AN ANALYSIS OF FIXED EXPRESSIONS IN TED TALKS
(focused on Brené Brown's "The Power of Vulnerability")

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Abstract. This research conducts a detailed exploration of fixed expressions used in Brené Brown's renowned TED Talk, "The Power of Vulnerability." Utilizing modern theories of formulaic language and discourse analysis, the study identifies three primary functions of these expressions: aiding cognition, fostering audience connection, and enhancing rhetorical impact.

The analysis highlights how phrases like "here's the thing" and "you know" help organize ideas while creating a sense of natural conversation. These insights shed light on the interplay between cognitive efficiency and perceived authenticity in public speaking.

Keywords: fixed expressions, discourse markers, TED Talks, public speaking, formulaic language, cognitive load, audience engagement, Brené Brown, performed authenticity, spoken discourse.

АНАЛИЗ УСТОЙЧИВЫХ ВЫРАЖЕНИЙ В ВЫСТУПЛЕНИЯХ TED
(на примере доклада Брене Браун «Сила уязвимости»)

Аннотация. Данное исследование представляет собой детальный анализ устойчивых выражений, используемых в знаменитом выступлении Брене Браун на TED Talks под названием «Сила уязвимости». Используя современные теории формульной речи и дискурс-анализа, исследование выявляет три основные функции этих выражений: облегчение когнитивной обработки информации, установление межличностных связей с аудиторией и усиление риторического воздействия. Анализ демонстрирует, как такие фразы, как «вот в чем дело» и «понимаете», помогают структурировать сложные идеи, создавая при этом эффект естественной беседы. Полученные результаты проливают свет на взаимосвязь между когнитивной эффективностью и воспринимаемой аутентичностью в публичных выступлениях.

Ключевые слова: устойчивые выражения, дискурсивные маркеры, TED Talks, ораторское искусство, формульная речь, когнитивная нагрузка, вовлечение аудитории, Брене Браун, исполняемая аутентичность, устный дискурс.

Introduction

The study is rooted in three key theoretical frameworks that explain the role of fixed expressions in prefabricated speeches.

1. **Psycholinguistic Processing** [1]

- Proposes that fixed expressions are cognitively stored and retrieved as holistic units rather than assembled word-by-word during speech production.

- This holistic processing reduces cognitive load, enabling speakers to allocate attention to higher-order concerns such as emotional delivery and audience engagement while maintaining syntactic fluency.

2. **Discourse Coherence** [2]

• Classifies linguistic markers into three functional dimensions:

Ideational: Organizes information structure (e.g., topic transitions)

Interpersonal: Manages speaker-audience dynamics (e.g., rapport-building phrases)

Participation framework: Reflects real-time thought processes (e.g., self-repair markers)

• Provides a systematic taxonomy for analyzing how fixed expressions operate across different discourse levels.

3. **Performed Authenticity** [3]

• Examines the strategic incorporation of spontaneous-seeming elements into scripted oratory to enhance persuasiveness.

• Explains the paradoxical effectiveness of rehearsed linguistic features (e.g., conversational hedges like "*I mean*") in creating perceptions of genuineness.

• Highlights the tension between preparation and naturalness in high-stakes public speaking contexts.

This study addresses the following questions:

1. What are the predominant functions of fixed expressions in this monologic format?

2. How do these functions align with theories of cognition and audience engagement?

3. What rhetorical benefits arise from repeating specific fixed expressions?

Methodology

Brené Brown's 2010 TED Talk was selected for analysis due to its widespread influence (over sixty million views), her academic background combined with a conversational style, and the high frequency of fixed expressions compared to other TED Talks.

The research followed a two-step process:

1. Identification: All multiword phrases meeting Wray's (2002) criteria for formulaicity were annotated. These included conventional phrases of two or more words appearing at least three times in the transcript.

2. Classification: Using Schiffrin's (1987) framework, each expression was categorized by its primary function, with attention to patterns and positioning.

Results and Analysis

Structural Fixed Expressions

Structural fixed expressions, making up 38% of the dataset, served as organizational tools in Brown's talk. These phrases divided the discourse into digestible segments and highlighted relationships between ideas. The most frequent marker, "*here's the thing*" (eleven occurrences), introduced key points. For example, at 03:55, it preceded her main argument: "*Here's the thing I learned: vulnerability is the core of shame and fear...*" Enumeration phrases like "*three things I know*" (five occurrences) provided clear frameworks

Interpersonal Fixed Expressions

Interpersonal expressions, accounting for 45% of the data, strengthened the speaker-audience bond. The phrase "*you know*" (twenty-eight occurrences) acted as a hedge and a tool for shared understanding. Notably, Brown used interactive markers like "*raise your hand if*" (three times) to simulate dialogue. At 12:45, this phrase engaged the audience: "*Raise your hand if you've ever...*" Such techniques reflect Goffman's (1981) idea of footing shifts in communication [4].

Cognitive Fixed Expressions

Cognitive expressions (17% of the dataset) revealed Brown's thought processes. "*I mean*" (nineteen occurrences) served functions ranging from self-correction to emphasis. For instance, at 08:40, she refined a statement: "*Vulnerability is not weakness - I mean, that definition became very dangerous for me in the research.*"Phrases like "*it hit me*" (four occurrences) dramatized moments of realization, aligning with Chafe's (1994) theory of consciousness in speech [5]. At 13:22, Brown shared: "*And it hit me that vulnerability is not about winning or losing...*"

Discussion

The findings support Wray's (2008) dual-process model, showing how speakers use prefabricated phrases to manage information and audience engagement simultaneously. The study also extends Schiffrin's coherence model by demonstrating how fixed expressions function in monologic settings, serving as auditory guides for listeners. Brown's success lies in her ability to balance scripted content with perceived spontaneity. For public speaking training, teaching fixed expressions as rhetorical tools can be highly effective. For example, the "*three things*" pattern offers a versatile structure for argumentation. In language learning, practicing phrases like "*here's what I learned*" can help learners sound more natural.

Conclusion

This study reveals the multifaceted role of fixed expressions in TED Talks as cognitive aids, interpersonal connectors, and rhetorical enhancers. The perceived spontaneity in Brown's talk stems from deliberate linguistic choices, particularly the strategic repetition of formulaic phrases. Future research could explore whether these patterns apply to other TED speakers or compare them with different public speaking genres to uncover how context shapes formulaic language use.

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