The psycholinguistic construct of formulaicity in second language learners: issues of conceptualisation and identification

Florence Myles and Caroline Cordier

University of Essex and Newcastle University

The purpose of the present paper is to provide a conceptual and methodological framework for the analysis of formulaic sequences (FS) in second language learners, with a particular focus on advanced learners. The term 'formulaic sequence' has been used with a multiplicity of meanings, including in the SLA literature, some overlapping but others not, and researchers have not always been clear in defining precisely what they are investigating, or in limiting the implicational domain of their findings to the type of formulaicity they have focused on. The first part of the paper will discuss various issues relating to the conceptualisation of formulaicity, the different definitions used by researchers depending on their particular agenda, and how these differences affect the study of FS in L2 learners. The discussion will focus on contrasting the linguistic or learner-external definition, i.e. what is formulaic in the language the learner is exposed to, such as conventional expressions or collocations, and the psycholinguistic or learner-internal definition, i.e. what is formulaic within an individual learner and therefore presents a processing advantage for that learner. The discussion will underline how essential it is to consider the specificity of L2 learners when investigating FS and not to make assumptions about L2 learners based on research on FS in native speakers. The second part of the paper will focus on the methodological consequences of adopting a learner-internal approach to FS, and will examine the challenges presented by the identification of psycholinguistic formulaicity in second language learners, especially at advanced levels, proposing an identification toolkit based on a hierarchical identification method.