Academic Tenor and Formulaic Academic Phrases

12

Abstract

This chapter introduces the central role that formulaic academic phrases play not only in research papers (as is well known) but also due to their frequency and import as used in conference speech events of all types. Maintaining an academic tenor is a central part of marking one's membership within an academic discourse community, particularly at core events such as academic conferences. These often overlooked items need to be mastered by novice members of the community in order to participate and engage others fully.

As we noted earlier, at academic conferences, several differing streams of discourse typically occur. The first of these falls within the specific language domain, or field of discourse (e.g., medicine, aviation, tourism etc.) or even specialist sub-domains therein. These will be marked by the use of specialized terminology, abbreviations, ellipsis, and other 'insider talk,' often not known or used outside of immediate domain circles.

Another stream is that of language that is academic, but not specialist. Academics are expected to interact in a manner that is befitting of their academic stations, maintaining an academic tenor consistent with the norms of the discourse community. In this section, I will introduce and analyze some of the key factors of maintaining this academic tenor.

Some, not only laymen but also in-service professionals and even language teachers, tend to think of 'insider' language as basically consisting of the knowledge of single-item technical terms. When I was interviewing doctors at my own hospital about CP performance, I asked them how they had come to master the technical terms in their fields. Only one of the nine doctors interviewed said that she had acquired most specialist terms from memorizing lists while she was a medical student. Every other doctor interviewed mentioned how these terms became part of their active lexicons only when they were directly related to usage in their workplace. Some remarked how certain English technical-medical words had more or

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less become extensions of their mother tongue, incorporated into the L1 specialist lexicon.

Take, for example, the specialist items 'phthisis' and 'astigmatism.' These are not known to your average native speaker of English, and in fact, even some medical practitioners might not recognize them. However, if one is in the field of ophthalmology, even as a NNES, these words will seem rather commonplace—practitioners typically append them to non-English field discourses (without any explicit surrounding code-switching). In short, mastery of terminology comes quite naturally with necessity—with being actively engaged in a specialist field. What I am suggesting here is that such items need not be an ESP teaching focus or priority.

However, participating as a fully ensconsed member of an academic discourse community involves using a much wider range of academic discourse skills and conventions. Therefore, what *should* be a pedagogical and practical focus for young academics is the use of formulaic academic, set phrase, or multiword forms that mark one as a member of *any*, as opposed to *a particular*, academic discourse community.

Although, as we will see, formulaic academic phrases are prominent in any type of academic discourse, they are often undervalued as learning items among both language teachers and learners. Formulaic academic phrases consist primarily of flexible lexical phrases or chunks that mark reoccurring academic discourse across various disciplines. Such phrases appear frequently in both written *and* spoken academic texts. Hyland (2000) states that many academic discourse features have cross-disciplinary application, which holds true for CPs across various academic disciplines as well, in which certain formulaic academic phrases regularly and consistently occur.

In my observations, several formulaic academic phrases occasionally appeared in succession in longer texts.

One such example that I noted occurred at a medical conference poster session in which the host was explaining an aspect of the poster—related to the field of hematology—to a visitor. One part of the explanation was expressed as follows:

> *The most significant finding was the elevated level of carboxyhemoglobin, which excluded any other diagnoses.*

In this spoken text, the formulaic academic phrases are '*significant finding*', '*elevated level*', and '*excluded*' (or 'ruled out') '*any other diagnoses'*.

These expressions express a degree of detached formality, typical of academic discourse, and are characteristic of many spoken interactions during conferences settings. Even if we remove the specialist term 'carboxyhemoglobin' and change 'diagnoses' from the above text to a semantically equivalent term (such as 'results') that does not imply a medical field, the tenor remains academic, as we can see:

> *The most significant finding was the elevated level of X, which excluded/ruled out any other possibilities/results.*

Compare that with the tenor expressed when the formulaic academic phrases are replaced by 'general English' terms, which remove it from the field of academia and mark the type of everyday conversation that could be applied to any topic:

The most important thing we found was a lot of X, which meant that nothing else was possible.

Perhaps paradoxically, given the nomenclature, formulaic academic phrases can be anchored in single lexical items as well as phrases. For example a common single-word formulaic academic anchor that appeared regularly in CPs I observed was 'obtain,' ("*We managed to obtain three clear images*"), used in place of the general English 'get.'

Among the formulaic academic phrases connected to methods, materials, and procedures that I noted in scientific conference CPs, are those listed in Table 12.1. X and Y refer to variables that can be used flexibly in the environment of the phrase:

Table 12.1 Formulaic academic phrases connected to CP methods, materials, and procedures

In the initial trials, we investigated X.
In order to determine X, we carried out/conducted a Y.
We performed a comparative analysis.
To implement real-time detection…
To prevent X from occurring, …
By reducing the pressure on X, …
X is characteristic of Y
Considering/given the complex state of (the patient), …
The aim of the study was to…
To establish primary and secondary endpoints…
Key objectives of this analysis included…
These, then, are the baseline characteristics of X
Using a multivarietal analysis…
X here is defined as within a statistical range of…
Based on X, we assessed Y, using a standardized instrument
At the time of X, …
Z consists of X factors and Y factors
This is the most important factor in determining X
The visual disturbance was localized
Usually, we expose the tumor within a range of X
X was inserted to achieve a high-level density
Through composite analysis, …
We performed a comparative analysis
…induced by the distribution of Y
Considering/given the complex state of X…
According to a number of risk factors, …
This pie chart/graph/diagram demonstrates that…
The mechanism occurs as follows…

Table 12.2 Formulaic academic phrases connected to CP conclusions, discussions, and summaries (some of the items listed above were originally compiled in 国際学会のためのサバイバル英語術, Guest, 2014)

According to a number of risk factors, …
The mechanism occurs as follows…
There is a significant/slight correlation between X and Y
(Radiological) reports indicated X
Statistically significant outcomes included…
Our data also indicates the probability of X
Perhaps the most important/significant factor is X
Through this approach, X was successfully removed.
From this relationship, it can be estimated that…
They were equally distributed between X and Y/among all groups
We found that those who displayed X were associated with Y
Evidence suggests that there is an association between X and Y
The mechanism causing X was not clear
The prevalence of types A and B indicated…
Statistical analysis shows that there was a significant effect upon…
X confirmed that there was a significant correlation between X and Y
X proved to be the strongest associative factor
X was present in Y
These results suggest that there are some statistically significant differences which serve as evidence that…
We achieved a desirable outcome
Since this was a retrospective study, …
Our database also indicates the probability/likelihood of X
Essentially, there is no difference between these two groups in terms of outcomes
There is insufficient evidence to say X, so more experimentation is needed
X produced no statistically significant difference
Y is (not) a major determinant of X
…due to the prevalence of Y
A similar finding was observed in X
X is associated with Y, particularly when Z occurs
We found that X was inversely correlated to Y
These findings suggest (that) X
So X should be considered indispensable when carrying out Y in the future
The data generated by X indicates a high intake/incidence of Y
To prevent the recurrence of X, Y is effective
X inhibited the production of Y
More research is necessary to conclude X

(continued)

Table 12.2 (continued)

According to a number of risk factors, …
Long-/short-term/positive outcomes included…
If we follow-up long-term, the chances of recurrence…
Post-operative findings showed X
X remains unclear, so the future aim of this study is to investigate Y
A substantial number of Xs were located next to Y
The presence of X suggests Y

Examples of formulaic academic phrases connected to discussions, conclusions, and summaries that recurred in scientific CPs are included in Table 12.2:

From the examples noted above, we might conclude that formulaic academic phrases display the attributes listed below. They:

- Occupy a mid-point between 'general English' and specialist terminology
- Contain constituents that are flexible (i.e., *excluded vs. ruled out, possibilities vs. results*)
- Have cross-disciplinary academic application
- Are utilized in both written and spoken modes
- Hold long-term (intrinsic) value for academics/professionals
- Mark entry or membership into academic discourse community

Given these attributes, it would seem fair then to argue that formulaic academic phrases serve as building blocks of academic discourse. Since academic conferences are platforms for the dissemination of knowledge and ideas by means of employing the norms of academic discourse, and since speech events such as CPs and poster sessions represent a core element of conferencing, the mastery of formulaic academic phrases should therefore be treated as a central feature of any discussion about academic conference discourse.

However, again it is important to clearly distinguish formulaic academic phrases from more localized, specialist terminology. Formulaic academic phrases might appear to fall into the broader circle of 'general English' in that any proficient English speaker will grasp the meaning of the terms, but will still maintain an academic tenor (meaning that these terms would not usually be applied in informal or non-academic settings). A visual representation of the location of formulaic academic phrases within conference discourse is indicated in Fig. 12.1:

Another defining feature of formulaic academic phrases is the prevalence of abstract nouns. The following observed utterance serves as an exemplar of this quality:

> *The presence of anomalies in these findings may be a product of some degree of subjectivity in the calculations.*

The abstract nouns have been underlined above. This is an area that is ripe for further research, as the frequency with which they were noted suggests that novice presenters may well want to develop mastery of these items, particularly the ability

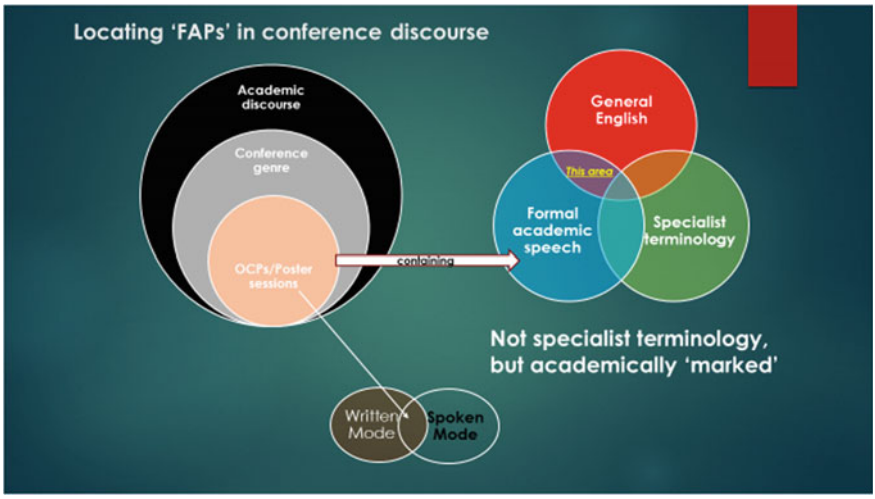

Fig. 12.1 Locating formulaic academic phrases (FAPs) in conference discourse

to retrieve and deploy them in real-time speech. These, too, appear to mark the speech forms of the academic discourse community.

It seems then that formulaic academic phrases occupy a central role in determining effective and fruitful participation and performance at academic conferences and, as a result, enable or enhance learner entry into a variety of professional/academic discourse communities—fostering a sense of 'belonging'—and therefore should be a focal point in any academic writing practice, CP training, or preparation for academic conferences.

Since formulaic academic phrases have immense value in identifying the speaker as a competent member of the professional or academic discourse community, novice academics should have a sufficient number of these recurring phrases securely embedded in their conference English repertoire for quick retrieval and should become not only familiar with, but proficient in using, most of the sample items listed earlier. This involves not merely understanding the dictionary meaning of each term within the phrase (the semantic value of the phrase is not a mere composite of its constituents), but rather to become sensitized as to how they are used as set constructions in the academic discourse community, particularly in RPs, CP slides, and in the accompanying CP spoken texts.

Productive usage of these forms should become instinctive to young academics, with NNESs in particular treating them as if they were new extensions of their L1. I suggest highlighting such items when reading academic journals and later consciously employing them not only in RPs, but also to the point of developing a level of comfort using them in their own CPs or other conference speech events. Knowing how to use these forms is perhaps *the* strongest indicator as to who belongs to a specific academic discourse community and who does not.

Questions and Exercises for Chapter 12

1. In the following (authentic) speech sample, taken from the field of ophthalmology, which terms/phrases/words represent (a) formulaic academic phrases, (b) specialist terminology, and (c) 'general' English?

   Myopic astigmatism is widely recognized as the most common form of non-strabismic diplopia and is marked by an inability to focus clearly. Visual acuity is subsequently reduced due to persistent interocular macularization.
2. What three qualities distinguish formulaic academic phrases from specialist terminology?
3. Take a short academic article from any specialist journal. Underline or otherwise highlight any formulaic academic phrases you encounter. Rank them on a scale of 1 to 5 based upon your familiarity with them ranging from *well-understood; often used' to 'not well-understood; not often used.*

References

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