From formulas to constructions: the case of Arabic

Formulas and constructions within Construction Grammar have often been described as distinct kinds of structures, with clearly different defining features: constructions are regarded as open and related by a thick network of motivated relations (Goldberg 1995), while formulas are a stock of ready-made forms, directly retrieved in the speaker’s working memory (Wray 2002). On the other hand, oral traditional studies, since Milman Parry’s seminal work on the Homeric Poems (papers from the ’20s and early ’30s posthumously gathered in Parry 1971), have shown that formulaic language is a constituent element of the poetic fabric in most oral poetic productions.

Work by Monroe 1972 and Zwettler 1978 has convincingly shown that the pre-Islamic corpus of Arabic poetry is formulaic to a relevant degree, and that the text of the Koran is significantly close, from a linguistic point of view, to that corpus. Since Classical Arabic [ClA], the historical antecedent of Modern Standard Arabic [MSA], is exactly a language reconstructed from this selected, close textual corpus, centred along the Koran and pre-Islamic poetry, it can be assumed that ClA inherited important formulaic features from its models, which are consistently missing from spoken Arabic variants; these features range from text chunks to morphological and syntactic patterns (including redundant case affixes, and syntactically determined partial agreement: see Lancioni forthc. for a discussion).

The general consequence of the hypothesis presented is that formulaicity in written languages can be strongly reinforced by the model of literary varieties, even long after the original textual constraints disappeared. Possible extension of the model to other linguistic domain include, among others, Classical Greek (where a prototypical formulaic model can be found in Homeric poems), Biblical Hebrew and Sanskrit.

A second important consequence is that Construction Grammar may be able to explain diachronic change in a more plausible way than other formal models are able to do: in the case of Arabic, a gradual process coinage → formula → construction → expansion can be reconstructed, which is able to explain how some significant features of the language evolved across time through grammaticalization of originally formulaic features. As a by-result, a continuum from coinages through formulas to constructions is proposed, against some widespread assumptions within Construction Grammar (e.g. Kay 2002).

References

Keywords: Arabic, diachronic change, formulas, general session