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## *An Interview with Professor Alison Wray*

Interview by: *Karim Sadeghi*



### **Background**

*Prof. Alison Wray has a BA and D.Phil in linguistics from the University of York and had a 3 year postdoctoral in the Music Department of the same university. After working as a linguistics lecturer at what is now York St John University in York, she became Assistant Director of the Wales Applied Language Research Unit, Swansea University. In 1999 she was made a senior research fellow at Cardiff University, and subsequently a Reader, Professor and Research Professor. She been Director of Research for the School's of English Communication and Philosophy since 2004. What follows is an interview with Alison Wray (AW) conducted by Karim Sadeghi (KS).*

*KS: Thank you very much Prof. Wray for so kindly accepting my invitation to take part in this interview despite your very busy schedule. We very much wished to have a paper contribution on idiomaticity in this Special Issue of IJLTR since this is one of your expertise areas; however, your very tight schedule didn't afford this opportunity for our readers.*

AW: Yes, I'm sad I couldn't provide a paper. It was just the timing. There is a natural rhythm to research, and we need to work with it. Sometimes we are in the middle of a 'finding out' phase, when we read a lot, and collect data. Next, we move into an analytical phase, when we are working with what we have found out, to come to new conclusions about a phenomenon. That may be answers to review questions we have taken to our reading of the published literature, answers to research questions we have composed for our empirical research, or new ideas about how something works, such as a theory of how formulaic language is memorized, for example. And then we move into a writing phase. We can't get into that phase unless we have gone through the other two. When you asked me about contributing a paper, I was not in a position to move into the writing phase for any research I had done that was relevant to this issue. It was just bad timing, I'm afraid.

*I am happy that we still have the opportunity to learn from you in the form of an interview. As usual, my first question will be about your academic life. Could you please introduce yourself, highlighting the turning points in your educational and professional life? Our readers would be interested to know, for example, how it is possible to do a PhD immediately after a BA without having done an MA, as was in your case.*

AW: When I was at school, I wanted to be a professional singer of classical music. However, for various reasons, it was not possible to study music as an option at school, and instead I chose to study Russian. The teacher happened to be doing a Masters in Comparative Philology at the time, and she was very excited about what she was learning. Her enthusiasm was contagious, and I became deeply fascinated by language. I got a place to study Linguistics with German and Hindi at the University of York (UK) and loved every minute of it. After graduating, and doing a year of voluntary service, I returned to York to do a doctorate. You're right that I did not get an MA on my way to my D.Phil. In those days it was not a requirement. However, I was actually registered for a Masters by Research in my first year, and then was able to upgrade to D.Phil without completing the Masters.

*KS: I understand that your doctorate was in psycholinguistics, and that you then did a post-doc in music, after which you were a linguistics lecturer, and then a singer, before returning to university life. Could you explain whether you see these as shifts in your thinking or academic/professional life or whether you see these as interconnected? In particular could you elaborate on how related you see language and music?*

AW: I have always kept a place for singing in my life, and that has meant that I used opportunities to combine linguistics and music where possible. One of the most important ideas in my D.Phil thesis on the hemispheric specialization for language was inspired by a conversation with a singer, for example. Making connections between ideas in different domains has always been something I enjoy and find stimulating. My three-year post-doc in the Music Department at the University of York was actually a linguistics project. I was researching how classical singers (opera, art song, etc) manage to sound natively when performing in languages they don't know. What are they doing,

and could these techniques be of use in ordinary L2 teaching? I also did a lot of research on the reconstruction of pronunciation of English, French and Latin for performances of music from earlier centuries, and subsequently acted as an advisor for recordings, broadcasts and performances. As the post-doc finished, I was lucky to get a lectureship at what is now called York St John University, and it was there that I learned my craft as a teaching academic. I had extremely good colleagues and, indeed, it remains to this day an outstanding place to study linguistics. But the call of music was still there. I was by then doing a lot of freelance solo work around the UK, and I was keen to see if I could develop a career in music. So I changed my lecturing contract to part time, and spent the rest of my time working as a singer. I did that for four or five years, before deciding that, overall, I had more chance of success as an academic – which I think was a good decision. It hasn't stopped me singing, though of course it has reduced the amount I can do.

As for the relationship between language and music, it's a question I'm asked a lot. For example, are musicians better linguists because they have a good ear, or because they are good at memorising? Well, I guess they may well be, but there is so much more to learning a language than that. What may also help a musician is that they have confidence about making a sound in front of other people and they are used to making mistakes! Also, through my work on Alzheimer's disease I have come to understand that multitasking makes the brain resilient to damage – and multitasking is central to using different languages, and also to making music. In my view, all children should be given every opportunity to learn musical instruments and to learn languages, both for their intrinsic value and because they are good for the brain across the lifetime. Unfortunately, in the UK neither are as common in schools as they were and that is a huge problem for the future.

*KS: How did you become interested in research on vocabulary and formulaic language?*

AW: I was an avid language learner when I was in my teens and twenties, and developed my own methods for vocabulary learning. Near the end of my doctoral studies I met the famous vocabulary researcher Paul Meara, whom I was later lucky enough to work with at Swansea. So my interest in vocabulary learning was definitely developed. One year at the annual conference of the British Association for Applied Linguistics, I happened to sit in on a symposium on 'formulaic language'. I was fascinated to hear one presenter observe how easily we use formulaic language every day, another show how easily children pick it up in first language acquisition, and a third explain how it is so deep engrained that it is often all that survives after a stroke, when novel language construction is no longer possible. Then the fourth speaker demonstrated how *hard* formulaic language is for L2 learners – and that struck me as odd: how could something that is *so easy* and so *resilient* for L1 speakers be so *hard* for L2 speakers? I decided to find out the answer, and that is how I got started on research in that area.

*KS: Could you talk more about your scholarly products? Please tell us how many publications you have and what the major focuses of these publications have been. How do you compare your first and last publications in terms of focus and topics covered?*

AW: Overall, I've published about 120 items, I think. My core contribution has been formulaic language. After a couple of papers that outlined some of the ideas, my first major contribution on that topic was my 2002 book *Formulaic Language and the Lexicon*. My next book was 2008, *Formulaic*

*Language: Pushing the Boundaries*, in which I reported empirical tests of the ideas in the 2002 book, and added a little to the theory. So, most of my publications have been on formulaic language, but not by any means all. My first monograph, about the role of the right hemisphere in language processing, was based on my doctorate - though actually I realize in retrospect that some of my later ideas on formulaic language were already developing there. My current book project is on the language of dementia, which is the topic I've been working on for the last several years. Besides that, I have published on the evolution of language, historical pronunciation, hybridity in grammar, the nature of the word, and even on how academics develop their research expertise. And I've been a co-author of two successful textbooks: *Projects in Linguistics and Language Studies* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed 2012) and *Critical Reading and Writing for Postgraduates* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed 2016).

As for how my first and most recent works compare—well, I think I'm fortunate that my writing style was already fairly well developed in the first book, so that hasn't changed much. I am tempted to say that I know more now than I did then, but in truth I'm not sure that's correct. One never feels one knows enough, and as I write my current book I am very aware of the huge amount of stuff I have not read or have read but perhaps have not adequately understood. I think that's probably healthy, as it means one does not get complacent.

*KS: Which one of your works you have enjoyed the most? Which one of your books/articles you think is more seminal compared to others? I know that your 'Formulaic Language and the Lexicon' won the BAAL book prize. Can you talk a bit about the nature of this prize and whether you expected to win the prize when you were authoring the volume? Could you also tell us what was/were the major claim/s in the book?*

AW: Fortunately, I tend to enjoy whatever I'm doing at the time. Overall yes, I think the 2002 book is the one (so far) that has been most important. The BAAL book prize is annual and is decided after shortlisting from a rather long list of candidate books published in the previous year. I definitely didn't expect to win. In fact, I wasn't even at the event where it was announced! It was a huge honour and winning helped get more attention for the book.

The book was, as I mentioned earlier, an attempt to find an answer to that puzzle of why formulaic language is hard for L2 learners when it seems easy for L1 speakers. The answer I came to was 'needs only analysis': when we are decoding language, our cognitive constraints push us to take the easiest route to getting the meaning out, and that means breaking down the input as little as possible. (It's a bit like how you might buy a pre-made meal rather than cooking one from scratch, if you are in a hurry.) We try to give a meaning to the largest chunk of language we can, to save the trouble of working with the smaller components unnecessarily. Children in L1 acquisition have a lot of contextual cues to help them get out big meanings for big chunks, and with these, they can then, at their leisure, work out smaller components as they need them. Often that will leave them, in the end, with single words and bits of morphology but not always – if the meaning they have for the chunk is flexible enough for their needs, they won't break it down. This is how we learn idioms, where the words inside really don't help understand the whole phrase. My claim was that classroom L2 learners have different needs – they are expected to do a lot more with their language, sooner and with less context. As a result, they need more flexibility, and as a result, they break their input down more. They are expected to use rules for building new sentences, and so they have to develop knowledge of the components. In my food analogy, they are being discouraged from buying the

ready-made meal, and are being taught how to cook. Now, this means that, if they persist long enough, they can end up with a more sophisticated understanding of how the language works than native speakers have. But it also means they are less able to work with the large, under-analysed units. They have to rely on the language having learnable rules for putting small components back into larger ones. Often those rules don't exist, because native speakers are using the larger unit in the first place, and its composition may be irregular. As a result, L2 learners can find they over-correct when trying to create expressions, and when they find they have not got it right by native speaker standards, it can be frustrating and confusing.

*KS: Your work on formulaic language has extended to how this works with people suffering from Alzheimer Disease (AD), which has led to the development of your Communicative Impact model. Could you please expand what this model is and how it can account for formulaic language in people with AD?*

AW: We can understand why people with dementia might use a lot of formulaic language: they have a lot of cognitive pressure to contend with and formulaic language is low in cognitive demand. But my interest was piqued by observing that their carers *also* use a lot of formulaic language. After a massive amount of reading about dementia and caring, I'm writing a book called *The Dynamics of Dementia Communication*. The main idea in the book is that we are all set up to use language to achieve certain goals associated with personal identity and emotional security. When someone has dementia, or is caring for someone with dementia, these goals become very important. The language medium is disrupted by dementia, so it's not always possible to use the same tools to achieve the goals as previously. Using a new linguistic means to achieve an outcome that used to be achieved in a different way means that hearers are not quite sure what is going on. This heightens their own need to fight for their personal identity and emotional security. In short, I argue that much of the frustration, aggression and depression associated with having dementia or being a carer is due to how changes in cognitive capacity alter communication (including the introduction of a lot more formulaic language). The problems can be alleviated by helping carers understand what is going on, and training them in alternative ways of achieving their goals.

*KS: If you were given a second chance to live the life you have lived, would you choose to be an academician or a singer (as you used to be once)? Why? Is there anything you wish you could have accomplished in your life/career that you haven't so far? How successful have you been in your job as an applied linguist?*

AW: I'm fortunate in that I always knew there was something else I also wanted to do (music), and I did give myself the opportunity to open that door and see what happened. So, I don't have any regrets: I tried two careers and in the end, chose the one I thought would work out better for me. I'm also fortunate in that an academic can be an amateur singer and really enjoy it. If I had become a professional singer I doubt I would have been an amateur academic on the side! In any case, though, I have never seen the point of regretting anything in one's life. My philosophy is to take time to make decisions, so all the issues one can see at the time have been taken into account. Then make a decision and move on. Certainly, there is no point being annoyed about things one couldn't foresee at the time. As for my success as an applied linguist, I often find myself feeling quite humbled by how well people seem to regard my work. I do my best, but I'm always painfully aware of the limitations of what I do. I hope that is encouraging to the readers of this article – do as well as you can, and that is good enough!

*KS: Many thanks again Prof. Wray for so humbly taking part in this interview. It is a great pleasure for me and the IJLTR readers to discover more about one of the most acclaimed researchers in idiomaticity. Is there anything else that you would like to add or share with our audience, especially in terms of what lines of research on formulaic language they may follow?*

AW: I would say that there is a bit of a trap in formulaic language research at the moment. It's become very tempting to keep asking versions of the same question over and over again – e.g. *How can (my) L2 learners master formulaic language? Are some types of formulaic language easier to learn than others? How should we define, and how can we identify formulaic language?* These questions *can* be fine, but as they stand, they don't move the field on, and it's hard to make any impression on our knowledge. There is a simple solution, though. That is to ask *why?* For example, WHY have my learners mastered formulaic language better/worse than the learners of other researchers? WHY is this type of formula harder to learn than that type? WHY is it so incredibly difficult to define and identify formulaic expressions in language? Using the WHY word rather than just the WHAT or HOW words immediately opens your research into something more conceptual. It is no longer enough to collect data and describe it. It makes you explain it, and that in turn means you have to look at the research literature in a new way. It's not just something that you use to introduce your study and show that your exact thing hasn't been done before. Instead, it is a core part of your research, because you need a lot more information than you can get from just your study, to answer the WHY question. It is explanation that moves the field on, and formulaic language research is currently stuck in WHAT phase. So asking WHY is a good way to make a mark on the field.

Thank you, Karim, for inviting me to contribute in this way. It's been a great pleasure.

