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## **SENTENCE STEMS WITH CELEBRITY ENDORSEMENT MOVIE QUOTES IN THE LANGUAGE USER'S LEXICON**

**Abstract:** This contribution focuses on ways in which popular culture affects our everyday language use. The main purpose of the present analysis is to suggest that film and mass media have created special conditions for language learning and use that were quite inconceivable before. One change brought about by current technology is rather banal: it has made it possible to reach unprecedentedly vast numbers of people. Apart from this obvious fact, modern popular culture has created special contexts through which language users come across some common expressions. This has implications for how such expressions are then stored in people's lexical memories. Under current linguistic theorizing, people's memories are assumed to be roughly equivalent in the sense that one person's definition of a word can be expected to overlap with other people's definitions. However, the overlap is not perfect, given that one person's knowledge is derived from his or her private experiences and these

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The research presented in this paper was supported by a grant from Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Nível Superior CAPES 88887.892742/2023-00 and Grantový fond děkana PdF-UPOL 2023 454123661

are different for different people. On the other hand, expressions associated with popular movies are presented in ways that are identical to all audiences.

**Key words:** formulaic language, sentence stems, mass media, language acquisition

## INTRODUCTION

One rarely examined aspect of film is its contribution to everyday language in the form of movie quotes such as *May the force be with you* or *I'll be back*. Such lines enter most speakers' lexicons and in many cases they are used in everyday conversations, which makes them part of people's active vocabularies. It is interesting to note that movie quotes represent instances of formulaic language. Just like other formulaic expressions, they are sequences of words that are "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 grammar." (Wray, 2001: 9)

In the last three decades or so, there has been a growing appreciation of formulaic language as a key component of linguistic proficiency and creativity. A fluent speaker's solid command of a language is now believed (e.g. Dąbrowska, 2009) to result from knowing vast numbers of fixed expressions including collocations (such as *answer the phone*), non-transparent idiomatic phrases (*bite the bullet*), partially filled patterns (e.g. the time-away construction: *They danced and kissed the night away; Chloe napped the day away*), to entirely schematic constructions (e.g. the passive voice construction). Not only has it become obvious that the numbers of formulaic expressions in a language user's lexicon are vast, estimated to run in the hundreds of thousands (e.g. Jackendoff, 1997), but everyday natural use of language is primarily formulaic in nature (Sinclair, 2008). The new view of language use rejects the traditional conception of words as the main building blocks of sentences. Rather, it is now widely accepted (e.g. Wood, 2015; Sidtis, 2021) that sentences are for the most part made up of prefabricated sequences. We "speak by stitching together swatches of text that we have heard before" (Becker 1975: 60).

The formulaic mode of language use follows from a number of benefits that fixed expressions offer. Among the most important ones is that fixed expressions allow language users to communicate with a fluency that would otherwise be a major challenge if the speaker were to compile his or her utterances out of individual words. For example, common phrases like *sooner or later* or *better late than never* are typically uttered instantly, in less than a second, bypassing the limitations of short-term memory processing and lexical access (Wood, 2015: 21). This remarkable speed is owed to storage of formulaic expressions as single units, which can be accessed in the mental lexicon in one quick step, instead of looking up the component words separately. Additionally, such expressions have been previously

rehearsed, which further contributes to their automaticity (Bybee, 2010: 34). They also help speakers achieve better grammatical accuracy than in situations where they attempt their own lexical combinations (Arnon and Snider, 2010). Because formulaic sequences provide conditions for more accurate output, Dechert (1983) called them *islands of reliability*.

Sometimes formulaicity is taken to extremes. Fluency is achieved not only by stitching prefabricated phrases into sentences, but by reproducing entire sentences which are formulaic themselves. Each proficient speaker's mental lexicon contains examples of sentences such as *That's easier said than done* or *Do what I say*, which Pawley and Syder (1983) called "sentence stems" stored in memory as units "of clause length or longer whose grammatical form and lexical content is wholly or largely fixed" (p. 191). Just like other types of formulaic sequences, sentence stems have been found to play an outsized role in fluent language production, making it possible to plan and utter very long stretches of language that are not only fluent but also sound natural and native-like.

The large stock of lexicalized sentence stems includes movie quotes such as *I will make him an offer he can't refuse* or *Life is like a box of chocolates*. Such sequences are a component of linguistic proficiency in that they represent pieces of popular culture that most language users can be expected to be familiar with. As will be demonstrated further in this paper, special characteristics of movie quotes have implications for how they are learned and used.

## CREATIVITY

To name one more function of formulaic expressions, they have been shown to be the main factor behind proficient speakers' creative language use. This may seem paradoxical, as the existence of stock expressions appears to be the very antithesis of imaginative or innovative usage, as they bring to mind automatic regurgitation of memorized expressions. However, the potential for creativity becomes evident when fixed expressions are used in modified form. Perhaps the most obvious example of formulaic creativity is found in word play, which typically involves conveying a new meaning through the replacement of one or more words in a well-known phrase. For example, the saying *don't count your chickens before they hatch* served as the model for "Don't count your submarines before they are built," the title of a recent commentary article on the uncertainties surrounding a military defense program. The modification conveys the idea that it is premature to declare success in the early stages of planning a large-scale program that creating a submarine fleet is. This idea is expressed succinctly by allusion to the formulaic phrase associated with the very meaning of the folly of premature hopes.

A more general point to be made here is that while the very essence of creativity consists in novelty, it would be impossible without a well-established, memorized element to build on. Thus, it is a paradox of novelty that it is never really achieved by creating from scratch. It is only by referring to something memorized that the speaker "adds new nuances to conventional expressions, or gives a new twist to a well-worn cliché" (Taylor, 2012: 249).

### INSTITUTIONALIZATION

This potential for creativity is especially evident in the way people use movie quotes. Apart from ordinary rote repetition usage (where a movie line is simply reproduced verbatim), movie quotes also lend themselves to word play. Not only can they be used in contexts going beyond the films in which they originally appeared, but also in innovative forms such as *...an offer he/she/you can't resist/revoke/confuse/retract, etc.*

What motivates creative experimentation with movie quotes is their meaning. That is, when speakers modify a familiar movie quote, they do not just play with the form of the expression, but with its content. They express a new idea by alluding to the idea contained in a movie quote, which is often a complex concept. In the case of *The Godfather* line *I'll make him an offer he can't refuse*, the meaning being conveyed is that of a serious threat communicated with determination, resolve, and cold-blooded composure leaving the person no real choice. Thus, anyone playing with this movie quote can allude to the complex concept without having to describe it in detail. The meaning not only comes ready-made but can be expected to be familiar to most listeners. This allows the speaker to easily allude to the whole meaning or at least some of its components (e.g. determination). This is not to say that all the components have to be preserved in creative allusions. It is by all means possible to use the phrase without any serious intention of a threat (let alone a death threat), and instead mean it lightheartedly; the effect would then be likely to be humorous. However, it is interesting to note that the humor would in that case consist in the incongruence between the phrase's atmosphere of sinister, cold-blooded composure and whatever trivial offer the speaker is making. Thus, while apparently suspended the original semantic element of 'a death threat' is by no means irrelevant.

Of course, this is true of formulaic language in general. All stock expressions come with their dedicated semantic content. An important point to bear in mind is that the meaning of each formulaic expression is highly institutionalized. This means that while a fixed phrase can theoretically have a number of possible meanings, speakers stick to one specific interpretation and ignore any potential ambiguity (Bauer, 1983: 48). Institutionalization is quite indisputable in non-transparent idiomatic expressions such as *bite the bullet* mentioned above. Speakers conventionally agree on only one meaning 'to face a difficulty with courage and sacrifice'; the literal meaning is not entertained. But institutionalization also applies to

expressions that appear perfectly transparent. For example, *fish and chips* could theoretically mean any fish, cooked in any way (not only deep-fried), but English speakers would object to this phrase being used to refer to steam-boiled salmon or sushi. One consequence of institutionalization is that meanings of phrases are rarely fully predictable, even in the case of apparently transparent expressions. This has implications for learning, to which we turn next.

### USAGE-BASED LEARNING

An important tenet of recent accounts of language knowledge (e.g. Tomasello, 2003) is that language learning is usage-based. That is, all expressions in a language have to be learned by experience with actual usage found in the input (spoken or written). This happens in piecemeal fashion through multiple exposures to specific situations in which a given word is used. Referred to technically as “usage events”, such situations serve as models of use, revealing key details of a word’s meaning.

Learning by observation may seem like a banal assumption, but it represents a radical shift from earlier Chomskyan approaches, which downplayed the role of the input. What these earlier approaches overlooked is the challenge of discovering the diverse aspects of a word’s meaning and usage, which in most cases are not revealed in a single usage event: “additional encounters with the same word typically overlap in some ways with the earlier representation, strengthening those shared aspects, while also potentially adding contextual information that is unique to that particular experience” (Goldberg, 2019: 16).

To take a simple example, the simile *red as a beetroot* conveys more than a simple description of intense red; rather, it highlights the idea that the red color is due to embarrassment, anger, or some other strong emotion. This precise meaning may not be obvious from a one encounter alone. A single use could lead the learner to conclude a more general non-emotional concept of red. To discover the narrower meaning, the learner must note that the expression is consistently used only in descriptions of external manifestations of strong emotions and never in utterances like *?This car is red as a beetroot*. This phenomenon can also be seen in other languages; in Serbian the sentence *Ovaj automobil je crven kao cvekla* is only possible if intended humorously. Major cognitive authors (e.g. Ellis, 2002; Bybee, 2010) assume that learning through multiple exposures to the input is a rule rather than an exception for most expressions.

### TWO PATHS TO MEMORY RETENTION

There is some controversy surrounding the moment a new language form is recorded in memory. One unresolved issue has to do with the amount of attention necessary for a new

expression to be retained in the mental lexicon. Under Schmidt's (1990;1994) *Noticing Hypothesis*, in order for the input to become intake, the learner must devote to it fully conscious cognitive resources. What that means is that it is not enough to come across such a word while reading. Rather, the reader should ideally pause and focus on the spelling, reflect on its meaning and acknowledge that it represents an addition to their vocabulary. The rationale behind this heightened attention is that this way a new word receives more processing in the brain, ensuring its early consolidation. In the case of many words, people probably do benefit from a conscious approach to words to be acquired. This is probably true of most people's first encounters with the term *COVID*. The dramatic circumstances surrounding the outbreak of the epidemic made the new term salient enough to justify conscious focus.

However, it is quite beyond belief that language users pick up all new language forms this way. Many expressions are very unlikely to attract a person's conscious attention because they lack the inherent salience of words like *COVID*. This is especially true of formulaic expressions such as *black and white* (Szcześniak, to appear). Just like tens of thousands of other unassuming-looking phrases, *black and white* is a fixed expression listed in people's mental lexicons, as evidenced by the fact that its form cannot be altered: the alternative form <sup>?</sup>*white and black* sounds decidedly awkward to native speakers. In other languages, the order is also memorized as fixed. In Serbian, one can say *crno-bela fotografija* (lit. 'black-white photograph' with over 18,000 Google results), while <sup>?</sup>*belo-crna fotografija* is so unusual that its Google search receives only one hit. One reason speakers of Serbian must learn this particular phrase is that its meaning is not entirely predictable. While in many uses it is a mere description of color, it is also used in the sense of 'morally unambiguous or inflexible', as in *Njihova moralna stajališta su uvijek crno-bela*. ('Their moral stances are always black and white.') The same is true of many other phrases such as *more or less*, which in some languages follow the same English word order (e.g. *mais ou menos* in Portuguese), whereas in others they are reversed (*manje više* in Serbian, *mniej więcej* in Polish). In none of these languages can one freely rearrange the component words. Examples of otherwise ordinary expressions are legion: one can say *yes or no*, but not *\*no or yes* (conf. *da ili ne*, *\*ne ili da*). Proficient speakers know and adhere to their exact canonical word order. This suggests that despite their rather inconspicuous shape, most of such expressions must be learnable by incidental exposure, which does not require the learner's investment of conscious effort or resolution to learn. Few learners would even realize that the sequence *black and white* is a formulaic phrase that should be learned, so few would pause and reflect on its form or meaning. Instead, such phrases are picked up because they are encountered repeatedly in the same form. They are learned through a mechanism called "repetition detection," the brain's unconscious and automatic way of noticing patterns, which can be observed in situations such as learning to associate the end of a song with the first sounds of the next song on an

album we have heard many times.

In sum, there appear to be two paths to memory retention. One involves conscious attention which extends the time of processing a word undergoes. This path is taken by salient elements of the input that capture a person's perception. The other path is one of frequency. When an element of input does not attract considerable attention, its memory trace can be consolidated by being revisited frequently.

Which path is taken by movie quotes? Most of them are rarely inherently salient. It is not their wording that makes them memorable. Lines such as *I'll be back* or *You talking to me?* are not particularly imaginative or eloquent. In this respect, they resemble non-salient expressions such as *black and white* or *more or less* which need many encounters to be retained. And indeed, they do enjoy a degree of frequency because they are repeatedly encountered not only in their original scene in the movie, but also in trailers, movie reviews, in water-cooler conversations, in class discussions, or in college bull sessions.

#### **IDENTICAL USAGE EVENTS**

What makes these quotes memorable is the emotional charge of the scene they are nested in. In cognitive-linguistic terms, that scene represents a usage event, one that is quite special in that it is the same for all language users. While people learn most expressions through exposure to multiple usage events, each of which is different for different learners, lines such as *You had me at hello* are learned from identical input reproducible in the exact same form. It is true that not all people know all legendary lines and even those who are familiar with a given movie quote may not have seen the film, but it is fair to say that the numbers of people exposed to the scene in question are still considerable, which is quite unprecedented in human history. Film has made vocabulary usage events uniform for masses, whereas previously most expressions were learned more "privately" through usage events that were not reproducible. Further, today's electronic media make the availability of that input even more egalitarian. Famous scenes are available on YouTube where the quotes can be heard without having to watch the whole movie. For example, the *Casablanca* scene with the quote *Here's looking at you, kid* is a YouTube clip with 3.2 million views (as accessed in August 2023).

#### **DIFFERENCES BETWEEN COMMON FORMULAIC PHRASES AND MOVIE QUOTES**

Thus, one difference between movie quotes and other formulaic expressions has to do with how they are learned. Most formulaic expressions are learned on the basis of multiple exposures to specific situations of usage, each of which is slightly different from previous situations, so as a result, people do not share the same experiences. On the other hand, the

input is exactly the same for all people exposed to a movie quote. When audiences come across a soon-to-be-popular movie quote, they witness the same usage event, with the same characters set in the same scene, with all the accompanying stage details also identical for all. This makes movie quotes a unique kind of language items which people learn in the same way. They are quite a bit different from literary phrases that have their origins in theater plays or novels. Shakespearean phrases like *to be or not to be* or *strange bedfellows* do not enjoy the same level of uniformity, if anything because the scenes in which they are delivered differ slightly from performance to performance. By contrast, movie quotes are learned from a perfectly consistent and unchanging source.

While being sentence-length themselves, movie quotes also differ from other sentence-length sequences, such as those that Pawley (2007) calls “situation-bound expressions”. These are formulaic sentence-length expressions such as *I declare this (meeting, etc.) closed* or *If it's good enough for X, it's good enough for Y*. What makes these sequences special is that they are “tried and true ways of doing things, standard recipes for achieving social purposes” (p. 19). They are also memorized unitary chunks, so that when such utterances are produced, they are not composed by stringing individual words together, but rather by reading off the ready-made script. And they are recognized by other language users as having a specific communicative purpose typical for the situation. In this respect, movie quotes function in a similar way. To take a well-known example, the line *You had me at hello* conveys a love-at-first-sight kind of affection. The line is uttered in a *Jerry Maguire* scene, where Renee Zellweger's character Dorothy Boyd listens to the title character's (played by Tom Cruise) intense romantic speech about how he had discovered that she “completed him”, a realization that he feared may have occurred to him too late. She stops him with the words “Shut up, just shut up. You had me at hello.” Because people associate the line with the memorable scene, in their minds it is linked with the details of the situation, including what must have been a relief for both Dorothy (who had not expected Jerry would turn a corner) and for Jerry (who was not sure of his eventual redemption). Thus, this quote is a situation-bound expression. It can be used under similarly suspenseful circumstances of romantic deliverance, especially if preceded by high-tension uncertainty or dejection. However, this movie quote holds a special status in people's lexical memory that gives it a clear advantage over ordinary situation-bound expressions. While people's knowledge of expressions such as *I declare this [event] open / closed* results from witnessing many different situations, most people do not have specific recollections of situations in which they have heard them. Knowledge of such situation-bound lines is a fairly schematic amalgam sketch of the type of situation, abstracting away the details unique to each situation. (This tendency to form abstract memories out of specific episodes is common in situations such as locking a door, something we do so frequently that we eventually are no longer certain of concrete details. We do not remember specific situations, because in our memories they fuse



into a sketchy scenario. As a result, the question “did I lock the door?” may occur to us behind the wheel, often miles away from home because we do not know to a certainty whether the action took place in the last situation). Similarly, most ordinary formulaic expressions (such as *better late than never*) carry meanings that we have built by witnessing their appearances in many different usage events, but we no longer remember the specifics of the individual events themselves.

Movie quotes escape this problem of lossy memories. A movie scene serves as a model of use, which most speakers are familiar with. It is a situation of use that most speakers actually do remember, something that is possible to a remarkable type of memory to which we turn next.

### **FLASHBULB MEMORIES**

The strong emotional impact of movie quotes bears some resemblance with so-called flashbulb memories. These are people’s recollections of events such as President Kennedy’s assassination, 9/11, or any stirring situations that attract the observer’s attention and emotional involvement to such an extent that they become “seared into memory”. Flashbulb memories were first investigated by Brown and Kulik (1977), who argued that they are indelible traces formed following a single exposure. They found that people had surprisingly vivid memories of what they were doing the moment they heard the news of Kennedy’s death, even in the year of the publication of their paper, over a decade after the 1963 event. Brown and Kulik’s findings were replicated in numerous studies focusing on people’s memories of later events, including the crash of the Challenger Space Shuttle or Princess Diana’s death. While these studies did confirm that flashbulb memories feel very vivid, they also found that they were not always accurate. Also, later researchers questioned the idea that a single exposure was enough to lay down a strong trace in memory. They argued that what normally happens is that the dramatic developments are replayed in the days and weeks following the event itself. In the case of 9/11, for example, the footage of the airliners flying into the Twin Towers was broadcast around the clock on television news channels and people found themselves thinking and talking about these key moments for a long time afterwards. Thus, the dramatic nature of the events themselves combined with the rehearsal phase enhance the strength of the memories.

There is reason to believe that the mechanism may be the same in the case of movie quotes. Movie quotes encapsulate powerful emotions and these can resonate with audiences on a deep level. While the dramatic impact of movie scenes is unlikely to match the intensity of classic flashbulb memories such as those of 9/11, the viewer is rarely emotionally indifferent. After all, the point of successful storytelling is to elicit strong emotional reactions, whether or not the events depicted are true. Further, there is research to suggest that from the

psychological point of view, we approach fictional events as if they were real life situations. When we watch a movie, our mirror neurons activate, making it possible to imagine participating in the story, empathizing with the characters (e.g. Iacoboni, 2009), and ultimately suspending our awareness of the fictional nature of the events we are witnessing. It is this ability to immerse in the movie's world that makes it possible to intimately experience the emotions portrayed and associate them with the accompanying quote. For example, the sense of nostalgia and fondness of the airfield farewell scene in *Casablanca* is so vivid that in people's collective memory it functions as a backstory that is now inseparable from the wording of the line *Here's looking at you, kid*.

At first glance, movie quotes may not appear to be central to a person's identity or daily life. After all, no scene from which a memorable line originates is part of the audience's direct experience; no viewer directly participates in the drama of the *Casablanca* airfield scene. However, the reason why it is so natural to step in the characters' shoes is that the conversation combines several important experiences that viewers do know directly. Namely, the scene is a condensation of a bittersweet turmoil brought about by an inevitable farewell, of a sense of loss that neither party chooses willingly, and of a hint of affectionate consolation conveyed by gentle tone of Humphrey Bogart's voice. These component motifs are perfectly familiar experiences all packed in one powerful scene, which elevates them to a universal theme. In other words, the scene serves as a kind of model usage event for the phrase *Here's looking at you, kid* encapsulating a viscerally relatable experience. The line serves as a slogan for a special meaning which the viewer feels vindicated in knowing, a meaning now immortalized thanks to the actors' celebrity endorsement.

## CONCLUSIONS

Movie quotes are an example of formulaic phrases with which they share a number of important properties. First, they carry a fixed and recognizable meaning. Using the line *You had me at hello* makes it possible to express the intended sentiment without having to describe it in excessive detail. Just like other formulaic sequences, movie quotes are also characterized by uniformity in comprehension. Because the meaning is fixed, speakers and listeners adhere to it, which enhances precision of communication. Because they can be modified through word play, movie quotes can be used creatively to convey novel meanings, which are easily interpretable by allusion to the original wording.

These expressive functions of movie quotes are further maximized by the exceptionally uniform conditions under which they are learned. Unlike most other formulaic expressions (learned by multiple exposures to different usage situations), movie quotes are witnessed in their source scene in a movie. Such a scene is the same for all learners, a factor contributing to consistent, common usage and precision of expression. Finally, their strong

emotional resonance, cultural prominence (and the consequent frequency) can enhance their memorability, making movie quotes comparable to flashbulb memories in both their successful retention and recall when needed.

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## REČENIČNE OSNOVE ČUVENIH FILMSKIH REPLIKA U LEKSIKONU KORISNIKA JEZIKA

**Rezime:** Cilj ovog članka je da se ispitaju posledice sve većeg uticaja masovnih medija na način na koji ljudi uče formulaične izraze. U skladu s kognitivno-lingvističkim modelima jezičkog znanja, pretpostavlja se da je formulaični jezik jedna od glavnih komponenti jezičkog znanja, odgovorna za tečno izražavanje i fraze koje zvuče prirodno. Jedno od glavnih pitanja istraživanja jeste kako ljudi koriste input da razviju svoje mentalne reprezentacije formulaičnih izraza. Konkretno, kako izvorni govornici, u zavisnosti od svojih različitih jezičkih iskustava, na kraju dolaze do približno jednakih definicija značenja i upotrebe formulaičnih fraza? Jedna hipoteza koja se ovde postavlja je da bi masovni mediji mogli pomoći da input bude ujednačeniji za različite polaznike koji uče jezik.

**Ključne reči:** formulaični jezik, mediji, usvajanje jezika

Datum prijema: 11.9.2023.

Datum ispravki: 8.11.2023.

Datum odobrenja: 10.11.2023.