

Formulaic Language in Spoken EFL Teaching

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Abstract: This paper discusses the role of formulaic language in the teaching of English as a foreign language, and in particular in the decoding of the spoken production of native speakers (NSs).

Key words: Formulaic language; Spoken English; Native speech; Tone language; Prosody; Speaking speed

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1 Nature of non-performance NS spoken English

Except in performance situations, such as broadcasts and formal recordings, NSs almost always speak in dialogues with one or more people. This is language as part of social interaction, which goes back to the dawn of humanity. In common with more highly developed animals, humans have an extremely developed sense of intonation and rhythm. New-born babies are accustomed to the rhythm and intonation patterns of their mother, and after a few weeks can already distinguish between their parents and others. Our love of music is also based entirely on tonality and rhythm.

Mehrabian has shown that in informal NS-NS communication 38% of the communication value of speech can be attributed to the way the words are spoken, rather than the choice of words, which accounts for only 7% of the total communication. This is in stark contrast to the effort which goes in to the teaching of

vocabulary and grammar in the average language class at all levels.

2 Tone languages

In her keynote speech to BAAL 2008, Alison Wray noted that all early languages were tone languages. Today the majority of surviving languages are still tonal, in particular Chinese, Vietnamese etc. In these languages tonality plays a major role in distinguishing one word from another, whereas in English the role of intonation is mainly in signalling speaker intention and in marking grammatical elements such as phrases.

There exists therefore a 'tonal gap' between tonal and non-tonal languages which presents difficulties for language learners in both directions. In particular, speakers of tonal languages have difficulty in mastering the use of intonation and stress patterns in spoken English, and as a result can sound dull, flat, and even boring to a NS listener.

3 Formulaic Language

We are born into a language community, we do not – except in the rarest of cases – invent words or phrases ourselves. Daily discourse is marked by phrases which occur with great frequency and which can be profitably studied in corpus linguistics. NS dialogues sound unnatural without these commonly used 'fixed phrases', and it can cost the learner much time and effort to incorporate them into his or her speech.

Phrases such as 'do you know what I mean' are not

to be taken literally ('are you able to understand the meaning of the words I am using?'). It is the intonation patterns used therefore which distinguish between the many possible interpretations: 'Do you agree with me?' 'Can you understand my point of view?' 'I am finished my turn and I would now like you to give your opinion.' etc.

In fact these formulaic phrases can be completely empty of lexical meaning and be used as discourse markers, or even in a bid to gain some time while the speaker thinks of another topic. Erman and Warren have noted that in informal dialogue formulaic phrases make up almost 60% of NS-NS speech.

4 Formulaic phrases and speed of delivery

Because of the frequency with which formulaic phrases are used, they are rarely highlighted or pronounced in idealised or citation form. If spoken with a marked prosody, their true emotional meaning might be made clear, but more frequently they are spoken in a rapid, blurred manner, so that other, more important elements of the dialogue can be highlighted.

This intentional use of blur and clarity in NS speech is what distinguishes the native speaker from even a proficient user of English who is not from a NS speech community.

5 Tonal and non-tonal rapid speech

The following spectrograms illustrate what happens in English and Chinese when the speaking speed is increased. Spoken at normal speed the spectrogram of the phrase: 'Ni shi wo de hao peng you' is as follows.

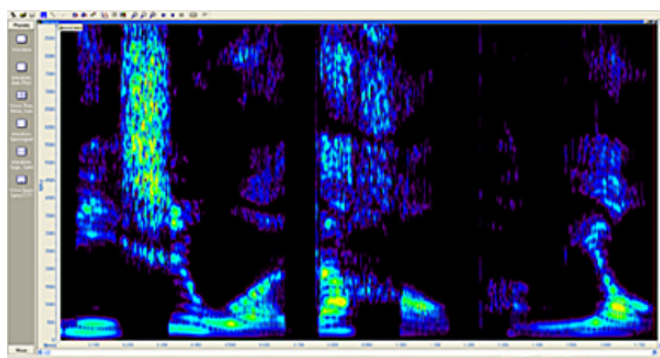


Figure 1. Ni shi wo de hao peng you - at normal speed

If the speaking speed is doubled, the spectrogram looks like this:

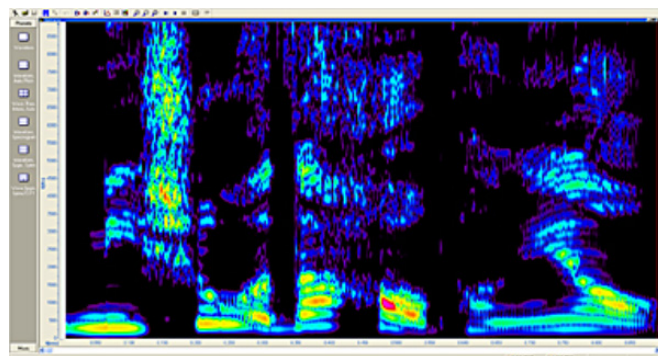


Figure 2. Ni shi wo de hao peng you - at double normal speed

Even a casual inspection reveals that the two utterances are almost identical. This is because in Chinese it is important to maintain the tonal integrity of the utterance.

By comparison, the English phrase 'come here', when spoken at double speed, results in a blur. Tonal integrity is not a major issue in NS speech production. It is much more important to distinguish between elements that the speaker wishes to highlight and other, 'filler' words and phrases.

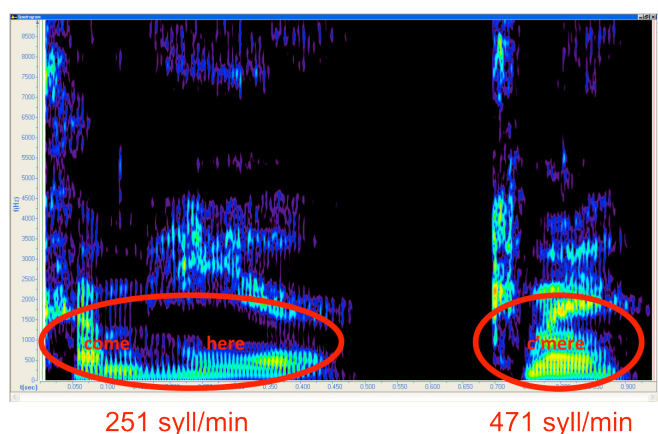



Figure 3. 'come here' spoken at normal and double speed

Spoken at a normal rate of 251 syllables per minute 'come here' is clear and in citation form. However, spoken at 471 syllables per minute it becomes a blur and sounds like 'c'mere'. This poses a problem for EFL learners when confronted with NSs in face-to-face or online interaction.

The comparison of a handwritten signature and the printed version of the person's name offers an exact analogy to the spectrogram examples. If the signature is written with sufficient speed, it is no longer legible. In order to be clear, the signature must be written more slowly – closer to 'citation' form.

John F. Smith = citation form
 John F. Smith = careful speech
 = speed blur

6 Implications for advanced EFL teaching

Corpus linguists such as McCarthy have argued strongly for the inclusion of a study of formulaic language in EFL teaching and in fact in the training of language teachers (personal exchange). Lawley *et al* have constructed a complete online course based on 330 such phrases. (Sounds Good, UNED 2020).

Cauldwell has published several courses which train EFL learners to cope with rapid NS speech. The problem is how to make this speech accessible?

7 The solution – slowdown

Using modern audio technology it is possible to slow down natural speech while still maintaining tonal integrity. Using this technology, if a phrase is played at 40% playback speed, the listener has 2.5 times the length of time to hear the phrase as it took the speaker to produce it.

This is analogous to training golf players how to hit a golf ball correctly by playing a slowed-down version of a perfect swing. The details of a professional swing can be studied in detail, even though in reality they happened too quickly for the eye to follow.

In order to enable learners to be aware of how NSs actually produce the common phrases which make up 60% of NS-NS speech, examples of the effects of rapid speech production should be included in course material of advanced learners and all trainee teachers of English (and other languages) as a foreign language.

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