behind shared values which coerces agreement and pre-empts disagreement” (Moon, 1992: 24). This may well be a valid reason why editors, journalists, and even writers in general, resort to the use of prefabricated language units. Perhaps the answer lies more in the purpose or aim of the discourse or interaction than in the constraints under which the writing or speech takes place.

Lemke posits that “one of the most basic functions of language is to create interpersonal relationships between speakers and addressees through the way in which text is worded. Speech act functions establish whether we are offering or demanding, aiding or attacking, creating solidarity or emphasizing social distance. In these and other ways we use language to take a stance towards and socially orient ourselves and our text to others. But we do not just use language to orient to addressees, real and potential; we also take a stance toward the ideational or propositional content of our own texts. Whatever we have to say about the world, we can also tell others, in the same utterance, to what extent we believe what we say is likely, desirable, important, permissible, surprising, serious, or comprehensible. In making these evaluations of propositions and proposals, we also orient our text in the larger world of available social viewpoints on our topic, and we further define our identities as meaning-makers

with particular values as well as beliefs” (Lemke, 1998: 33). Prefabricated language appears to be a valuable resource and one of the most common tools for achieving this. Evaluation is defined as “the broad cover term for the expression of the speaker’s or writer’s attitude or stance towards, viewpoint on, or feelings about the entities or propositions that he or she is talking about” (Thompson & Hunston, 2000: 5).

Lemke, in an earlier publication on interpersonal meaning, identified three “value orientations” of interpersonal meaning, namely goodness, certitude and expectability (Lemke, 1992: 82). In his later paper on language as a resource for conveying attitudinal meaning, Lemke identifies seven “dimensions” of “attitudinal meaning” or “evaluative semantic relations”: desirability/inclination (*wonderful, horrible*), warrantability/probability (*possible, doubtful*), normativity/appropriateness (*necessary, appropriate*), usuality/expectability (*normal, surprising*), importance/significance (*important, trivial*), comprehensibility/obviousness (*understandable, mysterious*), and humorousness/seriousness (*hilarious, ironic, serious*) (Lemke, 1998: 33-36).

In attempting to account for the complexity involved in evaluative meaning, Monika Bednarek suggests a parameter-based framework for investigating evaluation. Her framework is based on the understanding that speakers “can evaluate what they are talking about in relation to a wide range of norms: do we feel that what we are talking about is ‘good news’ or ‘bad news’, do we evaluate the information we have as reliable or unreliable, is what we are talking about presented as expected or unexpected, obvious or surprising, important or unimportant, appropriate or inappropriate, etc?” (2008: 11). Bednarek identifies (at least) ten parameters along which speakers can evaluate aspects of the world. Each of the proposed parameters involves a different dimension along which the evaluation proceeds, and includes what she calls *sub-values*. These sub-values can refer to different points on the respective scale or to different types of parameters. She makes an important distinction between *core* and *peripheral* evaluative parameters. Core parameters “relate to evaluative qualities ascribed to entities, situations, or propositions that are evaluated, and involve evaluative scales with two poles, but also potential intermediate stages between them. Peripheral parameters do not involve scales and do not indicate the same kind of qualitative evaluation” (2008: 14). Lemke and Bednarek provide valuable tools for examining the way in which prefabricated language is used in journalistic writing in Barbados.

3 Evaluation in Newspaper Editorials

This paper will examine the possible evaluative functions of prefabricated language units in editorials published in the *Sunday Sun*, and the *Weekend Nation*, two publications from one of the two major media houses in Barbados. It will seek to

determine the kinds of evaluations expressed through the use of prefabricated language and to assess the significance of their use for making these kinds of evaluations. The *Sunday Sun* editorial titled “Strong Focus on US Events”, examines the interest of nations around the world in the 2008 Presidential Campaign in the United States of America. The editorial in the *Weekend Nation* is titled “Learn from Their Mistakes” and discusses how small economies can learn from the mistakes of larger economies, like that of the United States of America, which have led to the present economic crises. Both of them were written in October 2008.

The following are examples of the use of prefabricated language to fulfill evaluative functions in the editorials mentioned. They are presented according to the framework used by Bednarek (2008: 7-14) and, to a lesser extent Lemke (1998: 34).

Comprehensibility

Bednarek proposes that evaluations of comprehensibility have to do with the degree to which writers evaluate entities, situations, states-of-affairs or propositions as being within or outside the grasp of their understanding (2008: 15). These judgements are located along a scale (cline) from incomprehensible to comprehensible. In the following example, *only wonder at* suggests that the matter is more or less incomprehensible; full understanding can never be achieved, so it will remain a mystery.

... small economies such as ours can only wonder at [COMPREHENSIBILITY: INCOMPREHENSIBLE] the damage that tax regulation has wrought upon large and small economies alike. (Weekend Nation)

Emotivity

The parameter of emotivity is concerned with the writer’s evaluation of aspects of events as good or bad, that is, meets with the writer’s approval or disapproval (Bednarek, 2008: 12).

... because experts from some of these larger countries criticize the regime of regulation and fiscal discipline in smaller countries as if bigger and more developed countries have a monopoly on proper regulation. [EMOTIVITY: NEGATIVE] (Weekend Nation)

The expression *have a monopoly on* gives the impression that the writer disapproves of the situation and thus expresses a negative evaluation of the situation. In the following example *walked away with* conveys a negative judgement, while *learn from the mistakes (of others)* expresses a positive evaluation of the situation.

Amazingly, nonetheless, high-flying executives walked away with multi-million-dollar bonuses... [EMOTIVITY: NEGATIVE] (Sunday Sun)

Yet we have to learn from the mistakes of others. [EMOTIVITY: POSITIVE] (Weekend Nation)

They are clearly taking their toll on the Republican administration as well as on a Democrat-controlled Congress... [EMOTIVITY: NEGATIVE] (Sunday Sun)

Expectedness

This parameter expresses the writer's assessment of aspects of the world as more or less expected or unexpected (Bednarek, 2008: 15). In the following example, the expression *up to now* conveys the impression that although no significant repercussions have been experienced, they are not totally unexpected. Again expectedness falls along a scale from expected to unexpected.

Up to now, there are no significant repercussions in Barbados. [EXPECTEDNESS: EXPECTED] (Sunday Sun)

...a highly charged race to the White House...and unprecedented turmoil in the banking and insurance sectors that are having fallout on banks even in the European Union, Ireland and Russia. [EXPECTEDNESS: UNEXPECTED] (Sunday Sun)

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Humorousness

This has to do with writers' evaluations of aspects of the world as more or less humorous or serious. These judgements also fall along a continuum from humorous to more or less serious (Bednarek, 2008: 16). In the example below, Obama's bid for President is evaluated as serious.

...but also because an African-American is for the first time a serious contender for president... [HUMOROUSNESS: SERIOUS] (Sunday Sun)

Importance

Evaluations along the parameter of importance evaluate the world (and discourse about it) according to the speaker's subjective evaluation of its status in terms of importance, relevance and significance (Bednarek, 2008: 16). Notions of stardom, fame, influence, significance and importance are included within the parameter of importance.

...but also because an African-American is for the first time a serious contender for president... [IMPORTANCE: IMPORTANT] (Sunday Sun)

...public opinion polls show them having a significant impact on what voters are likely to do at the polls next month. [IMPORTANCE: IMPORTANT] (Sunday Sun)

Possibility/Necessity

Within the parameter of possibility/necessity, the writer expresses evaluations about what is possible or necessary. These can be seen as one dimension or can be perceived as separated (Bednarek, 2008: 17).

It is the only way to restore confidence among investors while dispelling ...[POSSIBILITY NECESSITY: NECESSARY] (Sunday Sun)

Reliability

“Evaluations of reliability are connected to what is generally described as epistemic modality..., that is, to matters of reliability, certainty, confidence and likelihood. The parameter of reliability goes beyond this, however, to include both the writer’s evaluation of the reliability of a proposition and his/her evaluation of the ‘genuineness’ of an entity/entities. There are five values subsumed under this parameter: fake, genuine, low, median, high. The first two (fake/genuine) refer to the evaluation of genuineness — writers evaluate states of affairs as either real or artificial. As with other parameters, this parameter can thus be regarded as having a ‘positive’ (real) and a ‘negative’ (unreal) value. The remaining sub-values (low, median, high) refer to the evaluation of the likelihood of propositions being true (Bednarek, 2008: 18). Examples from the text are given below:

...public opinion polls show them having a significant impact on what voters are likely to do. [RELIABILITY:MEDIAN] (Sunday Sun)

Indeed, ... Obama would win hands down [RELIABILITY: HIGH] if the vote for presidency were held in Barbados...[RELIABILITY: FAKE] (Sunday Sun)

In this second example, an evaluation of the likelihood of an event being true is expressed as high in a situation which is at the same time marked as unreal.

The other three parameters are seen as peripheral but can be related to evaluation in different ways. They are evidentiality, mental state and style (Bednarek, 2008: 18).

Evidentiality

Evaluations of evidentiality have to do with the writer’s evaluation of the truth of information contained in the sentence with respect to the source of that information. However, these sources imply a scale of reliability, in that, for example, general knowledge or proof are normally considered as more reliable sources than perception (Bednarek, 2008: 19).

From all accounts, the current upheaval arose from a combination of ... [EVIDENTIALITY:PROOF] (Sunday Sun)
News reports from Zimbabwe tell us that since the beginning of January of this year ... [EVIDENTIALITY:PROOF] (Weekend Nation)

Mental State

Bednarek bases this category on evaluations of mental states associated with particular verbs of knowing. These refer to states such as emotion, desire or volition, belief, expectation, knowledge, process and state-of-mind.

...and also in Europe where European Union governments are at odds [MENTAL STATE: STATE-OF-MIND] about how to restore confidence quickly. (Weekend Nation)
...but it is recognised [MENTAL STATE: KNOWLEDGE] that she has minimal intellectual muscle. (Sunday Sun)

Style

Evaluations that are concerned with the writer's scrutiny of the language used fall under the parameter of style. This category is minimal in newspaper editorials except in terms of the types of expressions used to report discursive constructs as Bednarek points out (2008: 21). These may be classified as neutral, illocutionary, declarative, discourse signaling, or paralinguistic.

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News reports from Zimbabwe tell [STYLE: NEUTRAL] us that since the beginning of January of this year ... (Weekend Nation)
We may be more surprised because experts from some of these larger countries criticise the regime of regulation and fiscal discipline ... [STYLE: ILLOCUTIONARY] (Weekend Nation)

4 Conclusion

Within this very small sample, we have found examples of prefabricated language which cover practically all the dimensions identified by Lemke and Bednarek. This highlights for us the prominence of evaluation and the role of prefabricated language in communication.

Since prefabricated language units make up a large part of any discourse and since their use is especially marked among native speakers, this suggests that their use may in fact "free" the speakers to concentrate on other aspects of the discourse. Prefabricated language also serves a purpose in persuading the audience to accept the writer's view. It is believed that prefabricated language bypasses logical analysis on the part of hearers/readers and makes them more inclined to accept than to question the ideas expressed by the use of prefabricated language. This is especially significant

in terms of the study of human communication in general and in specific areas such as teaching, politics, public relations and marketing, to name a few.

This paper examined a small sector of the vast area constituted by the use which we make of prefabricated language units to meet the evaluative function of language. It appears to be impossible for us to speak, or write for that matter, without making evaluations or personal judgements. This forces us to re-examine our concept of objectivity and to consider the subtle ways in which our thinking may be influenced by what we hear or read. It also nudges us to re-examine the concept of “creativity” in language and points the way to a vast untapped area of research.

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