

Peeping into myths and legends for chunks: an exploratory study¹

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Abstract

In this paper, we report on an exploratory study into the recurrence of formulaic sequences in unabridged versions of myths and legends from different parts of the world in English. We describe the steps taken to build up a small corpus of FSs typical of these narrative text types. Those sequences which are both frequent and pedagogically relevant for ESL primary school students will be subsequently selected and used to design teaching material for this group of young learners.

1. Introduction

Fictional narrative texts such as legends and myths share certain grammatical, lexical and stylistic features that make them unique. On these grounds, it is of prime importance that EFL primary school students deal with these particular features by exploring how ideas are developed and meaning is conveyed through the use of specific vocabulary inherent in these text types.

In this exploratory study, we set out to investigate the recurrence of formulaic sequences (FSs) in unabridged versions of myths and legends from different parts of the world in English. We report on a number of steps that were followed in order to build a small corpus of strings of words which are frequent in these narrative texts. From this corpus, a series of FSs were chosen on the basis of their frequency and pedagogical relevance for ESL primary school students. Such selection of chunks will lead to the design of teaching material for this group of young learners.

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2. Theoretical framework

Since the eighties there has been an important change in the way vocabulary is learnt and taught in a second and/or foreign language context. This paradigm shift was virtually triggered by Paul Meara's findings (1983) into this area; he categorically stated that detailed description of words is not as essential as a very much deeper understanding of how the Lexicon works. From that moment onwards, a great number of studies in the field of second and foreign language vocabulary has been taking place.

During the nineties, this growing interest into vocabulary learning and teaching led researchers to study spontaneous native speakers' corpora, which shed more light into lexical knowledge and its development in a second and foreign language. Their revealing insights have enabled linguists such as Sinclair (1991), Lewis (1993, 1997 & 2000), Hoey (2005), Meunier & Granger (2008) and Schmitt (2010), among others to widen the view of the Lexicon and assert that this inventory is made up of not only morphemes and words but also formulaic sequences. In other words, proficient native language users frequently employ relatively fixed strings of words in their production to convey specific meanings. This recurrent phenomenon is described as formulaic language and each individual instance is called a formulaic sequence, which according to Alison Wray (2002), is defined as:

“A sequence continuous or discontinuous, of words or other elements which is, or appears to be 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, 2002: 9)

In 2008, this researcher re-named these combinations as “morpheme equivalent units”, which she describes as “a word or word string, whether incomplete or including gaps for inserted variable items, that is processed like a morpheme, that is, without recourse to any form-meaning matching of any sub-parts it may have” (Wray, 2008). This new definition entails that FSs behave like morphemes and individual morphemes reveal a formulaic nature as well.

2.1 Why Formulaic Sequences

There are several compelling reasons why knowing FSs can turn out to be advantageous for EFL learners. According to some estimates, FSs represent 58% and 52% of everyday spoken and written discourse in English respectively (Erman & Warren, 2000). These combinations of words are also understood to decrease processing effort as they appear to be stored in long-term memory as single memorised units, and so they are believed to be accessed more quickly as chunks (Pawley & Syder, 1983). In addition, FSs are associated with fluent, idiomatic, communicative, native-like use of language (Schmitt, 2010). On these grounds, including them in

the EFL classroom implies a different approach to vocabulary teaching and learning since vocabulary is no longer interpreted as single words, but as multi-word units.

2.2 Similarities and Differences between Myths and Legends

Although myths and legends have a religious or sacred origin and they share the same narrative structure: an introduction, a problem and a solution, they differ in several aspects. In the case of legends, there is evidence that the characters are generally notable people from history and their actions existed in a recent historical past whereas myths are fictional stories about gods and super human beings who lived in an ancient past. Myths are always about heroic deeds and sometimes about evil-doing while legends explain natural phenomena through symbolism and metaphor. It is important to highlight that behind a legend and a myth there is one of the long-lasting traditions of humankind, that is to say, storytelling.

2.3 Myths and Legends in the EFL Classroom

The reasons behind this text-type selection are varied and relevant. Basically, legends and myths are narrative texts so they provide fertile ground for the development of EFL primary school students' cognitive skills as they foster their imagination and creativity, harness their higher-level thinking skills (Bloom, 1956) and increase their concentration span (Salinas, 2000). Through this type of narration, they can also strengthen and broaden their linguistic skills as these narrative texts create a suitable context for their increase of vocabulary proficiency, their exploration of other aspects of language, such as style, and the development of their productive and receptive skills. More importantly, the length of these narrative texts seems appropriate and convenient to introduce young EFL learners to the world of written and oral narration. They also promote certain moral values, such as tolerance, empathy, respect and appreciation for their own and different cultural roots, among others. In addition, the school curricula for primary schools in the provinces of Río Negro and Neuquén detail myths and legends as two of the target text types to be developed by teachers in their mother tongue.

3. Research aims

The aims of this preliminary study was to build a small corpus of FSs typical of myths and legends with the aim of selecting frequent and pedagogically relevant combinations to design teaching material for EFL primary school students.

4. Method

The steps taken to create this database of FSs recurrent in myths and legends as well as the criteria applied for the selection of frequent and pedagogically relevant FSs for the design of teaching material for EFL primary school students will be described in detail.

4.1 Procedure

Unabridged versions of myths and legends, either online or printed versions were analysed in order to trace possible instance of FSs, specifically actions and temporal phrases. The formulaic nature of each of these combinations was confirmed by checking their recurrence in different corpora such as COCA and BNC, Google Chrome and online versions of dictionaries. Partial findings of this search will be displayed in section 4. Subsequently, frequent FSs underwent two classification processes: firstly, they were grouped under the traditional headings that refer to the structural framework of these texts, i.e. setting, conflict and solution and secondly, they were shortlisted on the basis of specific criteria that will be detailed in the following section.

5. Findings

The process of selection of FSs in myths and legends will be described in this section. Partial findings of our search on Google Chrome and two extensive corpora: the BNC and COCA will be also detailed through tables that group the selected FSs on the basis of the conventional narrative features of myths and legends. Even if in the tables that will be displayed in the following sections, the frequency of FSs found in the BNC and COCA amounts to 0, this does not mean that the FS is not recurrent as a whole as shown in the Google searches.

5.1 Classification of FSs typical of myths and legends

A careful look at the selected FSs revealed that it was possible to classify them according to the structural elements underlying myths and legends, i.e. a setting, a conflict or problem and a solution. It was also interesting to see that the concepts of “order” and “chaos”, which prevail in these narrative texts, were also employed in this classification.

5.2 Selection Criteria of FSs in myths and legends

On closer examination, it was agreed that shortlisting these units of meaning on the basis of a set of particular criteria was convenient and practical. Their high frequency and usefulness in the process of reading and writing this type of texts in the EFL classroom were adopted as significant criteria. Their pedagogical relevance in terms of the age and proficiency level of these EFL learners was also taken into account. The final criterion established the selection of actions that

characters typically perform in myths and legends. The most relevant findings will be discussed in the following sections.

5.2.1 FSs in the setting

Table 1 compiles three indefinite temporal phrases (*long ago and far away*, *in the beginning* and *once upon a time*) plus a classic introductory phrase (*There was once*) in these two narrative texts. As table 1 shows, the number of entries after browsing the Internet and consulting the BNC and COCA confirms their ubiquity in the English language.

FSs	Google	BNC	COCA
<i>There was once</i>	45,600,000	41	168
<i>Long ago and far away</i>	768,000	7	38
<i>In the beginning</i>	449,000,000	0	4,186
<i>Once upon a time</i>	90,300,000	156	1,404

Table 1. Record of FSs in the setting

5.2.2 FSs in the Conflict

The FSs contained in table 2 describe actions which characters in legends and myths generally perform while they try to handle a conflict. It is also interesting to mention that these FSs are made up of verbs which primary school students are likely to be already familiar with (*make, have, run, think, watch* and *cry*), which can ease their processing and actual use of these units of meaning in the EFL classroom. Additionally, Lewis (2009) asserts that “word sequences are shown to have preferences for positions and grammatical functions in clauses and phrases but also for the type of verb, tense and active/passive voice.” On these grounds, the simple past form of these combinations have been preserved as this is the tense that is typically employed in narrative texts. In fact, these chunks in the past can act as “islands of accuracy” (Lindstromberg & Boers, 2008) as they can help learners increase their linguistic accuracy. It should be added that although a search in the BNC and COCA in the cases of *watched in secret*, *cried in pain* and *made a surprise attack* has yielded poor or no results, their recurrence can be confirmed by the large number of entries retrieved from Google and registered in table 2.

<i>FSs</i>	<i>Google</i>	<i>BNC</i>	<i>COCA</i>
<i>made (his) way back to</i>	75,100,000	19	203
<i>had an idea</i>	687,000,000	103	608
<i>ran back to</i>	2,700,000,000	49	324
<i>thought for a moment</i>	7,520,000	0	594
<i>changed (himself) into</i>	877,000,000	1	11
<i>watched in secret</i>	32,500	0	0
<i>cried in pain</i>	225,000	0	7
<i>made a surprise attack</i>	70,100	0	2

Table 2. Record of FSs in the conflict

5.2.3 FSs in the Solution

The solution to the challenge characters face in a myth or legend can be realised through the FSs that have been drawn up in table 3. In this case, five FSs depicting actions in the simple past and whose individual components are probably part of EFL primary school students' vocabulary stock (*returned, saved, lived, took* and *day*) and one temporal phrase signalling a turning point in the myth or legend have been selected. Table 3 specifically reveals the high frequency of the target FSs except for *was saved from death* (probably the passive voice form limited this search) and *took (me) home* which, despite the limited or non-existent number of retrievals on the BNC and COCA, have proved to be recurrent on Google mainly because of the comprehensive nature of this database in contrast with the other two corpora.

<i>FSs</i>	<i>Google</i>	<i>BNC</i>	<i>COCA</i>
<i>returned home</i>	16,900,000	305	2,147
<i>was saved from death</i>	100,000	1	1
<i>took (me) home</i>	1,210,000,000	9	0
<i>fell in love</i>	88,400,000	245	3,179
<i>lived happily ever after</i>	231,000,000	14	61
<i>From that day on</i>	8,310,000,000	72	157

Table 3. Record of FSs in the solution

5.2.4 Chaos and FSs

Table 4 lists a set of FSs that can be related to a chaotic situation, which is so popular in myths in legends. Precisely, while the first two options in this table signal ensuing chaos, the other two describe a scene of disorder and confusion in this type of texts. Additionally, except for *had a problem*, the processing and actual production of the rest of the FSs may pose some difficulty to EFL primary school students due to their linguistic complexity but their utility and relevance in retelling a myth or a legend together with the fact that their syntactic properties have been preserved may be worth the effort. It is also important to highlight the fact that two self-contained ideas have been found to be recurrent on Google even if the searches on the BNC and COCA yielded poor or no results respectively.

<i>FSs</i>	<i>Google</i>	<i>BNC</i>	<i>COCA</i>
<i>Everything was about to change.</i>	2,330,000	0	12
<i>There was something not quite right.</i>	81,800	3	13
<i>had a problem</i>	6,820,000	109	1,274
<i>Out of nowhere appeared</i>	11,500	0	1

Table 4. Record of FSs signalling chaos

5.2.5 Order and FSs

The FSs compiled in Table 5 can bring order out of chaos in a myth or legend. Specifically, they denote actions which characters usually perform in these narrative texts and they are all framed in the past. With respect to this last feature, it should be noted that the past perfect form of the FS may not be a teaching point in the EFL primary school context but conveying meaning can become a priority in this classroom irrespective of the linguistic difficulty this particular tense may present young L2 learners with. It can be added that the selected FSs are all frequent on the databases consulted, which confirms their formulaicity in English.

<i>FSs</i>	<i>Google</i>	<i>BNC</i>	<i>COCA</i>
<i>had made it</i>	28,300,000	4	1,086
<i>lived happily ever after</i>	231,000,000	14	61
<i>became friends</i>	543,000,000	50	560
<i>was crowned (king) of</i>	46,600,000	11	8

Table 5. Record of FSs signalling order

6. Results

The insights gained after the construction of this small corpus of FSs typical of legends and myths are varied and significant. Initially, it can be affirmed that FSs are ubiquitous in these narrative texts as shown by the number of retrievals obtained from Google and the BNC and COCA. A tentative classification of these units of meaning based on the structural framework of this type of texts can be made. It is also possible to define criteria to shortlist these units of meaning according to their frequency, usefulness for a group of young EFL learners as well as their pedagogical relevance in terms of the age and proficiency level of these learners. This last criterion also implies the deliberate selection of longer stretches of language composed of vocabulary items that these learners are already in contact with and whose syntactic preferences have been preserved. On these grounds, it can be concluded that a) young EFL learners who are reading and/or writing their own myths and legends can profit from a more holistically oriented approach to learning vocabulary; b) they can direct all their attention to meaning while they cling to these “zones of safety” (Boers et al., 2006) as the grammatical uniqueness of these combinations, especially the use of past tenses in the case of the selected FSs is usually encoded in them c) EFL teachers can benefit from the construction of a small “pedagogic corpus” (Willis, 2003) made up of legends and myths used in the classroom as teaching material and the design of specific criteria such as the one outlined in this exploratory study to help them decide which FSs to teach and how to do this job successfully.

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