Episode 6 – Emotion at Work in Language and Learning from a Forensic Linguist
Chatting with Dr Samuel Larner
(https://www2.mmu.ac.uk/languages/staff/profile/index.php?id=1482)

Phil: Hello and welcome to this edition of the Emotion at Work podcast. I am incredibly excited today because I have a forensic linguist with me. We'll talk a bit more about what a forensic linguist is and what a forensic linguist does but very much today, in this episode, we focussed on the role of language and what both the language that we use and the language that people speak can tell us either about them as individuals or how they feel and how we then link all of that back to emotion and credibility and deception in the workplace. Without any further ado let me welcome along our guest. Good morning and welcome, Dr Samuel Larner. Good morning, Sam!

Sam: Hi Phil, great to see you.

Phil: Great to see you too. How are you doing?

Sam: I'm very good, thank you. And you?

Phil: Very good, really excited. I mentioned in my intro that you are a forensic linguist and therefore we are going to talk a lot about language so let's start with the language part of it, if that's ok. What got you into being fascinated with and about language then?

Sam: It's a really interesting question. I'm not sure I can pinpoint any one particular moment thinking that's the thing that I need to learn more about. I think I grew up being fascinated by language. I remember being young and typing for hours writing out of encyclopaedias and dictionaries and just loving words and always being fascinated with them and playing with them. I guess the defining moment for me was when I went to visit a friend at Lancaster University, and she was busy doing something, so I went with another friend to sit in on a linguistics lecture when I was 18. I just spent the hour sat in that lecture in absolute ore of what we were being told so I kind of gate crashed a lecture and thought this is it; this is what I want to do. I got into doing my degree at Lancaster in linguistics and from there really everything that we covered was just fascinating to me so I think there was probably just a natural inclination to language and being fascinated by language rather than it being a specific decision that this is what I want to know more about.

Phil: You mentioned you used to write and when you were writing, you used to go to places to find words. What were you writing about? Were you writing stories or…

Sam: A bit of everything really. I used to do a little bit of creative writing. I certainly wasn't good at it, but I used to like creative writing. Even now I thoroughly enjoy writing papers which can be very dry and very technical, but there is something about crafting and editing and putting words together and really thinking about every word that you're using and making it count that really floats my boat, I guess. There's the idea that everything you communicate even the smallest words are communicating something and that's really interesting.

Phil: I get it. If it's all right I'm writing down "making every word count". That's something I want to come back to later.

Sam: Right.

Phil: Now I said that, I am implying I don't want to come back to it later, so I am going to bring it up now because I think that's the level of depth that in my experience very few people think to in terms of how can I make every word count. And I know that in an academic setting or in a research paper you've often got a word limit or you've got a particular message that you are trying to put across but the idea of making every word count is interesting because I think often language is almost thought of as something that is wholly spontaneous. But I'm less sure it is wholly spontaneous.

Sam: Not at all. One of the areas I am interested in is the notion of formulaic language. This idea that actually we don't pick every single word on a one by one basis in casual conversation anyway. And if you think about it, it starts to make sense in terms of the cognitive load that goes into producing language. We speak so quickly and so fluently that if you thought about how many words you actually had to pick per millisecond to make it through a conversation it would be an immense amount of words to choose. So right now I'm talking slower because I'm trying to be more meaningful and more careful in the words that I am selecting. If you think about casual conversation, you can speak very very quickly because quite often you're pulling out these formulaic chunks of language, these sequences of words that allow you to stitch it all together in a more coherent way.

Phil: So when you say a chunk or a sequence of words, can you give us an example of what that might be in everyday conversation?

Sam: Yes. Basically, clichés and idioms would be two really good examples. Those sorts of phrases that you hear over and over again. You quite often hear people talking about "at the end of the day" which is six individual words but the theory of formulaic language says you are not picking "at" and then "the" and then "end" etc. you're not picking every single thing and sticking them together in a meaningful sentence, you are pulling it together as one chunk so by the time you said "at the end of the day" you've bought yourself the thinking time to come up with your next word or your next sequence of words. Basically I'm talking about formulaic language, I'm talking about any of these clichés, these metaphors, these routinised phrases. When you go into conversational situations that you regularly engage with like going to the supermarket or going to the shop, you might often hear "have a nice day" at the end of it or you'll hear "that's…" and the amount of money. These are structures that we tend to use that become conventionalised and routine.

Phil: Do they then get conventionalised for routines within organisations? So what I mean by that, there was a client of mine whom I spent a lot of time with and they had a certain set of phrases that they would be using within the organisation and they really bothered me. You know, personal kind of emotion where management strategies had to come into play because when they were used, it would just frustrate me. They were used in such a ritual way that they didn't have the actual weight and meaning behind them. For example, if we ever talked about doing something new or different or a new project, somebody in the meeting nine times out of ten would go "can we start with what good looks like?" And then someone else would go "oh yes, absolutely, we need to start with what

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good looks like". So "what good looks like" and "face into" were two kind of almost stock things. If somebody was coming up with an idea, if I was a betting man, I could get really good odds on the fact that I would hear "what good looks like" and likewise if somebody was expressing some frustration or disappointment with a colleague, then the words "face into" would come out in terms of "you need to face into that" would be the structure. Would they be examples of formulaic language as well?

Sam: Absolutely. That's formulaic at smaller level. If you think of the phrase "at the end of the day", that's something for the speech community, that's pretty much all of us speaking the same language that we are familiar with. What you are talking about there are specific formulae that operate within a close group of people. If you think about management speak, I'm sure they're out of favour now but things like "pushing the envelope" and "blue sky thinking" or those kinds of things that you regularly come across that people get so frustrated by hearing. What was interesting about those examples that you gave, "what does good look like" I think was your example, other people then started to pick it up and use it as well and I think what you probably got going on there is a situation where somebody very senior within the organisation would have started using it and those around him would have wanted to pick it up and internalise it and use it to signal their solidarity with that speaker, their way of showing that you are part of the same group, that you want to belong to that particular group. That's another marking thing about these formulaic sequences. It's showing some kind of commitment or some sort of engagement with the people that you are talking to. If you were in that meeting and actively picked apart that formulaic sequence saying that's a silly phrase or that doesn't mean what you think it means, you'd be signalling that you're not buying into the ethos and the culture of that particular group. So in many ways having these formulaic sequences shows our solidarity with one another and that's why you can get them emerging within these closed groups that you might not hear outside of that organisation let alone in another organisation. But it's somehow showing that group's solidarity.

Phil: And it has both an inclusive and an exclusive feel about it.

Sam: Absolutely.

Phil: I remember I was part of a group that was studying (the MSE group through which I met you) and I cannot remember how it came into being but there was a particular phrase that would get used within that group and we would all know what it meant and the associated meaning that went behind it. But if you didn't understand it, that was almost a signal of exclusivity because everyone around you would be laughing or engaging or responding to that particular thing which actually made no sense to anybody outside of that world. It was all to do with memory and the idea of "schemer" and the word "schemer" fitted very well in the football chants and so if anybody mentioned "schemer" either somebody would make that footballesque chant or there will be an eye contact made between different members of the group to signify somebody has just used that thing that's part of our group. I guess it can be used both in an exclusive and an inclusive way as well.

Sam: Absolutely, yes. Going back to management speak that is a perfect example of exclusionary language. You either understand what "pushing the envelope" means or you don't. You're either with it or you're not. Just like a small group of MSE students getting together, you have something

that marks your belonging together. You are an in-group and if you don't understand those formulaic sequences or you can't use them appropriately. It's almost worse in some ways if you are trying to use it and don't use it in the way that the in-group does. You then have that exclusionary out-group effect going on. But there is so much within language that allows us to show our in-group solidarity. Even at the level of accents when you are around people that you like, you try to moderate your accent a little bit to show the similarity between you, you are using the same words as people so at all levels of linguistics you mark your in-group status and your out-group status through the way that you communicate with people.

Phil: And within the linguistic sense do you take it beyond language, do you start looking at things like language or other ways that the voice is used?

Sam: Yes, like any field of study there are lots of things that some people do and lots of things that people don't so I personally don't work with speech so much. Those that do work with speech would quite often take into account what we call the paralinguistic features, so the features that are non-verbal communication like body language, facial expressions, gesticulations, those sorts of things. It depends on what particular aspect of linguistics you research. Certainly within the realm of paralinguistics you would take into account those sorts of issues.

Phil: OK. So you just did an in-group/out-group distinction there. You just said there are some who research paralinguistics but that's not for you so where do you focus then? Where do you specialise?

Sam: My specialisation is forensic linguistics and within that it's in the written language which is why I made the distinction between the speech and writing. I work with written text.

Phil: Ok.

Sam: But my particular expertise is in the field of forensic linguistics which at a very basic level it's looking at the connection between language and law. Any sort of legal text or legal context or text that somehow becomes legally relevant is of interest to me. When we talk about forensic linguistics we can really break it down into three areas. Firstly, the written language of the law and start looking at things like legal contracts how comprehensible are they to people and do they make sense. If you think about something like the police caution which is quite often delivered to people on a Saturday night after they've been out drinking and perhaps, they are in a state of inebriation, is it still comprehensible to somebody when they haven't got all of their faculties? Things like mobile phone contracts or when you sign up to Facebook or Twitter or any social media site, you're always presented with these terms and conditions that you have to accept. Can the average person actually penetrate the linguistic or are they written in a way that actually makes them inaccessible to them? From that point of view that aspect of forensic linguistics really deals with comprehensibility from the layman person's point of view.

Phil: Would that translate over as well into things like employment contracts and that sort of things then? In terms of either policies or procedures that people need to sign up to if I may be a bit topical, an IT policy because within that there would be aspects around maintenance of software or

computer or access or supervision of people's activity on IT platforms. Would that include that sort of stuff as well?

Sam: Absolutely. Because what you are doing at that point you are entering into a contract. You are signing up to those terms of employment. If you're saying to your employee you need to accept these terms in order for you to have the job, is there a check-in process to make sure that your employee actually understands those terms and conditions? There's lots of movements towards plain English, trying to write in non-legalese, trying to avoid Latin terms and legal terms that actually carry a different meaning in a legal context than they might in an everyday context, but we are a long way from people actually accepting legal language as written in plain language, plain English. I think that's definitely a strong area where more work could be done in ensuring people are understanding what they are agreeing to when signing these contracts.

Phil: Ok. You said the first area of linguistics is the intersection of language and law and then I interrupted you so the second?

Sam: Ok. The first one was about the written legal language and the second one would be more generally interaction in the legal process. That's mainly thinking about how different groups of people communicate within different legal settings. One of the issues that becomes very salient here is power differential. If you think about how a witness is cross-examined during an adversarial trial, they're put under immense pressure, there are lots of linguistic constraints on what responses they are allowed to provide, there are lots of tactics that barristers can use that will get to a particular answer in a particular way. They are really exerting linguistic control or linguistic influence over their witnesses and that becomes really significant if you are dealing with somebody who has already been victimised in perhaps the worst way. If we think about sexual assault victims who then have to go into a court room and be questioned in great details about what's happened to them, there's an argument that actually they're re-victimised within the court room because they are asked to relive the particular event that happened to them. Quite often in cases of sexual assault the issue comes down to whether the person who alleges sexual assault consented to it or not and quite often there is a verbal linguistic battle between the issue of consent and did consent mean consent and so on. Police interviews provide another fertile ground for looking at this source of power issue. How free are you to actually exercise your rights when you are sat in a police cell and there is somebody in a uniform looking at you reading your rights to you? Or not necessarily in a uniform but certainly in a power differential. So those are the sort of issues that forensic linguistics get interested into at that level, looking at how people are actually interacting within a legal settings. And of course that can extend to a whole spectrum then. It might even be things beyond sentencing, beyond the court room, we might be looking at discourse within prisons. How do prisoners communicate and how do they talk about crimes they committed and how do they present their world view of what happened to them? It might even extend to things like mediation meetings between the victim and the perpetrator. Basically, everything and anything that is to do with the legal system at some level and it's looking at interaction between the participants within it.

Phil: And if you answer this question as "I don't know", then that's ok. Are you aware of much research that happens around things like employment tribunals or investigations within the work place?

Sam: To be honest, no. It's not an area that I've seen a great deal. I certainly couldn't name anything off the top of my head. I feel that there's something at the back of my mind, but I can't recall it but certainly that would be an area where there would be a great deal of research that could be done. Because it's one of those non-legal contexts but with legal ramifications, I suppose that would be the way of looking at that one.

Phil: Yes, because if I think about everything, well not everything (here is me being linguistically crude by saying everything and then picking out one particular thing), if I think about in particular when you talked around the power differential and you likened it to being in a police cell or in the police interrogation room with somebody in a uniform stood over you, likewise though if it's an internal investigation within an organisation, if you're there as the accused or the accusee or the witness or whatever that is, sat in a meeting room, either that has got no glass around the outside of it because it's HR practice for example. Some of the considerations they might make is if I have this meeting in a meeting room that has lots of glass around it, how would other people from outside the room be able to judge what is happening inside. There's a HR representative and/or a line manager and/or an investigator and/or the individual all in a room. So rightly you need to think about those external factors that could affect what's happening in the interview but likewise you might want to therefore pick a meeting room which has no windows and is closed off yet still there is potential there for the power differential to equally be at play, but just in a different way. Whilst from a criminal or forensic setting if this doesn't go your way it could ruin your life in terms of you get convicted and all the implications that could come with that, likewise from a work place point of view it could ruin your reputation not just within your current organisation but within a market or a sector as well. So yes, I'm like you, I can't think of any research off the top of my head and I have a note to go and try and find some.

Sam: Of course, the important thing that ties into that as well is to do with the setting, this idea that people quite often find themselves in a situation where they might be interrogating somebody having read about the latest technique. You'll know more about this than me, but things like the Reid technique. Going in and thinking right I can do this, I can do an interrogation but without understanding the complexities of how we actually communicate. So already when you say to me that you might have an employee in a closed room without windows and that, I'm already thinking about the context of what that is going to do to their communication pattern whether they are guilty or not. And I think that's one of the difficulties, there are people going in and assuming that language is straight forward. I can go in and ask this question, get that answer and I can tell whether they are guilty or not but really there are so many different factors going on at any one moment that affect linguistic choices we make and how we communicate those choices that actually you really have to have a strong sensitivity of language if you are going to start relying on what people are saying and thinking about how they are saying it.

Phil: Especially then when, and again I bring my HR bias into it, the weight that's been put on the written testimony whether that would be the notes taken or the handwritten one that comes off the back of that, in terms of the weight that those statements have is huge in terms of the role that they have to play both within an internal investigation but then also potentially within an employment

tribunal as well. And you're right. If we then don't think about those issues with language or how the context and/or what is happening can affect and shape language, it can make a massive difference.

Sam: Absolutely. Even at the level of producing that statement, has that person been left to write it on their own or have they been prompted? Because this is going to form a written piece of evidence and they might be using the words that the investigators have them put together and in doing that they're putting in somebody else's words that might then become problematic in the later stages of the investigation. So it's really thinking about all these issues and I'm not saying that there is a right way and a wrong way, but certainly to be aware of it and how it's being put together, it's going to be significant.

Phil: I think it's also being aware of the… see, this is one of those moments when I risk getting on the soapbox. One of the challenges that we have, and granted I can't speak across the whole profession, but if I think about the training that I've received from my profession about questioning techniques and approaches to interviews (across the different types of interviews a HR practitioner might do whether that would be recruitment or talent or succession planning or investigation or whatever that may be), the training that I've received is quite crude (I can't think of another word but crude). For example, there's closed questions and open questions or probing questions and maybe there's a funnel but actually in terms of the things like the language that you use within your question and/or presuppositions that are included within your questions and the way in which the question is delivered and the order in which the questions are delivered and all of those sorts of things, they are something that never feature. It's something I know through part of the other work that I do, but I would argue for the vast majority of HR practitioners, they don't think as deeply as that around the way that questions, for example are put together and formulated and then the priming effect that they have on the responses that you get back.

Sam: Absolutely. And I'm sure you're aware of Elizabeth Loftus' study and how the use of a different verb is going to affect perception of what actually happened. In that particular paper she looked at participants who were shown a clip of a car crashing into another car and then she said to them how fast was the car going when it *crashed*, to another group of people she asked how fast was the car going when it *collided*, to another how fast was the car going when it *bumped.* Each time the verb was changed, she was getting an average different speed from the participants who viewed the video. So even the words that you are using are priming how people perceive what they've witnessed even though they were watching the same video, they were perceiving it as travelling at different speed because of the verb that was used. I think it's absolutely right. It's not just a case of an open question or a closed question or a probing question, it's all these other sorts of issues that go into language that have a big effect on how people perceive something.

Phil: Yes. And I know I'm using this question in isolation but a question like "how many times has X done Y?" Presupposes that X has done Y within that.

Sam: Absolutely, yes. It's the classic example: "how many times did you beat your wife?". It presumes that you did beat your wife in the first place. It's exactly that presumptive language that it's problematic.

Phil: Yes. It poses massive challenges and risks to some of the investigations that are happening both in the forensic setting and outside. So just picking up on that theme in terms of the awareness of language of interviewers, in your setting, in a forensic setting, is that still present and prevalent within forensics do you think?

Sam: In what regard, sorry?

Phil: Some of the challenges around the way that people ask questions. We've established that yes, the way you ask questions and the language that you use would prime and have an effect on the responses that you get. In terms of the practice from what you see in either the research that you do or the research that you read, are practitioners in forensic settings aware of some of these challenges and do they modify their behaviour accordingly?

Sam: I don't necessarily work closely with police interviewers myself, so I wouldn't want to generalise beyond that but from colleagues who do work with police officers there is definitely a willingness, certainly within England and Wales and Scotland, to really develop good practice over interviewing. I have colleagues who do work very closely with the police and they seem very engaged and want to learn more and make sure they are collecting the best evidence at every stage. But of course, there is a big culture, an institutional culture about how to give an interview so quite often people are fighting against or rather researchers are trying to encourage people to see another way of carrying out an interview. There also can be cultural issues. Just because England and Wales and Scotland are very receptive to this doesn't mean every territory and every country is going to be receptive to it. There is a great variation in practice but certainly from what I am aware within my closed group of colleagues is that actually yes, there is a willingness to make sure that interviews are carried out sufficiently well. It's in everybody's best interest because first of all the pursuit of justice is important whether that person is guilty of the crime or not and secondly, they need the best evidence because if they are going to go to court and prosecute, they need to make sure that the evidence isn't flawed. So it's in everybody's best interest to ensure that they are aware of the linguistic issues and they take them on board and try to formulate the most effective interview they can.

Phil: Ok. Thank you, Sam. We talked about the two different aspects that forensic linguistics applies whether that be at the intersection of language in law and then the second, I can't remember how you paraphrased it earlier on…

Sam: Interaction in the legal process.

Phil: That was it, thank you. In terms of your research then, I guess over time your research interests have changed or developed? Would that be fair?

Sam: Developed I think it's a natural trajectory. I think you start in one area and find yourself moving towards others.

Phil: Formulaic language. Was that where you started? Was that where you began? Was that where your research interest started from?

Sam: Backwards really. My research interest started in forensic linguistics and particularly in the third area of forensic linguistics which I'm yet to mention which is expert witnesses; this idea of going into the court room or helping the police solve a crime which has been committed through language. My passion really started out with one of those particular clients which is authorship analysis. This might be the police get in touch and say they've received a threat letter or a blackmail but they have no idea who's written it so they might get a linguist to try and profile a likely person. What sort of things can be said about the age, gender, socio-economic status of this writer that might help them narrow down their list of suspects or a case I've worked on: the police had arrested a man who had a terrorist manifesto on his computer and they needed to know whether he's written it or not, because obviously it's a very different crime if he is the author of it. In that case there was a closed list of suspects if you like. It was a case of comparing his known writings with the terrorist manifesto to see whether he was likely to have authored it or not. But within that realm then, there were also others like deception detectorists becoming increasingly studied from a linguistic point of view. Looking at things like trademarks and trademark law which looks at things like how similar trademarks are phonetically and semantically. Do they sound the same, do they mean the same? That's another area that is quite interesting for forensic linguists. Even looking at language analysis for determination of origin. Some countries will take asylum seekers and give them linguistic tests to see if their pattern of language falls in line with what is expected from them if they came from the country that they said they'd come from.

Phil: Oh, wow!

Sam: Quite a controversial area within forensic linguistics. It's not one that is accepted by everybody, but it's another example of having something seemingly obvious like the way that you speak which can be used as evidence to either grant or not asylum. Going back to your earlier question then, my original research interests are in authorship analysis. I'm really interested in the way that different people write and the way that they write consistently over a series of different texts that are sufficient to enable them to be matched as the likely author of a criminal text. Being interested in that and getting into that area, dealing with formulaic language was something I came across and started to really make sense to me. It made sense because there is a famous case from America, I don't know if you are familiar with it: the UNABOM investigation. At the time it was the largest terrorism case in the late 1970s which went on for around almost 20 years where a man was sending bombs (a total of 16 Bombs) to different university employees and different airline employees. After 16 bombs were sent, he sent this manuscript which was basically an outline of his ideological position, his arguments for why he was targeting this, what was wrong with society, how we needed to change and in there, there was a particular phrase: "you can't eat your cake and have it too". If you think about it, and we're talking about formulaic language, you'd quite often say "you can't have your cake and eat it".

Phil: That's almost a break from the pattern.

Sam: Absolutely, yes. The words are transposed, aren't they? You can't eat your cake and have it. And actually, it makes sense when you put the verbs that way around. There's a logic to it. And it's the sort of phrase that is historically correct. I believe if you look at the etymology of that phrase,

that is historically the right way of doing it, it's just that we don't say it that way anymore. So from my point of view, from my research point of view, I became really interested in this idea that this was a man who was evading detention, he didn't want to be caught, so why would he use a phrase that was so distinctive to him, that enabled him to be identified? Because what happened was that he'd used this phrase in some of his other texts as well, so it started to become a phrase that he was using so it was really quite marked for him, quite distinctive. So I argued in my early PHD research that this was probably a formulaic phrase for him as an individual and because it was formulaic, he probably wasn't aware of just how distinctive and how marked it was from a linguistic point of view. And that really got me interested in this idea that actually we all have these formulaic phrases. You gave the example earlier about the one that you used as a group of students, but we have them at individual level as well. I don't know if you have one of those mean students who every time a lecturer says a word you make a drinking game out of it, that kind of thing. you become very aware. If you're reading some fiction, you'll notice there are certain words that are starting a pattern, start to stick out. This idea of individual, what we call idiolect, this idea that we have our own individual version of the language, really started to interest me so my research really starts to explore this notion of formulaic language and how it might be used at the individual level.

Phil: I find that fascinating for a number of different reasons. Partly I'm now thinking what's my idiolect, what are the formulaic phrases that I have? But also, in terms of how unaware the individual in the UNIBOM case may have been about the use of that phrase because I guess as we were talking at the beginning, often there may be little thought that goes into the language that we use. You said earlier on you specialise in written text. Is there a difference in formulaic language in speech versus written?

Sam: It's an interesting question and I don't think there's a definitive answer to that. Certainly in speech you would expect to find more formulaic sequences because you don't have the planning time that you have when you're writing. If I'm writing an email, I can take my time, I can go back, and I can edit it. That's the value of written language. It's more permanent. In spoken language, because we have to produce it quickly, we have to produce it fluently, you expect to find more formulaic sequences within there as a way to keep a conversation going. In terms of the types of formulaic sequences they use, I would expect some variation in terms of there are some formulaic sequences that are used as discourse markers to keep a conversation going but then there are some that occur in written language as well. You might find some difference between them, but I think that it's the overall proportion that is more likely to differ. I think you'll find more in spoken language than in written language.

Phil: Ok. So it's not necessarily about the type it's about the frequency it would occur.

Sam: Yes. And what I find interesting in my research is when I've looked at different authors and their use of formulaic sequences, I found that actually there is no specific formulaic sequence with the exception of one author out of 20. The 20 authors that I studied didn't have a particular formulaic sequence they used with the exception of one who kept using "in a way" and she used "in a way" at far higher frequency than any of the other authors and she was using it consistently over a whole sequence of texts so that allowed me to say it was formulaic for her because she is using it regularly across different texts. But that didn't happen for any of the other 19 authors that I studied.

What I did find was that the overall proportion of formulaic language they were using did vary dramatically, so in other words some authors were more formulaic than others. Others used what we call more novel language by creating one of these novel constructions rather than existing formulaic language. What I don't yet know is what explains that difference in formulaicity. Is it just a natural correlate of the way that we use language or the way that we've acquired language, or can we relate it to some kind of sociolinguistic variable? An obvious one to investigate would be intelligence level as controversial as that is in itself. Is there a connection between IQ level and the level of formulaicity? And that is really the direction my research is going to go in the future, so moving beyond forensics in some regards but then feeding back into it because it would be a good profiling tool if you had a text and you didn't know who authored it and then you had a look at all the formulaic language in it and then you might be able to start building a picture of their likely IQ level or socioeconomic status and all those sorts of things that affect language. If you can find a correlation between that formulaic sequences, that could be quite useful.

Phil: It's fascinating.

Sam: Am I blowing your mind, Phil?

Phil: You regularly do, Sam, when you and I chat. How do you go about this then in this kind of analysis that you are doing? How do you go about it? Is it through the use of technology or how do you go about that analysis?

Sam: It's very difficult to identify formulaic language because it's the sort of thing that once you're aware of it you can recognise it. You have this intuition of what is formulaic but when you actually start to identify it in text it starts to become very problematic because you realise that you cannot do analysis based on your intuition and certainly not if you are using it for forensic purposes where you need a reliable and valid method. You can't pick things and say that sounds formulaic to me. So the approach I adopt is to build a dictionary of formulaic language which basically involves going through hundreds of websites looking at different types of clichés, different types of idioms, different types of everyday sayings that are typically used for teaching English to people who don't have English as a first language because that's another feature of the formulaic language. If you want to sound like a native speaker of English, you need to drop in the idiomatic language. That's what shows you to be a competent language user. So I was using a lot of these materials to build a reference list of about 13,500 of formulaic sequences and at that point it became a computational exercise in searching the texts for those different formulaic sequences and see which ones are actually picked out and how regularly they occur. And that allows you to then derive the measure of how much that language is formulaic or it's non-formulaic. So it's a difficult method to use because there's nothing to say that every single formulaic language or every single sequence that could be formulaic would be in my dictionary. I can often go through a text where intuitively I would have seen that as being formulaic but it wasn't identified as so but at the same time when you have a large list like that, you've got to be resilient and you've got consensus from all the people who wrote all those different websites about what they considered to be formulaic rather than it being one person's intuition. So it's a difficult method but it seems to be one that is working so far. I'm not sure that is robust enough for me to go into a court room and use it, but I am hedging that actually I wouldn't at this stage of the research. In future if it was shown that there is a difference between

individuals using formulaic language, that method still needs refining more before it being admissible in a court room. But it's opened up some interesting opportunities and some interesting ways of looking at formulaic language.

Phil: Yes. And the title of this podcast is Emotion at Work so we're thinking about the workplace in particular. From the research that you've done and/or the knowledge that you have around formulaic language as an example, what do you think are some of the applications across into the workplace? What could be some of the links into the workplace that some of our listeners could start to think about or be aware of?

Sam: One of the things that strikes me that might be relevant would be in how we perceive formulaic language. Quite often we can get very irritated by it. I've mentioned that some authors are more formulaic than others in terms of formulaic proportion. It can be incredibly irritating when you're talking to somebody who regularly uses clichés. We all use them. They are there for all of us but some people use them more than others and it can be irritating for some people. I think one area to think about is how you are communicating with people or how you are communicating your written materials, how you are communicating when talking to partners or potential customers. Are you using the sort of language that perhaps doesn't carry the gravitas or are you overusing it to the extent that it might be negatively impacting on how people are perceiving you? That would be one area I would be interested to explore. I think another area that I'm starting to research in is looking at deception detection. Research suggests that when you are being deceptive your cognitive load increases because you've got so much work going on to try and maintain the lie, to monitor the person that you are lying to, to see whether you are fooling them or not. One of the things about formulaic language as I said several times now, it's that it makes it easier to communicate, it makes it more fluent to put a conversation together, in other ways it reduces our cognitive load and so the research I am conducting at the moment hypothesises that when people are lying they should be using formulaic language more as a coping mechanism. And so again there are applications there in terms of interviews, are people using formulaic language more so than they normally would. And that becomes important because you need to know what the base line for some of this language use is, before you start saying there is a lot of formulaic language in there. There are some interesting applications to come from using formulaic language. Do they hit the mark?

Phil: Yes, absolutely. My pause was because my mind is now running with different thoughts. One of those is the idea that formulaic language could be a credibility enhancer or a credibility threat. As always, I talk about context as context is everything. Within a particular context overuse or underuse of formulaic language could either limit or enhance your credibility one way or another. So, in an attempt to fit in, you roll out all the stock phrases within a short period of time, whilst you're trying to show affinity and inclusion within the group, its overuse could be interpreted as an exclusion. Whilst you're trying to be using it as a marker of inclusion, it actually ends up as a marker of exclusion.

Sam: Potentially so. And I think it comes down to that making sure that you have the buy-in to use them. So particularly within a group rather than the wider language within the community, so within an organisation perhaps, you have to earn the symbolic right to use these sorts of phrases. The example you gave earlier with the use of "schemer", if I was to use that, straight away you'd be

angry about it. You wouldn't be happy because I haven't earned the right to be part of your group. Simply using that phrase isn't in itself going to buy membership. It's almost the reward for being a member that you get to use that phrase, having that sensitivity and that awareness of how you use it. Then again think about when we sit in professional meetings and we can hear the chair of the committee that we are sitting on using these phrases like "push the envelope", "blue sky thinking" and so on. You have to mirror them back to show that you are on board with it and you are a credible member of the team, even if it's the first time you've ever heard it. You just have to show you are using it right. It's thinking about all those sorts of issues and what are the cultural formulaic sequences within the organisation and how are they being used by people. Are they used to push the agenda, are they used to push change or are they used to mark exclusive boundaries?

Phil: Earlier on you talked about idiolect, so what we are talking about now in the use of these different sort of phrases and sayings within a particular context, are we getting into the sociolect type stuff?

Sam: Absolutely, yes. The sociolect is the language that marks out some sort of social characteristic about you, so the argument that men and women have different types of language and that your language changes based on your age or your socioeconomic class, so they are marking out social characteristics about you. What we are really talking about when we are talking within businesses, within organisations it's not so much sociolect as a community of practice, so in other words we are all buying into sharing the same language that within your organisation it's familiar to you, that marks you out as using that particular kind of language, marks you out as belonging to the same organisation. You wouldn't necessarily expect to hear it outside that organisation and again from a HR perspective one of the things that can be very problematic is when you are using the sort of language that forms a community of practice with people outside your organisation because suddenly you are using language that is impenetrable for somebody on the outside. If you have phrases that you use on the inside that are regularly used or that everyone in your organisation uses, you need to be mindful not to use them externally because you're alienating customers or partners or whoever you're working with because they won't have access to that inside knowledge, they're not part of your community of practice.

Phil: I guess that applies to both visitors and guests to meetings but also to new recruits I would imagine. They are joining an organisation, they could be almost bewildered by the phrases or language that is being used.

Sam: Definitely. Absolutely. I work at Manchester Metropolitan University and on the first day I got given a glossary of terms that are commonly used in meetings and actually the idea behind it was incredibly impressive. It was to make you feel like part of the team that you wouldn't always have to feel left out but sadly they limited themselves just to the initialisms and the acronyms and I think there could be scope for this wider sense of formulaic sequences. What are the terms that we use, the phrases we use, rather than just the acronyms? There is real scope for quickly embedding this inclusion in the language, getting people inducted very quickly into how you talk within your community of practice so that person feels valued and up to speed very quickly.

Phil: I am part of a community who hosts a number of different Twitter chats regularly. We have two a week so the community is called L&D Connect and it's a load of different practitioners – there are some freelancers like me, there are others working within organisations and we all collaborate to curate and to arrange and monitor those chats as they happen. And one of the discussions we were having as a community outside of it was, "are there in-gags, within group things that happen that we can discuss that run the risk of excluding others?" One of those examples was the one I used earlier on about context so if I'm not taking part in a Twitter chat and somebody mentions "context" it's incredibly common for me to get a tweet saying "ha, ha, Phil so and so beat you to the mention of context". Because not only has that become part of my idiolect in a way, it is also part of that community of practice approach as well. The discussion that was happening behind the scenes was: do we need some sort of (I can't remember what we called it, it wasn't a glossary) "if you want to take part in this chat here are some useful things to know that might help you navigate through it". And I remember being pulled in two different ways: part of me got the value that could be derived for the individuals from that, but also do we want to have that much structure around what is essentially a group of people coming together just to have a chat on Twitter? I remember being pulled in two very different directions on that one. Part of me understood it, but part of me didn't want to overcook it. If you want to join this chat, here is the thing you need to read before you do because it's going to give you all this stuff. Do we really need to do that? Is that really necessary?

Sam: And I guess there's also a dimension there that if you are marked as an in-group, if you all have that insider joke, it defeats the need to have that insider joke if you are then going to be sharing it with everybody to make sure everybody has access to it because it delineates those boundaries that you set up as social boundaries. Again, the example at the very start when we were talking about the written language of the law and a movement towards plain language, plain English, a lot of that is resisted simply because lawyers like their language, it marks them out as having an education, it marks them out as almost demonstrating their worth within their profession. If everybody can access legal language easily, it kind of takes away the prestige and esteem that surrounds it. And I think there are those psychological issues that go with it. We all talk about wanting to be inclusionary but at the same time we get social benefit from having in-groups and out-groups.

Phil: We talked about the language aspects a lot and linked it into credibility, we also talked about deception and deception detection. The potential around there being something in the use of formulaic language more potentially in deception. But we haven't really talked specifically much about the links between some of these linguistic and formulaic language and emotion. How do you see emotion and/or some of the things we talked about coming together?

Sam: It's a really interesting question and that's the academic way of saying I don't know, I guess [laughs]. There's been no research that has looked at the correlation between formulaic language and emotion. It just doesn't exist as far as I'm aware. I don't know what would happen. I suspect what we are thinking about is what the emotion is doing at a cognitive level and whether that is likely to have any effect but also the impact of context so who you are being emotional around. Are you maintaining those professional boundaries? The way that you show emotions to your best friend is going to be very different to how are you emotional around a co-worker presumably. But also that bigger issue about the fact that we seem to be using formulaic language differently or to different proportions, it makes it very difficult to generalise how it's being used in relation to emotion

because I suspect we are not going to be able to see people using it in the same way in the same sort of situations. If you are naturally a formulaic person, then you are likely to see a lot of formulaicity in your emotional talk, if you have a propensity towards more novel language, more novel constructions, it may be that there would be an increase in formulaic language but we'd have to really think about why that was, what would cause that increase? So the straightforward answer is I guess no, I don't know.

Phil: Yes, that's ok. I like it that it's ok to not know. Part of me wonders whether, and this is very much experiential, so I have no research, no peer research to support me on this, but part of me wonders whether formulaic language is used as a way of expressing emotion in the work place in a "professional way". Earlier on I used the example of "face into" and part of me wonders if that is used in a formulaic way because the context around that phrase is typically when you're talking about something happening or about somebody having done something that you find frustrating or annoying or disappointing and so on. Something has happened where another individual, maybe a colleague, maybe somebody that you manage or maybe a manager of some description but often something has happened which has affected you in a way that has triggered an emotional response. And the context in which that phrase is used then is an instruction to tell you to go and talk to that person about it. And it comes with almost an implication that you haven't done that yet "why are you moaning to me when you haven't spoken to the individual concerned?" And also an implication that you need to… my hesitation is because my head is full of things like "you need to man up" and I realise that I am using formulaic language to explain formulaic language and there are all these meta conditions going through my head right now. Trying to pull that together, I wonder if we used them as a way of doing emotion work in terms of signifying how we feel about something but in a socially acceptable way because this is a phrase that is often used within this organisation. Does that even make sense? I don't know if that make sense.

Sam: I think it does, yes. I think it also probably links with there being an individual use of formulaicity. When we talk about formulaic language, we tend to use it in a way that if we are performing a routine, we find a good way of communicating that routine linguistically and if it works for us we use it over and over again so it becomes formulaic. So, if you are in a managerial position and it's common for you to have to deal with an employee who has had a dispute with another employee, in other words it's a situation that regularly occurs for you, you might well find that that person, that manager is using the same stock phrases, the same formulaic phrases to try and deal with the situation. You mentioned earlier "man up", that would be a good way of giving advice that is non-committal and very opaque in terms of actually not meaning anything but somehow looking like you are giving some kind of response so if that person goes away whether they are disgruntled or satisfied with that response, the manager might start thinking that has worked for me and I'm not saying that's an overt cognitive process but the next time that happens, last time I said "you need to man up" and it worked for me so that phrase then becomes formulaic for them in terms of how to deal with that particular situation. You might find there may be some formulaic sequences that come out of an emotional level as a more general term, but I think you might also find them at a more individual level as to how people actually deal with that emotion, how they communicate with that emotion or how they respond to that emotion.

Phil: Ok.

Sam: But again, I would say that's speculation on my part.

Phil: Absolutely, agree. And what about current research? What are you researching at the moment?

Sam: At the moment I'm really working on this idea of formulaic language, how it relates to different forensic contexts. I'm still carrying on with the authorship side of it trying to work out some of those different variables that affect formulaic language usage and I'm also looking at deception detection to see whether this might be the new key to detecting whether somebody has been deceitful or not. But kind of separate to those issues I've now got a third strand of research that I'm interested in, and I suspect this might not be so relevant to HR context, but I am particularly interested in the way that children and young people disclose that they have bene sexually abused. Here I am thinking about a forensic context where a child is making an accusation that they have been abused by somebody. How do they actually communicate that? There is a lot of research that looked at the barriers that children face when disclosing, the social issues that would stop them from making the disclosure. And there is a lot of acknowledgement that children struggle to communicate the sensitivities surrounding what has happened to them in particular with the psychological guilt they often feel in that it is somehow their fault that they've been abused, so what I would want to know is how are they actually making that disclosure, how are they actually saying to somebody that they have been sexually abused so that a trusted adult can recognise that they have been disclosed to. Quite often children will try to disclose but because they don't actually have the linguistic skill to actually make that disclosure overt, quite often the trusted adult will miss the fact that they have been disclosed to. Just not recognise that was what the child was trying to communicate to them. I'm getting really interested in this idea of language in sexual assault and particularly a child's perspective on how they disclose it, with a view to, if we can develop some kind of typology of the sort of characteristics that might be used by a child when they are disclosing that they have been abused, hopefully leading to more effective intervention strategies, more readily recognising that the disclosure has been made or conversely assisting that child in making that disclosure by recognising that the child may be going down that road trying to disclose, what strategies, how can we use language to help make that disclosure more clearly and more quickly. So that is an unrelated area of research but one that I feel very passionately about. I think this really sums up the importance of forensic linguistics because I think if you speak to any forensic linguist, our key goal is to make some kind of positive change within the legal system, we're really advocating for different groups to have equality within the civil criminal justice system and so here really I'm advocating for those children who can't quite explain that they have been sexually abused and when they finally build up the courage to say that, they may not have been understood.

Phil: Wow that is amazing, Sam.

Sam: What would be really amazing was if formulaic language links to that, but I suspect it won't.

Phil: Truly commendable third addition to your research. That's brilliant.

Sam: Thank you.

Phil: One of the things that we ask all the guests that come on is any recommendations in terms of books, articles, videos, films, anything like that in terms of thinking about your specialisms and any recommendations for where people can go to find out more if they wanted to do that.

Sam: Sure. Thinking from a non-academic point of view, so more accessible kind of texts, there are some great books out at the moment. There is one that has been recently released by Ben Blatt called "Nabokov's Favourite Word is Mauve". He's a journalist so it's not an academic treatment but it gives a real insight into the sort of questions a forensic linguist might ask of a text. It's really taking a stylometric approach to language and looking at the ways that language varies between different authors, particularly fiction writers. So can you tell whether an author is male or female based on the words they are using? How does it relate to those sorts of things? So that's quite a nice and very gentle introduction to the sort of questions that we ask. Another really good forensic book is by John Olsson and is called "Wordcrime" and again it's a very accessible, non-academic one, but it really takes you through a whole series of cases that he's worked on as a consultant. I think it just nicely illustrates the whole spectrum of things that a forensic linguist might work on and that gives an idea about how that could fit into a HR context, the sort of problems that HR managers might face and how a forensic linguist might be used to help them out with that. Roger Shuy is also a big name, one of the founding fathers of forensic linguistics in fact, he's got two books that I would recommend, one called "Creating Language Crimes" and again that's based on his experience as an expert consultant and another one called "The Language of Confession, Interrogation and Deception" and that really starts to look at issues of police interviews, police interrogations, how confessions are made, how deception is played out from a linguist point of view and I think that's quite a nice compliment particularly for those who are familiar with that sort of material from a psychological point of view. There are always some great articles and things. I can send you a list of those, if that would be easier.

Phil: That would be great and then I can put them in the show notes.

Sam: No problem, yes.

Phil: That would be fab. I'll put links into all of those books as well and you've also just added to my reading list as well.

Sam: Sorry [laughs].

Phil: You're not sorry really [laughs].

Sam: Still the teacher in me.

Phil: Ok. I've just looked at my recording and thought wow, we talked for one hour, so is there anything else that you're thinking, feeling, anything else that you think or want to say?

Sam: I guess one thing that I probably haven't stressed enough is that we've talked about the importance of being sensitive to language and in my experience, I've been teaching forensic linguistics for over 20 years now and I can pretty much guarantee every year I'll have a student who

tries to solve a crime based on a couple of hours or a term's worth of input. I guess it's just important to point out that being a forensic linguist requires you to be a skilled linguist not just applying it to legal context. I guess I wouldn't want people to think that they can look at a text and notice something and build a case around it without really considering the wider linguistic issues. In those instances, I would really encourage people to be aware that language is a useful thing, a useful tool from a forensic point of view but to seek the appropriate advice if you think it's worth pursuing it rather than to try and do it on your own. We talked earlier about having HR interviews with people who don't necessarily know what they are doing, or they've read the latest psychology book. I think it's great to be aware of forensic linguistics but don't assume you can do it straight away.

Phil: Agree. Part of what I want to do with this podcast series is introduce listeners to both topics, people and approaches that I think are really interesting and have merit for consideration in our field and I agree with you completely that awareness and applicability and expertise are three quite very different things and the intention is I guess to raise some of that awareness around things that are out there, practices and approaches that have a really strong evidence base behind them that can be useful and helpful for them in their practice. But there is a lot of time, effort, energy and so on that goes into being able to do that and do that well. All that is left to do then is to say a huge thank you to you. Actually, if people did want to get in touch with you, Sam, what would be a good way to find you or do that? If people who wanted to find out more, what would be an appropriate way for somebody to make contact with you if they wanted to do that?

Sam: That would be great. I'd love to hear from people. I work at Manchester Metropolitan University and I guess my email address is the best thing to provide people – s.larner@mmu.ac.uk.

Phil: Wonderful. Huge thank you, Sam, for taking the time to join us today. I know you're in the middle of doing some research at the moment, so I greatly appreciate your time to come and join us on the Emotion at Work podcast.

Sam: Thank you for having me. It's been great to just talk about myself for an hour [laughs].