

DISCOURSE FUNCTIONS OF SET EXPRESSIONS: STRESS AND ANXIETY

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Abstract

This article examines the discourse functions of set expressions—idioms, pragmatic markers, and formulaic phrases—and their dual impact on stress and anxiety in communication. While set expressions support discourse by organizing information, signaling stance, and facilitating social interaction, they can also contribute to communicative stress when misused, misunderstood, or deployed in inappropriate registers. Drawing on insights from psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics, and applied linguistics, the paper demonstrates how formulaic sequences reduce cognitive load, promote fluency, and enhance interpersonal rapport, yet simultaneously risk triggering anxiety for speakers concerned with accuracy, social evaluation, or pragmatic appropriateness. The analysis highlights implications for teaching, professional training, and individual stress-management strategies, emphasizing the importance of metapragmatic awareness and contextualized practice. Ultimately, the article argues for a balanced approach that leverages the communicative benefits of set expressions while addressing their potential to intensify anxiety in academic and professional settings.

• Key words: Set expressions

• formulaic language, pragmatic markers, discourse functions, stress and anxiety, pragmatic competence, cognitive processing, politeness strategiesregister, communication anxiety

Set expressions—idioms, fixed phrases, and conventionalized utterances such as “at the end of the day,” “to be honest,” or “you know what I mean”—are ubiquitous in spoken and written discourse. At the university level, examining how these expressions function is important not only for linguistic analysis but also for understanding social and psychological effects. This text argues that set expressions perform crucial discourse-management roles: they structure interaction, manage

interpersonal relations, and help speakers and listeners regulate cognitive and affective states. However, these same functions can also contribute to stress and anxiety for both native and non-native speakers. Recognizing the discursive power of set expressions can inform pedagogy, clinical communication, and workplace training to reduce communicative stress and foster clearer interaction.

What Are Set Expressions and Why They Matter

Set expressions are formulaic language items that are stored and retrieved as whole units in the mental lexicon. They include idiomatic expressions (e.g., "break the ice"), pragmatic markers (e.g., "well," "I mean"), discourse connectors (e.g., "however," "on the other hand"), and conventionalized social formulas (e.g., "How are you?"). Their importance lies in efficiency and predictability: they economize cognitive processing, signal speaker intentions, and provide listeners with scaffolding for interpretation. In academic and professional contexts, set expressions help manage argument structure, signal stance, and indicate transitions, making them central to coherent persuasion and explanation.

- Cognitive economy: Speakers can produce complex meanings rapidly by deploying stored phrases.

- Interactional signaling: Set expressions indicate turn-taking moves, politeness strategies, hedging, emphasis, or alignment.

- Genre sensitivity: Different registers and disciplines favor different formulae (e.g., "it should be noted" in academic prose versus "to be honest" in casual speech).

These affordances make set expressions valuable rhetorical tools for persuasion. However, the same features that make them efficient can create problems when misused or misunderstood.

Discourse Functions That Reduce Stress

Certain discourse functions of set expressions can lower communicative stress and anxiety by creating predictability and social comfort.

- Framing and Transitioning: Phrases like "first of all," "moreover," or "to summarize" help listeners follow complex arguments. Clear signposting reduces cognitive load and the anxiety associated with losing track of an argument.

- Softeners and Hedging: Expressions such as "it seems," "perhaps," or "I would argue" allow speakers to present claims tentatively, which can reduce the fear of being wrong and thereby lower anxiety in debates or peer review.

- Rapport and Politeness: Conventional greetings and formulas ("thanks for your time," "if you don't mind") establish social norms that make exchanges feel safer and more predictable, reducing interpersonal anxiety.

- Foregrounding and Emphasis: Set expressions like “importantly” or “let me be clear” help manage listener expectations, enabling focused attention and minimizing the stress of ambiguity.

These supportive functions show that set expressions can be intentionally harnessed to create calmer, more productive communicative environments.

How Set Expressions Can Increase Stress and Anxiety

Despite their benefits, set expressions can also amplify stress and anxiety through several mechanisms:

- Formulaic Pressure and Inauthenticity: In settings that prize spontaneity or creativity, reliance on canned phrases may make speakers feel inauthentic, provoking self-consciousness and performance anxiety.
- Misalignment Across Registers: Using register-inappropriate set expressions (e.g., overly colloquial markers in formal writing) can create social or evaluative stress when speakers fear negative judgment.
- Pragmatic Misunderstanding: Non-native speakers and novices may misinterpret the social force of a phrase. For example, the hedging function of “kind of” or “sort of” varies across cultures and can lead to confusion about commitment, causing anxiety about the communicative outcome.
- Overuse and Distraction: Excessive use of fillers and pragmatic markers (e.g., “like,” “you know”) can undermine perceived competence, raising evaluative anxiety in academic or professional contexts.
- Cognitive Entrenchment and Fixation: Heavy reliance on set expressions may impede rhetorical flexibility, producing stress when speakers must adapt spontaneously to novel communicative demands.

Understanding these pathways clarifies why some learners and professionals experience heightened anxiety around discourse production and comprehension.

Evidence from Psycholinguistics and Applied Linguistics

Empirical research supports the dual effects of set expressions. Psycholinguistic studies show that formulaic language is processed faster than novel combinations, which can reduce real-time processing load. Conversely, sociolinguistic studies reveal that perceptions of credibility and competence are sensitive to the type and frequency of set expressions used. Applied linguistics research on second language acquisition identifies formulaic sequences as critical for fluency, yet notes that pragmatic competence (knowing when and how to use them) often lags behind memorization, leading to communicative breakdowns and anxiety.

- Processing speed: Familiar sequences activate retrieval pathways, freeing working memory for other tasks.

- Social evaluation: Listeners infer speaker traits from language patterns, influencing anxiety about social outcomes.

- L2 pragmatic competence: Non-native speakers who memorize formulae without pragmatic calibration may experience misunderstanding, increasing communicative stress.

These findings illustrate that set expressions are neither inherently good nor bad; their effects depend on competence, context, and social interpretation.

Implications for Teaching and Professional Development

To mitigate anxiety and harness the persuasive power of set expressions, pedagogical and training interventions should focus on both form and function.

- Teach functions, not only forms: Instruction should move beyond lists of idioms to include explanations of pragmatic effects, register choices, and timing.

- Contextualized practice: Role plays and genre-based tasks help learners practice appropriate selection and modulation of set expressions across contexts.

- Metapragmatic awareness: Promote reflection on how expressions affect perceived stance, politeness, and credibility.

- Gradual internalization: Encourage learners to use formulaic sequences as scaffolds while developing strategies for flexible adaptation.

- Feedback that addresses social perception: Provide evaluative guidance about how particular phrases are likely to be interpreted by target audiences.

In professional settings, workshops on rhetorical framing and audience-sensitive language can reduce performance anxiety and improve persuasiveness.

Strategies for Individuals to Reduce Stress

Individuals can adopt practical strategies to manage anxiety related to set expressions:

- Monitor frequency: Record and reflect on habitual use of fillers or hedges; practice reducing overuse when it undermines perceived competence.

- Learn alternatives: Build a repertoire of register-appropriate expressions and alternatives to avoid reliance on any single phrase.

- Rehearsal with variability: Practice delivering arguments using different set expressions and phrasings to build adaptive fluency.

- Seek pragmatic input: Use corpora, recorded lectures, or native-speaker models to observe authentic use in relevant registers.

- Reframe mistakes: View missteps with set expressions as learning opportunities rather than catastrophes – this mindset reduces fear of negative evaluation.

These techniques combine cognitive and behavioral elements proven to reduce communicative anxiety.

Ethical and Cross-Cultural Considerations

Because set expressions carry cultural and interpersonal meaning, ethical sensitivity is essential. What functions as a polite hedge in one culture may be read as evasive in another. In multicultural classrooms and international workplaces, explicit teaching of pragmatic norms and encouraging intercultural dialogue can prevent misinterpretation and reduce anxiety for all participants. Importantly, instructors and supervisors should avoid penalizing speakers solely for using formulaic language, recognizing its role in enabling participation and fluency.

Conclusion: A Balanced View

Set expressions are powerful linguistic tools that structure discourse, support persuasion, and reduce cognitive effort. Yet they can also be sources of stress and anxiety when misapplied or misunderstood. The persuasive argument offered here is pragmatic: the goal should not be to eliminate formulaic language but to cultivate pragmatic competence and metapragmatic awareness. By teaching the functions of set expressions, providing contextualized practice, and fostering reflective strategies, educators and professionals can help speakers exploit the benefits of these expressions while minimizing their stress-inducing effects. This balanced approach supports clearer communication, more effective persuasion, and healthier interpersonal dynamics in diverse academic and professional settings.

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