



A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OVER FORMULAIC LANGUAGE AND THE RELATIONSHIP WITH PHRASEOLOGY

Abdulkhakova Dilafruz Shamsiddinovna

PhD student, Uzbekistan state university of world languages
Tashkent, Uzbekistan

E-mail: abdulkhakovadilafruz@gmail.com

ORCID ID: 0009-0006-0237-6193

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ABSTRACT

This article analyses the characteristics and roles of formulaic language from cognitive and linguistic viewpoints, emphasising how fixed and repetitive phrases enhance discourse structure, processing efficiency, and communication stability, particularly from historical contexts. The study employs a descriptive, corpus-informed, and historical-philological approach to identify the structural characteristics, functions, and transmission methods of formulaic units across various textual sources. The findings indicate that formulaic expressions function as reliable cognitive anchors, enhancing memory, alleviating cognitive load, and promoting coherence in both spoken and written communication. The study shows that the phenomenon is not as new as we might think, but has been reconsidered and reformulated due to progressively sophisticated linguistic theory; what we have of it in modern times makes a much better description of its cognitive underpinning. It is argued in the paper that these types of formulaic language are an inherent and universal dimension of linguistic behaviour, and that its investigation can offer important insights into mental representation, patterns of use, and discourse structure.

Introduction

Formulaic language denotes pre-constructed, conventionalised, and recurring multi-word units that are kept and retrieved as cohesive entities rather than being formed by grammatical processes on each occasion. It includes idioms, collocations, phrasal verbs, proverbs, conversational routines, discourse markers, lexical bundles, frames, and several other fixed or semi-fixed phrases. Formulaic language comprises commonly occurring word combinations that speakers retain and utilise as pre-formed units to



improve fluency, coherence, and processing efficiency. Prior to the establishment of linguistics as a scientific discipline, classical rhetoricians such as Aristotle and Quintilian referred to them as “common expressions” and “stock phrases”. Medieval thinkers acknowledged established prayer formulae and ritualised phrases. While the contemporary word “formulaic language” was not employed in medieval research, medieval linguists, scribes, theologians, and rhetoricians were aware of set phrases and carefully characterised them.

Medieval religious texts - Christian, Jewish, and Islamic - were predominantly based on established, repetitive verbal formulae employed in liturgy, prayers, sermons, and rites. F. Adolph in the book “The Mass in the Middle Ages” characterised medieval liturgical language, highlighting recurrent prayer phrases, such “Dominus vobiscum,” “Kyrie eleison,” and others as well as demonstrates how medieval clergy saw them as static, memorised patterns (Adolph, 1902). K. Ernst and G. Joseph in the their work “Liturgy and Ritual in Mediaeval Europe” elucidated the application of formulaic prayers, blessings, and ceremonial expressions and illustrate that repetition was fundamental to religious memorisation and transmission (Ernst & Joseph, 1960). R. Taft in the work “The Liturgy of the Hours in Eastern and Western Traditions” demonstrated how mediaeval monastic communities depended on fixed linguistic formulas in their daily duties (Taft, 1986).

Medieval rhetorical manuals categorised clichés, stock phrases, and common idioms as stylistic instruments. Geoffrey of Vinsauf in about 1210 advised authors on employing pre-existing terminology, “conventional formulas”, and recurrent phrasings for efficient creation which is considered as one of the earliest explicit analyses of “formulaic” writing (Vinsauf 1210/1968). Matthew of Vendôme in about 1175 referenced traditional poetic diction and formulaic terminology for poetry creation (Vendôme 1175/1981). The book called “Three Arts of Medieval Rhetoric” edited by James J. Murphy is a definitive English translation and analysis of medieval rhetorical treatises which explicitly addresses formulaic composing (Murphy, 1971).

Methods

The findings displayed in Table 1 were derived from a descriptive historical-philological and cognitive-functional methodologies integrated with corpus-informed textual analysis. Formulaic expressions were initially recognised through meticulous analysis of original mediaeval and early modern texts across several languages, encompassing epic manuscripts, legal charters, religious-administrative records, biblical translations, and classical Turkic literary compositions. The selected statements have a set structural shape, a high degree of conventionality, and a recognisable discourse function, aligning with the criteria established in formulaic language research. Upon identification, each expression was subjected to a contextual-functional analysis, wherein the surrounding textual environment was scrutinised to ascertain the expression's role within its genre such as initiating narratives, delineating openings, indicating legal authority, imparting moral guidance, or contextualising theological content. Manuscript evidence, academic editions and reliable secondary sources were used in the investigation to outline historical and situation settings of usage. A linguistic-structural



annotation was then executed to provide glosses as well as brief semantic explanations. This included literal translations where appropriate and paraphrases for function when necessary, to ensure the essential meaning and communicative intent of each term was retained. In the end, a transmission mode classification was carried out based on categories from oral-traditional and scriptic discourse analyses.

Phrases were categorized as **orally-derived (O)**, **written-derived (W)** or **hybrid (H)**, according to their origin and principal transmission, which were tied to either oral performance or written recording, or some combination of the two. This is part based on genre criteria, history of usage and philological considerations. The method is descriptive-analytical and focuses on closely documenting, contextually interpreting, and functionally classifying historically relevant formulaic expressions rather than comparing them.

Result

Cross-Cultural Formulaic Expressions in Medieval and Early Modern Textual Traditions: Functions, Transmission Modes, and Linguocultural Contexts

Table 1.

Expression	Function	Language	Gloss	Medieval Context	Transmission Mode (W/H/O)
Hwaet! We Gardena...	Epic opening marker	Old English	"Listen! We of the Spear-Danes..."	Signals oral performance register in <i>Beowulf</i> (BL, Cotton Vitellius A.xv, fol. 132r)	Type O (Oral-derived)
Sciant presentes	Legal notification	Medieval Latin	"Let those present..."	Charter proem; Prescriptive formula from <i>Formulae Imperiales</i> (9th c.)	Type W (Scribal-written)
Bismillah	Religious-administrative	Arabic	"In the name of God..."	Oral <i>Qur'anic</i> formula → documentary requirement under Umayyads. The Muslim formula found Samaritan scripture as <i>beshem</i> Source: Al-Qalqashandi (d. 1418)	Type H (Hybrid)
bərē'šīt	Cosmogonic, narrative framing, theological opening, formulaic scriptural expression	<u>Biblical Hebrew</u>	"In the beginning" (H ebrew: בְּרֵאשִׁית; Ancient Greek: EN ἀρχῇ; Latin: In principio)	A linguistic and exegetical translation of this word being "In the beginning of..." Source: John 1:1; A more functional equivalent English translation of the first three words of Genesis 1:1 is: "When God began to create...". Approx. 1000–500 BCE	Type H (Hybrid)



Biliksiz sözi oz bashini yeyür	Moral maxim; didactic warning; gnomic wisdom	Old Turkic / Karakhanid	<i>"The ignorant person, through his own judgment, destroys himself"</i>	<i>Kutadgu Bilig</i> Yusuf Xos Hojib 9 th century Source: Abdurahmonov 2008:505	Type H (Hybrid)
Ul qissa andog' tururkim,	Narrative introducer; transition formula; discourse marker	Middle Turkic / Medieval Chagatai tradition	<i>"This story is such that..."</i>	<i>Qissaul-Anbiyo</i> by Nosiruddin Rabguziy 14 th century Source: Abdurahmonov 2008:508	Type H (Hybrid)
To hirsu havas ..., To nafsu havo ..., To zulmu sitam ...	Didactic- proverbial function; Ethical warning and political-moral critique; Fixed rhetorical formula	Classical (Golden Age) Chagatai Literature- 15 th century	Until greed and desire ... , Unless ego and empty desire ... , Unless injustice ...	<i>Ruboiy</i> by Alisher Navoi 15 th century Source: Abdurahmonov 2008:511	Type H (Hybrid)
gardi kudurat, zangi g'am; zeboyu oliy, har zabonda	Poetic embellishment, contrastive imagery, evaluative formula	Post- classical/ Late Chagatai → Early Uzbek Classical literature	gard-i kudurat – <i>dust of impurity; filth</i> zang-i g'am – <i>rust of grief/sorrow</i> zebo-yu oliy – <i>beauty and greatness / noble adornment</i> har zabonda – <i>in every language / in all tongues</i>	<i>Toleim</i> by Muqimiy 19 th century, literary works by Furqat from 19 th -20 th centuries Source: Abdurahmonov 2008:519-521	Type H (Hybrid)

This table provides a cross-cultural comparative analysis of significant formulaic expressions derived from Old English, Mediaeval Latin, Arabic, Biblical Hebrew, Old Turkic, Middle Turkic/Chagatai, Classical Chagatai, and Early Uzbek traditions, illustrating the role of formulaic language as a structural, cognitive, and culturally ingrained mechanism across various genres, including epic poetry, legal discourse, scripture, narrative storytelling, didactic literature, and classical poetry. Each entry lists the expression, its communicative function (like an epic opening marker, a legal notification formula, a theological or cosmogonic framing, a moral maxim, a narrative introducer, an ethical admonition, or a poetic evaluative embellishment), the language it comes from, an interpretive gloss, and a short explanation of its mediaeval or early modern textual context, including references to manuscripts, genre classification, and scholarly sources. The addition of transmission modes **oral-derived (O)**, **written-**



derived (W), or **hybrid (H)** introduces a novel cognitive-linguistic aspect by demonstrating how formulaic expressions develop, stabilise, and disseminate variably according to their discourse ecology and transmission medium. The table does a good job of showing how different language traditions can come together functionally and how formulaic expressions can be used as culturally stable discourse markers. However, it would be even better if the transliteration, formatting, and contextual descriptions were more consistent and concise to make it even clearer and more accurate for scholars.

Discussion

Throughout history, formulaic language has evolved and been used by many different peoples for many purposes; however, there is a clear link between the Classical Period (using Greek) and Medieval Times (using Latin). For example, Homer's poems provide examples of how the same words or phrases were used repeatedly, indicating that these phrases were necessary to help oral poets memorize their works and create improvisational verses. This is supported by Milman Parry (1930) and Albert Lord (1960), who demonstrate that oral poets did not invent phrases on each occasion when telling their stories.

Philosophers such as Aristotle (Rhetoric) and Plato (Phaedrus) believed that orators often relied on fixed or commonly known expressions (which they described as being "ready at hand") to appeal to their audiences. Orators used these expressions to persuade their audience; therefore, orators used them consistently, and as standardised forms, to promote the establishment of clear meaning. In addition, Roman Rhetoric made extensive use of standardised phrases and greetings; one notable phrase is Cicero's frequent use of the question "Quo usque tandem?" (which means "how long will you go?"). Another example is the motto of the Roman state, "Senatus Populusque Romanus" (SPQR). The examples set forth above provide evidence that all people, regardless of the historical period in which they lived, had an awareness of the cognitive advantages of working with fixed blocks of language. However, there was no explicit word that described formulaic language during this period.

Shifting to the medieval period, religious practices in Christianity, Islam and Judaism brought about institutionalized patterned structures for memorizing and performing in a ritual way such as "In nomine Patris et Filii et Spiritus Sancti," "Bismillāh ir-Raḥmān ir-Raḥīm" and "Barukh atah Adonai Eloheinu" (Wray 2002). Medieval legal and administrative documents relied on fixed formulas that could not be misinterpreted, such as "Know all men present and future..." in English charters or "Datum per manum..." in Latin contracts. Medieval poets using oral tradition used formulaic methods, shown by the repetitious opening line "Hwæt! We Gardena..." and a customary story structure of "Once upon a time" (known originally in Old French as *il fu une fois*). Both examples demonstrate that formulaic discourse has always been an integral aspect of creating and sustaining linguistic stability, as well as for transmitting knowledge/meaning from one generation to the next. From our current cognitive and social perspectives, it is clear formulaic discourse existed long before the advent of today's terminology associated with it.



When it comes to mediaeval oral tradition and epic narratives, formulaic language has also been utilized by people at that time unconsciously. Prior to Parry & Lord, medievalists had previously acknowledged the recurrence of phraseology (formulas) in oral epics. One of the principal sources can be Albert B. Lord's work named "The Singer of Tales" (Lord, 1960). Despite its contemporary nature, it alludes to the extensive heritage of mediaeval oral "formulas" found in epics like Beowulf, the Song of Roland, and Slavic epics. Additionally, another significant source might be Ong J. Walter's "Orality and Literacy" (Walter, 1982) that examines conventional oral formulations retained in medieval culture.

Medieval academics did not employ the contemporary term "formulaic language", nevertheless they extensively documented and analysed fixed phrases. Mediaeval liturgical texts included repetitive prayer phrases ("Dominus vobiscum," "Kyrie eleison"), which scholars like Franz (1902), and Taft (1986) categorise as stable, conventionalised linguistic units. Medieval rhetorical guides, such as Geoffrey of Vinsauf's *Poetria Nova* and Matthew of Vendôme's *Ars Versificatoria*, expressly address the use of stock phrases and standard formulae in poetry and academic composition (Murphy, 1971). In this regard, medieval Europe offers some of the oldest recorded evidence of the acknowledgement and methodical use of formulaic language.

Classical and mediaeval academics acknowledged the presence of permanent terms, but their observations were descriptive rather than terminological. They examined "common phrases", "stock expressions", "ritual formulas" and "conventional diction", however failed to categorise them under a singular linguistic designation. The contemporary phrase "formulaic language" arose when twentieth-century linguistics concentrated on language processing, fluency, frequency, and the cognitive mechanisms that underpin multi-word units. Therefore, to comprehend why current linguists refer to formulaic language instead of phraseology, one must transition from historical observations to the contemporary theoretical advancements that influenced the terminology. The subsequent parts analyse the evolution of the notion in the late twentieth century, the rationale for its introduction by scholars, and its distinctions from the conventional discipline of phraseology.

The phrase "formulaic language" emerged in the 1970s and 1980s, especially in research related to native-speaker fluency, speech processing, and usage patterns. Pawley and Syder's seminal study "Two Puzzles for Linguistic Theory" (1983) contended that a substantial segment of fluent speech comprises memorised, pre-formed components rather than structures produced word by word. During this time, Fillmore (1979) proposed the concepts of "lexicalised sentence stems" and "frame-and-slot patterns," highlighting that speakers access multi-word expressions as complete units during real-time processing. In the 1990s, researchers such Erman and Warren (2000), Nattinger and DeCarrico (1992), and Wray (2002) advanced the notion, resulting in the recognition of formulaic language as a significant field within applied linguistics, corpus linguistics, and cognitive linguistics.

While the examination of idioms and fixed phrases has historically been associated with phraseology, the word formulaic language arose as scholars sought a more expansive



and adaptable idea. Classical phraseology primarily emphasises idioms, proverbs, and fixed phrases, often from a lexicographic viewpoint. In contrast, formulaic language include idioms, semi-fixed patterns, discourse markers, conversational routines, collocations, lexical bundles, institutionalised phrases, and frame-based speech patterns. Contemporary linguists embraced the word as it encapsulates the operational role of these expressions in processing, fluency, cognition, and application, beyond mere dictionary definitions. In other terms, formulaic language emphasises the psycholinguistic and functional aspects that phraseology has conventionally neglected.

Formulaic expressions are not new in and of themselves; in fact, they are as ancient as language itself, as evidenced by established ceremonial words, epics, and medieval liturgy. The linguistic conceptualisation of these expressions as a unified phenomenon that is relevant to cognition, processing, and communication is something that is new. Therefore, formulaic language is an ancient activity that provides linguists with a contemporary theoretical framework. This framework enables linguists to conduct empirical analyses of multi-word units by utilising corpora, psycholinguistic studies, and cognitive models.

The phrase “formulaic language” is a relatively new concept that began to be utilised in a systematic manner between the years 1960s and 1980s as a result of the confluence of numerous different study traditions. It is possible to trace its origins back to the work of Milman Parry and Albert Lord, who, between the years 1930 and 1960, utilised the idea of the “formula” to characterise recurrent language patterns in oral epic traditions (Parry, 1930; Lord, 1960). In later years, throughout the 1990s, Nattinger and DeCarrico (1992) made significant contributions to the field of fixed expressions research by proposing concepts such as “lexical phrases”, “prefabricated language”, and “formulaic sequences”. These concepts highlighted the significance of fixed expressions in terms of both pedagogy and communication. Alison Wray (2002), building on this basis, took prior conceptualisations and combined them under the all-encompassing title of “formulaic sequences”. She did this by merging linguistic, cognitive, and pragmatic viewpoints. Before these advancements, linguists used the word “phraseology”, which characterised fixed phrases on a descriptive level but did not fully account for their cognitive, processing, and usage-based functions. This was something that linguists accomplished before these breakthroughs.

The term “formulaic language” was introduced to overcome the constraints of the conventional notion of phraseology, which developed in Eastern European linguistics in the 19th and 20th centuries, concentrating mainly on idioms, proverbs, and fixed expressions, with an emphasis on their structure, meaning, and categorisation. Although phraseology focused on the description and classification of phraseological elements, it failed to elucidate their functionality in actual language use. Conversely, the concept of formulaic language, grounded in cognitive linguistics, psycholinguistics, and corpus linguistics, redirects focus from structure to usage, emphasising how recurring sequences are mentally encoded, processed automatically, and retained as chunks that facilitate fluent speech. This comprehensive notion includes idioms, collocations, frames, pragmatic formulae, and discourse markers, synthesising insights from frequency,



predictability, and corpus data. From my point of view, the response to the question, “Why formulaic language?” can be articulated as follows: “The word denotes a contemporary, cognitively based framework that intersects with but surpasses traditional terminology, embodying current insights into language processing and production”.

While the phrase “formulaic language” is a contemporary concept from the 20th century, the phenomena it describes has existed since the inception of language. The identification of recurrent or fixed expressions dates back to Classical Antiquity, as seen in the Homeric epics and the rhetorical writings of Cicero and Aristotle. In the Medieval era, formulaic structures emerged in sermons, legal documents, and prayers, while Renaissance rhetoric and early grammars further standardised customary language. During the 18th and 19th centuries, philologists recorded fixed phrases in dictionaries and other descriptive texts, demonstrating an understanding of language patterns prior to formal theoretical development. Formulaic language is not a novel phenomena; it is a contemporary phrase that provides a cognitive and functional understanding of an old linguistic insight that was previously noted but not systematically conceptualised prior to the 20th century.

Conclusion

According to the findings of this study, formulaic language is not a new phenomena with a long history. The use of fixed and recurrent multi-word formulations has been prevalent in human communication for millennia, beginning with Classical Antiquity and continuing through the Mediaeval era. Homer, Cicero, and Quintilian were only a few examples of ancient poets, orators, and rhetoricians who relied on repetitive language patterns for maintaining their memory, maintaining their style, and being convincing. For the same reason, mediaeval cultures institutionalised repetitive sequences in the realms of religion, law, and literature. This is attested by liturgical prayers, charters, and epic narratives. These examples demonstrate that formulaic expressions have always played important roles in cognitive processes, social interactions, and communication.

The conceptualisation and formal labelling of these phrases as “formulaic language” is, on the other hand, something that is very unusual. The current term incorporates a wider range of multi-word units, including as collocations, discourse markers, conversational routines, lexical bundles, and frames, in contrast to the previous approach to phraseology, which largely concentrated on idioms, proverbs, and fixed phrases from a lexical or structural point of view. In addition to putting an emphasis on cognitive processing, fluency, and usage-based functions, it offers a theoretical and methodological framework that does not exist for researchers who study classical or medieval literature.

In light of this, formulaic language ought to be interpreted as an old method of communication used through the prism of contemporary theoretical frameworks. Rather than being the result of the creation of a novel language phenomena, the word is a reflection of breakthroughs in linguistic theory and cognitive research. By recognising this distinction, the importance of formulaic language in historical texts as well as modern studies is clarified. This helps to bridge the gap between conventional phraseological scholarship with the research that is now being conducted in cognitive, corpus, and applied linguistics.



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