

Analyzing prefabricated language in local advertisements

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ABSTRACT. The present study investigated prefabricated language in the ‘I saw you’ section, in the *Weekly Alibi*, a magazine based in Albuquerque, New Mexico. The ‘I saw you’ section is comparable to missed connections that are commonly found in the romantic personal advertisements of newspapers. Formulaic language, also called prefabricated language entails a ‘sequence of words that are stored and retrieved from whole memory and are a dynamic response to the demands of language use’ (Wray & Perkins 2000:5). We were interested in the social functions, prefab types, and distribution of prefabs in the context of romantic personal ads. We found that distribution of prefab types in our data was akin to that found in Erman & Warren 2000, where the lexical type was most frequent. We compared our samples of most frequent constructions to different corpora and found similar patterns in one of the corpora.

Keywords: Formulaic language, prefabricated language, personals advertisements, taboo topics

1. INTRODUCTION. This study examines the use of FORMULAIC LANGUAGE, also known as PREFABRICATED LANGUAGE, in local personal advertisements. Literature on the subject has noted the HOLISTIC PROCESSING nature of formulaic language. Sequences of words are processed as units rather than parsed (analytically) due to their frequency of use, thus reducing cognitive load. Selecting a READY-MADE set of phrases and words that many other people use in order to communicate is a safe way of communicating with someone you do not know – yet. It is not surprising, then, that 55–70% of communicators will depend on these ready-made set of phrases – as show by numerous studies (e.g. Erman & Warren 2000, Wray & Perkins 2000) and in various contexts. Other scholars have found 20–40% formulaicity in unplanned native speech and academic writing (Foster 2001, Biber et al. 1999, Howarth 1998).

Wray and Perkins (2000:13) suggest that, ‘we use [formulaic language] to frame [ideas] in a way that will maximize the likelihood of the required event coming about.’ Simply stated, formulaic language facilitates the way we convey our messages depending on particular contexts. Additionally, there are cognitive processing advantages in the use of prefabricated sequences over creative language. There are SOCIO-AFFECTIVE advantages as well. That is, there are social and emotional consequences of language use, which are detailed below by Wray and Perkins (2000).

Wray and Perkins (2000:13–14) suggest that we use language to meet physical needs as well as to assert individuality and group belonging so as to ‘ensure that we neither become subsumed within, nor are excluded from, the social networks which we feed off emotionally, and which directly contribute to our success in finding a reproductive partner.’ Finding a partner is an important feature of our study. In other words, ‘I saw you’ advertisements are a way to reconnect and communicate with potential partners. The study here investigates the distribution of prefab types, and discusses the socio-affective use of formulaic language in these local personal advertisements.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND. A great amount of languages' expressions is constructed through prefabricated phrases or idioms. Bybee (2006:713) points out that 'both written and spoken discourse are characterized by the high use of conventionalized word sequences, which include sequences that we might call formulaic language and idioms, but also conventionalized collocations.' She further suggests that idioms and prefabs are stored as whole units in the brain. Idioms and prefabs may have metaphorical and literal meaning, respectively (e.g. *the bottom line, the big picture, a piece of cake*); that is, it is possible to keep using them in new contexts of use with expanded or shifted meanings depending on the experience the individual user has with the prefabricated sequence.

The work of Bybee 2006 reminds us of the frequency and routinization of prefabs. 'Prefabs are word sequences that are conventionalized, but predictable in other ways, for example, word sequences like *prominent role, mixed message, beyond repair, and to need help*' (Bybee 2006:713). Phrasal verbs and verb-preposition pairings, which 'are pervasive in English as well as in other languages, can be considered prefabs, though in some cases their semantic predictability could be called into question' (713).

Erman and Warren (2000) investigated the prominence that prefabricated language has in the production and structure of the text, spoken or written. They examined the distribution of prefabs in texts and categorized them according to structure and function. The authors assumed that we use two resources to produce language: the open choice (word-to-word combinations) and preconstructed phrases. Erman and Warren (2000:31) define a prefab as 'a combination of a least two words favored by native speakers in a preference to an alternative combination which could have been equivalent had there been no conventionalization.' They distinguish different type of prefabs: LEXICAL, GRAMMATICAL, PRAGMATICS and REDUCIBLES. They contend that the exposure to prefabs is probabilistic. Therefore, identifying prefabs is a complicated task because not all the speakers are exposed to the same type of language.

Wray and Perkins (2000) assert that formulaic language is a tool of social interaction. Formulaic language entails word strings that possibly are registered in memory as a unit. Wray and Perkins' (2000:1) definition of formulaic language is a 'sequence continuous or discontinuous, of words or other meaning elements, which is, or appears to be, prefabricated: that is, stored and retrieved whole from memory at the time of use, rather than being subject to generation or analysis by the language of grammar.' The authors noted that some of the formulaic language is more transparent than others. Besides, 'possibly as much as 70% of adult native language may be formulaic' (Altenberg 1990 cited in Wray & Perkins 2000:2).

Wray and Perkins (2000) claim that there is a continuum of formulaicity in functional expressions, composite units, lexical collocations as well as grammatical collocations. These authors describe the following social functions for prefabricated language.

- (1) Manipulation of others: the effect of language to satisfy and emotional or physical need
 - (2) Asserting separate identity: the effect of language to be taken seriously
 - (3) Asserting group identity; the effect of language to show one's membership in a group
- (14).

According to Wray and Perkins (2000), the purpose of formulaic language is to help with communication and to avoid processing overload.

Among the studies of taboo language (Anderson & Trudgill 1990, Freitas 2008, Fleming & Lempert 2011) a commonality is to describe the use of certain mitigating strategies in order to convey a message without facing an explicit social transgression. The objective and function might be to fulfill point (2) above in Wray & Perkins's 2000 model. Certain kinds of speech have been regulated by different institutions, such as state, religion, social conventions, etiquette, etc. (Fleming & Lempert 2011). However, as Fleming and Lempert (2011:6) mention,

Ironically, proscriptions and even the appropriate substitutes these regimes recommend (e.g. euphemisms, circumlocutions, special citational forms like 'the F-word') make taboo utterances more salient. And rather than fix or stabilize a speaker's relation to the taboo object—by ensuring a safe, respectful 'distance,' for instance—proscription and efforts at containment seem to make such relations less stable. As conventions, they may now be flouted, parodied, played upon, or otherwise altered for strategic and interactional effect.

Fleming and Lempert (2011:6) remark that pragmatic prefabs or ready-mades have 'context coiled tight inside' for which producing those expressions in different contexts could be considered as a transgression of their primary social function, e.g. declaring a couple married by a non-minister; cursing in public broadcasts; pronouncing the quotation of a phrase that includes cursing, thus reduplicating the cursing and making the taboo word more outstanding (6–8).

Freitas (2008) looks at various modes in advertising to analyze the influential role of taboos. Freitas offers a definition of taboo as being 'a number of restrictions that regulate some areas of social life, and that demand avoidance behavior and that can be a threat to the established social patterns' (39). Drawing on this definition, two types of taboo are explained. One is when something should be avoided because it is negative, whereas the other type is when something is still a social violation but enticing to people. Especially in personal advertisements of the Weekly Alibi, it was observed that speech conveyed taboos. In the following examples the people who wrote the advertisements made explicit references to what could be considered taboo (e.g. sex).

- (1) ... Wanted to say hi but you were **handling the meat**, email me if you want to handle mine
- (2) You are stunning and your eyes paralyze me. Your energy cuts through me. **Let's get sweaty?**
- (3) I'll hoist my Jolly Roger. Now **let me have mah booty!**

However, these other advertisements downplayed a social taboo with the use of some prefabricated phrases (e.g. suggesting or inviting to have a more intimate relationship).

- (4) I know you're crazy fun so **let's get into some trouble** together.
- (5) We have lots of paddles, and straps, etc. to use. Please send a note with your interests and ideas and/or questions. **Experience isn't necessary**, only enthusiasm is.
- (6) I could tell by the stickers on your Mac Book that you like to snowboard. **Let's go for a ride** cowgirl.

For our particular study, we investigate the use of prefabricated language as a means of discussing taboo topics that are appealing rather than negative, as presented in the ‘I saw you’ advertisements, especially given the overall purpose of the advertisements. Our study examines the use of prefabs as a mitigating discourse strategy when speakers are approaching sensitive or taboo subjects in the social advertisements of a local magazine.

3. DATA AND METHODS. The purpose of this study is to investigate the use of formulaic language in the context of local ‘I saw you’ advertisements, personal ads about missed connections. The research attempted to answer three research questions:

- (1) What types of prefabs are present in ‘I saw you’ ads?
- (2) What is the distribution of these prefab types?
- (3) How are prefabs used to communicate sexual taboo topics?

3.1. DATA. The data were obtained from a local magazine called the Weekly Alibi. It is printed every week and it is freely available in different businesses and in the University of New Mexico area. The Weekly Alibi is also available online. The Weekly Alibi has different sections and one includes the Personal Ads for Dating, Friendship and ‘I saw you’, which is the missed connections section of the advertisements.

3.2. METHOD. A database of 100 ‘I saw you’ advertisements from the Albuquerque Weekly Alibi was compiled. We randomly selected at least two issues per month from 2009 until 2012 in paper-based form or online, and from each issue we randomly selected a maximum of four ads.

Each advertisement was analysed by the researchers for the presence of prefabs. In the selection process a co-referentiality check was done to ensure both researchers agreed on each prefab. A total of 148 prefabs were extracted from the advertisements, along with one to two sentences of the passages in which they were found to provide context.

The analysis was based on the prefab categories detailed below by Erman and Warren (2000). We calculated the use of prefabs by dividing the number of each type by the total number of 148 prefabs (see Table 2).

The coding categories in our analysis included: number of prefabs in the advertisement, type of prefabs (Erman & Warren 2000), and social functions of the prefabs (Wray & Perkins 2000).

The types of prefabs that we utilized were LEXICAL, GRAMMATICAL, and PRAGMATIC. Erman and Warren (2000:38–43) offer the following definitions of prefab types:

- (1) LEXICAL PREFABS: ‘semantic units that ... denote entities, properties, states, events, and situations of different kinds.’
- (2) GRAMMATICAL PREFABS: ‘intralinguistic text-forming items rather than units with extralinguistic reference.’
- (3) PRAGMATIC PREFABS: ‘functional in that they do not directly partake in the propositional prefabs in that they may occur outside the syntactic structure.’

Table 1 provides an example of Erman and Warren’s (2000) examples of these prefab types and examples of these types in our data.

Type of prefab	Erman & Warren (2000)	'I saw you' Ads
LEXICAL	Out of date, run off, permanent job, at the time	Out of practice, you must be taken, be mine
GRAMMATICAL	A few, a great deal, for instance, be going to, sort of, let us	Let me [have mah booty], had to run
PRAGMATIC	I'm afraid (to tell __), yeah, quite, right	I must say well, of course
REDUCIBLES	I'm, It's, Don't, They've, let's	You're, I'm, I'd, let's

TABLE 1. Types of prefabs.

After determining that the lexical prefab was the most frequent, we chose the five most frequent prefabricated sequences within our data and conducted a corpus analysis to determine if the distribution of our five most frequent would match the distribution found in different corpora. The corpora utilized were the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) (Davies 2008-), the British National Corpus (BNC) (Davies 2004-), and the Michigan Corpus of Academic Spoken English (MICASE) (Simpson et al. 2002).

The following are the most frequent prefab constructions: *let/let us*, *take + NP*, *make/made me/you + V*, *would love to + VP*, and *couldn't + VP*. For token constructions that varied in type use, e.g. *take me*, *take my*, each type was counted and divided by the total number of type use to get an average.

4. RESULTS. We found that the prefab types found in the Weekly Alibi pattern with the same distribution found in Erman & Warren 2000 (see Table 2). Lexical prefabs were used the most, grammatical prefabs the second most, and the least used were pragmatic prefabs.

Because lexical prefabs were used the most, we decided to mine for the five most frequent prefabs in our data and compare their constructions in the three major corpora previously mentioned (see results in Table 3). In the case of COCA comparison, the *let* construction was the second most frequent and *couldn't* the least.

In the instance of the MICASE comparison, the *would love to* construction was the least frequently used prefab and the *couldn't* construction was the second least frequent. The BNC corpus then seems to pattern the same frequency distribution of our most frequent constructions.

	Use of prefabs according to Erman and Warren (2000)			Alibi Data	
	Speech	Written text	Total	Written text	Total
LEXICAL	38.8%	71.5%	71.5%	127/148	85.8%
GRAMMATICAL	16.9%	20.5%	16.9%	18/148	12.2%
PRAGMATIC	2.4%	16.7%	Together 2.4%	3/148	2%
REDUCIBLES	9.2%	24%		N/A	N/A

TABLE 2. Distribution of prefab types.

	Let +me/us	Take +NP	Make	Would love to +VP	Couldn't +VP
Most Frequent Prefab/ Total Prefabs	7.4% (11/148)	6.7% (10/148)	6.1% (9/148)	4.7% (7/148)	3.3% (5/148)
Most Frequent Prefab/ Total Most Frequent	26.1% (11/42)	23.8% (10/42)	21.4% (9/42)	16.7% (7/42)	11.9% (5/42)
Most Frequent Prefab/ COCA 400 M (million words)	.000019% 773/400 M	.0000069% 275/400 M	.0000053% 214/400 M	.0000027% 109/400 M	.000022% 897/400 M
Most Frequent Prefab/ BNC 100 M (million words)	.00029% 2945/100 M	.000079% 795/100 M	.000053% 534/100 M	.000023% 237/100 M	.0000099% 99/100 M
Most Frequent Prefab/ MICASE 1.8 M (million words)	.0080% 1454/1.8 M	.0078% 1411/1.8 M	.0069% 1257/1.8 M	.00005% 9/1.8 M	.0016% 292/1.8 M

TABLE 3. Analysis of the five most frequent prefabs in Alibi data.

The following sentences are provided in order to gain a detailed sense of the use of our five most frequent prefabs.

- I'll hoist my Jolly Roger. Now *let me have mah booty!*
- Your amazing Bruce Lee physique *made my head spin.*
- Watched you biking down the street, *would love to get to know you*
- I winked at you at the stop light. Wanna *take me for a ride* sometime?
- I was there with my primo and he was laughing cuz I *couldn't take my eyes off you.*

5. DISCUSSION. The analysis above focuses on the prefab types and distribution of them; however, we must not forget to consider their function in communication. Advertisements such as those used in this study require participants to produce written communication efficiently in a small space in the publication, much in the same way speakers rely on formulaicity in conversations, which tend to have more time constraints than in formal writing. Furthermore, it is interesting that our five most frequent prefabricated sequences are also among the five most frequent in a major corpus, indicating that prefabricated language provides an avenue for conveying taboo messages to their imagined addressee. It appears that prefabs 'facilitate production and presumably the interpretation of utterances' (Erman & Warren 2000:50).

5.1. STRUCTURE AND DISTRIBUTION. Drawing on the work of Erman & Warren 2000, the genre of 'I saw you' written ads indicates that there is a pattern of distribution. The following pattern of distribution was found in the prefabs of the Weekly Alibi: first, the lexical prefabs, then grammatical, and last the pragmatic prefabs. Recall that lexical prefabs are 'semantic units that

... denote entities, properties, states, events, and situations of different kinds' (Erman & Warren 2000:38). In the context of the 'I saw you' advertisements, it makes sense that advertisers rely on language that refers to events or different situations in which they met or saw their intended addressee.

5.2. SOCIO-AFFECTIVE. The findings in this small-scale study indicate that the prefabricated language offers a way to mitigate the seemingly taboo nature of personal advertisements, which may be threatening to the people who wrote the advertisements. Freitas (2008:39) defined taboo as 'a number of restrictions that regulate some areas of social life, and that demand avoidance behavior and that can be a threat to the established social patterns.' As an alternative to using prefabricated language as an avoidance behavior, its use in an advertisement may tend to have stronger implications. Fleming and Lempert (2011) note that although social proscriptions to mitigate taboo language are meant to provide 'safe, respectful "distance"' to the object referred to, the effects may have a stronger force, especially when considering the intention of personal advertisements.

Regardless of whether prefabricated language is used to avoid directly mentioning or strongly implying one's desire for a potential partner, it is used as a means for physical and social survival, especially when managing interactions with a potential partner through the written advertisement. Referring back to Wray and Perkins (2000:14), who described the social functions for prefabricated language, it appears that the major function is to use 'language to satisfy an emotional and physical need.'

6. CONCLUSIONS. Social interaction can be performed utilizing formulaic language. The Weekly Alibi's personal advertisements reflected the social function already discovered by some studies on formulaic language and prefabs. The personal advertisements also mirrored the distribution of Erman and Warren's (2000) categories of prefabs. Prefabs are not only a way to reduce the working memory and cognitive load in speech; they are also a means to avoid emotional load.

According to Wray and Perkins (2000:15), adults have to frame their requests, petitions, etc. in a way that is more subtle than a simple and straightforward claim, due to 'the hierarchical relationships that exist between communicating adults.' In this sense, some of the people that post their advertisements of missed connections, using prefabs – familiar and immediately accessible language – could be softening their wishes to meet their physical or psychological needs.

The driving force behind the socio-interactive formulas is ensuring that the speaker gets what he/she wants and is perceived as an individual within the group (Wray & Perkins 2000:18). In a sense, prefabs are blocks of language that encompass metalinguistic functions. Prefabs help speakers to distance themselves with messages uttered through the conventionalization of the formulaic language. They also help social interaction through the conveyance of an individual or group identity, creating frameworks of social interpretation to maximize the likelihood of conveying the message, and being understood to avoid problematic interaction.

7. DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH. Socio-affective use of prefabricated language in personal advertisements deserves more study. Considering the socio-affective and socio-cultural approaches to interpreting language may contribute to the discussion on prefabricated language. Factors such as gender, for example, may very well affect the way prefabricated language is used as a distancing mechanism with such taboo topics that are inherent in personal advertisements.

Next, rather than simply relying on the researchers for interpretation, survey participants might be invited to do perception tasks on the effect of prefabricated language. Furthermore, the present study is small-scale and exploratory in nature and would benefit from an increase in the number of advertisements and prefabricated sequences for analysis. These considerations would avoid the shortcomings of two researchers' intuitions and we would also gain a more accurate sense of how language functions socially.

In the present study, we analysed the use of prefabricated language and its varying combinations. Another consideration is idiomatic formulaic sequences, which tend to be processed holistically due their inherent characteristics and their meanings that 'cannot be derived from the sum of the individual words' (Conklin & Schmitt 2008:80) in sequence. Bybee (2006) states that although idioms are metaphoric in nature, there is a fine line between idioms and prefabs, indicating that both types of expressions are mentally stored. Another idea for future research, then, might address the distinct use of idiomatic prefabs versus those that have more decomposability in personal advertisements.

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