

Style, Representation and Rhetoric

Introduction: Functional Grammar for Critical Text Analysis

Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) provides an analytical framework for those who are interested in the way language is used by Shakespeare and Virginia Woolf, the *Sun* newspaper, *OK* magazine and *The Australian*, Winston Churchill and Martin Luther King, the scriptwriters of *Star Trek*, Woody Allen, television celebrity chefs and Batman comics, two-year olds and tri-linguals, the writers of the gospels, the Anglican common prayer book and the Koran, agony aunts and astrologists, ‘flamers’ on e-mail lists, the copywriters of the Coca Cola ads, lawyers and witnesses in the OJ Simpson case, Sir Isaac Newton and David Attenborough, the UNA bomber, children and stroke sufferers with language disabilities, the talking clock, Bart Simpson, lonely hearts, obituaries and ransom notes.

That is to say, it is a grammar for those interested in exploring how it is that texts, both spoken and written, come to mean what they do, given that the mechanisms by which texts develop meanings are not always obvious or apparent to ‘the naked eye’. It is for those interested in the way our speech and writing varies, as it does, from social situation to social situation. It is for those interested in how ways of speaking and writing may have changed through history, how they *do* vary across different cultures, in why some texts seem to have the potential to influence public attitudes and beliefs, and in why some texts are judged to be effective, elegant or well-formed and others are deemed aberrant, ill-formed or mad.

This systemic functional linguistics (often just 'systemics' for short) has been developed over the last 30 years or so by the British-born, Australian linguist, Michael Halliday and a group of colleagues located in educational and research institutions throughout Europe, north and south America, Asia and Australia. It builds on an earlier traditions within linguistics, most notably the work of Firth, Hjelmslev and the Prague school of functional linguistics.

As indicated above, this theory sets out to explain language as it is used in actual social situations and hence is concerned at all times with the meaning, communicative functionality and rhetorical purposes of language. Systemic linguistic theory is organised so as to assist its practitioners in,

- understanding the communicative properties of written and spoken texts of all types: why a text means what it does and why it is valued as it is¹,
- understanding the relation between language and culture, language and community, language and social grouping, and language and ideology,
- identifying the grammatical, stylistic and rhetorical properties which associate with particular text types, and with which speakers/writers must be fluent if they are to communicate effectively,

¹ This list is largely derived from that supplied by Halliday in his introductory chapter to *An Introduction to Functional Grammar* (Halliday 1994: xxix)

- helping people learn foreign languages and to develop fluency in the various styles of language, both written and spoken, which make up their mother tongue,
- helping train interpreters and translators,
- understanding what languages have in common and what may differ from one language to another,
- understanding how a child develops language,
- understanding how languages evolve over time,
- understanding the language of the deaf,
- helping in the diagnosis and treatment of language pathologies,
- designing computer software to produce texts, summarise texts, extract information from texts and translate between languages,
- assisting in legal adjudications by matching samples of sound or wording (forensic linguistics).

The systemic functional framework assists those working with these and other objectives because it provides for descriptions and explanations which are based on an understanding of the general functionality of the language. It enables analyses of individual texts or groups of texts to be related to general features of the language. In many instances, it equips the analyst to discover tendencies and patterns in texts which would otherwise remain hidden. As Halliday has argued, (1994: xvi) without a coherent, functional theory of language (a ‘grammar’ of language), text and discourse analysis can become ‘just a running commentary on the text, an appeal to a set of non-linguistic conventions or linguistic features trivial enough to be accessible without a grammar’.

An overview of SFL

Language: resources for meaning

In very broad terms, Systemic Functional Linguistics can be said to be concerned with understanding text, where the term ‘text’ refers to any stretch of spoken or written language which is seen as in some sense complete and as serving some unified purpose or set of related purposes. In order to ‘understand’ text, systemics is concerned with describing the use which particular texts or text types make of various grammatical patterns and lexical choices and then with explaining that use. It is concerned with how and why texts mean what they do, where the ‘how’ references the general communicative principles which underlie the language and the ‘why’ references the social situation out of which the text emerges and the social purposes it serves.

To develop such ‘explanations’, therefore, systemics provides a description of the grammatical resources provided by the language under consideration. By ‘grammatical resources’, I refer to the various vocabulary choices, the orderings of words and the patterns of intonation that are possible in the language and the various meanings or communicative functions these choices and patternings serve.

Let me illustrate this notion of ‘grammatical resources’ with reference to one of the most basic oppositions in language – between (1) conveying information through language and (2) getting other people to act in certain ways through language. This opposition is often referred to as the difference between making a statement (offering information) and giving a command (demanding some action). English offers some

obvious grammatical resources for these two functions or communicative purposes. To make statements, English grammar provides what is traditionally termed the ‘declarative’ – for example, ‘John fears ghosts’. To give commands, English provides what is traditionally termed the ‘imperative’ – for example, ‘Run for your life.’ All ‘declaratives’ display the same grammatical structure or ordering of words in that they include a Subject (‘John’, in the instance above) which is typically followed by a Verb (‘fears’, in the instance above). In contrast, ‘imperatives’ of the type exemplified above include no Subject but begin, rather, with the Verb itself (‘Run’ in the instance above). Imperatives are thus distinguished from declaratives in grammatical terms by having no Subject. For example

1. declaratives (statements): Subject + Verb + additional elements

Subject	Verb	(additional elements)
John	fears	ghosts

2. imperatives (commands): Verb + additional elements

Verb	(additional elements)
Run	for your life

These, therefore, are two examples of ‘grammatical resources’ where a particular patterning of words (a particular grammatical structure of lexical items) serves a particular communicative function – to offer information in the case of the ‘declarative’ and to demand or urge some action in the case of the ‘imperative’.

The systemic theory of modes of meaning

Systemics, therefore, is concerned with describing the various patterns or structures of wordings which occur in the language in the context of the communicative functions or purposes those patterns serve. Systemics refers to these ‘functions’ as meanings, thereby using the term in a rather more general sense than is perhaps typical in everyday language, since in common parlance, ‘meaning’ is frequently understood to involve simply the dictionary definition of individual words. Under this broader use of the term ‘meaning’ – fundamental to the systemics approach – we can talk about the ‘meaning’ of the imperative as a grammatical resource (demanding/urging some action or response) versus the ‘meaning’ of the declarative (offering some information.) Thus, in grammatical terms, ‘John fears ghosts’ and ‘Run for your life’ differ in meaning in that ‘John fears ghosts’ offers some information while ‘Run for your life’ urges some action.

It is for this reason that systemics is described as both a ‘functional’ and a ‘semantic’ theory of language – it describes the grammatical structures of a language with reference to their meaning or communicative functionality. In this, it is substantially different from what are known as ‘formal’ linguistic theories, the best known of which is Chomsky’s generative grammar. Formal approaches are concerned with discovering abstract determinations of what is grammatical and ungrammatical in language, and not with exploring what possible meanings the grammar of the language makes available.

Systemic linguistics provides, therefore, a semantic account of the grammatical structures of the language. It is ‘semantic’, however, in a rather specific and distinctive way. It is one of the foundational principles of systemics (see, for example,

Halliday 94: i) that languages are organised so as to provide three broad types of communicative functionality or meaning:

- **experiential** (also known as ideational): meanings by which speakers are able to present a picture of some external reality, to represent and make sense of the patterns of experience – what Halliday sometimes terms ‘reflective’ meanings in that they enable the language user to **reflect** upon the nature and organisation of their experiential world.
- **interpersonal**: meanings by which speakers interact with one another, influence the behaviour of others, construct and fill social roles, adopt attitudinal and evaluative positions, form bonds, relationships and alliances – what Halliday also sometimes terms ‘active’ meanings.
- **textual**: meanings which arise out of the arrangement of ‘experiential’ and ‘interpersonal’ meanings within actual acts of communication, meanings by which ‘experiential’ and ‘interpersonal’ meanings enter into relationships with each other and with the situation in which the communication occurs.

In the following sections I will briefly introduce these modes of meaning and the way that systemic linguistics analyses them. The purpose here is only to provide a very general overview of this key aspect of the systemic theory – you are definitely not expected to master these concepts at this stage. Later materials (particularly units in the 2nd year Language Description course) will provide you with a much more detailed account and opportunities for you to apply the theory to actual grammatical analysis.

Experiential (ideational) meanings: constructing a view of reality

The constituents of experience

Under this ‘experiential’ mode we are concerned with the way the language constructs a representation of reality, with the various categories the language makes available for talking about real-world happenings. Under the systemic analysis, language is seen as representing external reality as consisting of (1) happenings and states, (2) entities and (3) circumstances in which the happenings and states occur. Happenings and states, referred to as ‘Processes’ in systemics, are to some degree transient and instantaneous – the language construes them as beginning and ending in time, as having a duration. They are most typically represented as verbs (*to run, to heat, to laugh, to say, to think, to love, to be, to possess*). Entities, referred to as ‘Participants’, are construed as to some degree persistent and fixed, as typically having an extended rather than a limited duration. They are most typically represented as nouns (*the cat, Fred, the bridge, the universe, the Prime Minister*). Finally there are those meanings which provide some context for the happenings and states of affairs, locating them in space or time, attributing causes, and so on. They are typically represented by prepositional phrases or by adverbs (*by the wall, after dinner, with an axe, on purpose, accidentally*). We use the term ‘Circumstance’ to label this functional grammatical category. Circumstances tell us when, where, for how long, to what extent, why, in what manner, by what means, for what purpose, towards what end, with whom, and so on.

Thus, in the context of meanings by which we make reference to and interpret the world of experience, the functional linguistic approach identifies three main constituents:

Processes – typically expressed as verbs and acting to identify happenings and states of affairs in some external reality,

Participants – typically expressed as nouns and acting to identify entities in some external reality which instigate or affected by Processes,

Circumstances – typically expressed as adverbs or prepositional phrases and acting to provide some context for the Participants and Processes.

Halliday explains the dividing up of the world of external experience into processes, participants and circumstances in the following way (1994: 108).

If we are out in the open air, we may notice some movement in the air. If that movement involves birds and the flapping of wings we are likely to say, 'Birds are flying in the sky.' We have thereby analysed the event as consisting of three component parts: a participant (birds), a process (flying) and a circumstance ('in the sky'). If the movement involves water, we might, in contrast, not break the event down into component parts and simply say, 'it's raining'. We thereby, construe the event simply as a process without participants (since the 'it' doesn't actually reference a real-world entity). In English, we do of course have the option of including participants and circumstances in our representation of this rain event. We can say, 'Rain drops are falling on my head.' But such instances, where the event is not analysed into component parts, are rare. Thus we don't have any equivalent structure for the movement of birds such as 'it's birding/it's winging' or any similar structure for the falling of leaves in autumn such as 'it's leafing' or 'it's autumning' etc. In almost all instances, we must analyse the event as involving a semantic configuration of a process, at least one participant and, optionally, one or more circumstances.

Systemic theory thus analyses language as providing a representation by which reality is made up of configurations of three very broad and abstract types of constituent or category – Processes, Participants and Circumstances. We will explore these ideas in greater detail in Unit 5.

Reflection Activity

Consider the slight difference in meaning (or at least emphasis) between the following,

1. The leaves were falling from the trees.
2. The trees were dropping their leaves.

How do they differ in terms of the way the happening has been broken down into Participants and Processes? Do you feel that the trees have, at least subtly, been made to seem more active or more centrally involved in 2. Why might this be so?

If you speak or are familiar with another language, think about how you would translate the two sentences. Can either or both of the sentences be translated word for word. Can you see any connection between problems in translation and the Participants and Processes involved.

1.6 Interpersonal meanings

I began this unit by looking firstly at what are termed 'experiential' meanings because it is this type of meaning which is probably most familiar to you – it is most in keeping with our everyday or common-sense understanding of the term 'meaning'. That is to say, common-sense notions are typically concerned with the 'experiential', with the ways language makes reference to events and items in some external reality. It must be stressed that, within systemic theory, the 'experiential' is but one of three types of meaning. Systemics is very careful not to give priority to this experiential mode and sees it as standing beside and interacting with interpersonal and textual meanings. Systemics certainly stands apart from some other linguistic frameworks in giving this emphasis to interpersonal meanings and stresses that to understand the full functionality of any utterance it is necessary to consider all three meanings simultaneously - all utterances simultaneously involve experiential, interpersonal and textual meanings. . (Some formal semantic theories ignore the interpersonal entirely.) While every sentence will have experiential content (it will reference items in external reality), every sentence likewise is necessarily and simultaneously interpersonal in that all sentences act to position both speaker and listener in some way. In this section I will briefly explain this view point and thereby offer a brief introduction to this interpersonal mode of meaning making. (Once again, this is intended to provide a very general overview – we'll explore interpersonal meanings in detail in later units.)

1.6.1 The four basic interpersonal positions a speaker can adopt

Perhaps a sentence such as *Hamlet was written by William Shakespeare* may seem to you an entirely 'factual' and impersonal statement. How does it 'position' the speaker and/or the listener, you may ask. In what sense it is 'interactive' or 'interpersonal'? Well, it positions in the sense that it involves a choice by the speaker to impart or offer some information and thereby positions the listener to be the recipient of that information. This is the 'interpersonal' function of the so-called 'declarative' sentence. Such declaratives (offers of information) stand in contrast to various other options within the language. They are contrasted, for example, with questions (interrogatives) such as *Who wrote Hamlet?* or *Did Francis Bacon write Hamlet?*. Questions act, interpersonally, not to offer information but to demand it. They position listeners as (potential) providers of information and speakers as (potential) recipients of information. Both declarative statements and questions stand in contrast to commands (also known as imperatives) which are concerned not with information but with some action or response, with what Halliday terms goods-&-services. A command such as, *Write me a play in the style of Hamlet*, thus acts interpersonally to demand or urge some service from the listener. It positions the listener as a potential supplier of a service and the speaker as the potential recipient of that service. There is one final basic interpersonal option, that of the offer. Here, as in the case of the command, we are concerned with some action or response (goods-&-services) rather than information, but while the command demands goods or services, the offer indicates a

willingness to supply them. Offers are typically expressed through structures such as *Would you like a beer?*, *Anyone for seconds?*, *I could open the window if you like?* etc.

At this level of the basic options for positioning speaker and listener, then, we have a four-way system which turns on two distinctions – between (1) whether the communicative exchange involves information or (2) actions/responses (goods-&-services) and between whether it involves (1) demanding or (2) supplying. The relationship between the options is set out below.

	information	goods-&-services
supply	statement (declarative): <i>Shakespeare was the author of Hamlet.</i>	offer: <i>Would you like this copy of Hamlet?; I'd like you to have my copy of Hamlet.</i>
demand	question (interrogative): <i>Who wrote Hamlet? Was Shakespeare the author of Hamlet?</i>	command (imperative): <i>Give me that copy of Hamlet. Write me an essay on Hamlet by Friday. Tell me who wrote Hamlet.</i>

Table 1: The four basic interpersonal options

1.6.2 Extending the interpersonal possibilities

These, then, are the four basic interpersonal options. All languages, of course, provide means by which we can complicate, qualify and extend these options. As a result there are many ways in which we can demand or offer information or goods-&-services and each of these different ways has its own interpersonal ‘meaning’ or function. Consider, for example, a demand for goods-&-services (a command.) We can of course use what is known as an imperative structure (the form which typically has no Subject and begins with a verb) – *Have the report on my desk by 5 o'clock.* But equally, we might also choose to make such a demand by means of utterances such as, *You should have the report on my desk by 5 o'clock, The report must be on my desk by 5 o'clock, It's essential that the report is on my desk by 5 o'clock, If it's not too great an imposition, could you have the report on my desk by 5 o'clock,* and so on. These alternatives all serve the same basic interpersonal function (they have the same core interpersonal meaning) of demanding a service. They nevertheless differ in certain subtleties of interpersonal meaning to do with issues of politeness, formality, intimacy, the power relationship between speaker and listener and the degree that the speaker indicates willingness to negotiate the demand. These alternatives, therefore, enable the speaker to complicate their interpersonal message, to complicate and extend the precise nature of the position they seek to adopt for themselves and their listener.

We find similar possibilities in the context of offers of information (declaratives). We might, for example, simply state, ‘Scientists have discovered life on Mars’. Here we have a direct offer of information without any indication that we want to qualify that information, that we are uncertain about the information, that the information is likely

to be challenged, that we suspect the listener may not believe us and so. But of course, the language enables us to do all these things. We are able to complicate the position we take with respect to offering information and with expecting the listener to accept that information. Thus we can say, *Scientists may have discovered life on Mars, It's just possible Scientists have discovered life on Mars, It's claimed Scientists have discovered life on Mars, Scientists allegedly claim they have discovered evidence of what just could be life on Mars.* All these variations can be said to share the same basic function of offering information, but once again there is considerable difference in interpersonal meaning relating to issues of the reliability, certainty, probability and acceptability of the information, and the degree to which the speaker presents themselves as willing to negotiate that information with listeners.

We will investigate these matters in more detail in a later unit.

Reflection Activity

English provides us with many different ways of performing the interpersonal function of getting other people to do things, many of which are seen as 'indirect' because they don't explicitly involve commands. Can you rank the following alternatives on a sliding scale from most to least polite?

Play the piano at once

I order you to play the piano

Can you play the piano

Could you play the piano for me Mary

Would you mind playing the piano

Did I say you could stop playing

I don't remember asking you to stop

Some music would be nice

It's gone very quiet in here

I do so much love Mozart

Which alternatives are 'indirect'? What different grammatical forms (questions, statements, commands) have been used to make these commands? How is, do you think, that listeners are able to detect that such questions and statements are actually functioning as commands? Can we generalise and say that questions are a more polite form of indirect commands than statements, or vice versa?

If you speak or are familiar with another language, think about how such indirect forms would be translated. Can questions and statements be used in

this way to make ‘indirect’ commands in any of the other languages that you know? How difficult would it be to match the exact level of politeness of each alternative in the target language?

1.7 Textual Meanings

Any utterance, therefore, simultaneously contains experiential and interpersonal meanings. That is to say, it contains meanings by which speakers make reference to events and items in some external reality (experiential meanings) and by which speakers interact with their listeners, positioning them as either sources or suppliers of information or goods-&-services (interpersonal meanings). One final set of meanings is necessary, however, if individual utterances are to be combined together to form coherent, connected and unified texts. We need linguistic resources, for example,

- which indicate whether the speaker/writer is referencing something they have already mentioned or whether they are introducing something new into the discussion,
- which indicate the speaker/writer’s angle on the information they are presenting.
- which indicate whether the speaker/writer is referencing something which is actually present in the immediate physical environment or whether they are talking about things which are distant in space or time
- and so on.

Systemics uses the term ‘textual’ meaning to reference the words and structures which serve these purpose’. For now, I’ll provide a brief introduction to just one of these meanings, what is termed the ‘Theme’ of an utterance.

Every complete, free-standing utterance in English has this ‘Theme’ element. In general terms, the Theme is that element of the utterance which the speaker wishes to make his/her starting point. The Theme is what each utterance is ‘about’, the ‘hook’ upon which the utterance hangs, the ‘angle’ that the speaker applies to his/her utterance. It is, however, rather difficult to explain in abstract terms what the Theme does semantically. It is easier to convey the functionality of the Theme through examples. (We will return to the topic of Theme and related grammatical issues in Unit 6.)

Consider the following sentence.

Two probationary police officers yesterday arrested the Prime Minister for allegedly driving while under the influence of alcohol.

Is there anything odd or unlikely about the sentence? Can you imagine it occurring in, say, the opening sentence of a news report? Without more information to go on, I personally find the sentence rather unlikely. Certainly we would expect a news report to go something like,

The Prime Minister has been arrested for allegedly driving under the influence of alcohol.

The question here turns on which Theme (which starting point or angle) is the most appropriate in the circumstances. In English, we indicate what is the Theme by

placing it first in the sentence. Thus, in the first sentence the Theme is ‘Two probationary police officers’ and in the second, ‘The Prime Minister’. The problem with the first sentence is that it’s difficult to imagine circumstances in which we would want to make two unknown police officers our point of departure, our angle for such an account. We would need to ask, ‘Is this a story **about** police officers or **about** the Prime Minister?’. Well, all things being equal, it is much more likely that the Prime Minister will provide the point of interest, the angle of what is to follow afterwards and therefore he/she makes for a better Theme.

Thus our story would be likely to go something like,

The Prime Minister has been arrested for allegedly driving under the influence of alcohol. He was pulled over by two probationary officers while returning home from Parliament House in the early hours of Wednesday morning.

This is not, of course, to suggest that there are no circumstances in which we might not want to make the police officers our angle or point of departure, and hence our Theme. Thus we might encounter something along the lines of,

Two probationary officers yesterday attempted to arrest the Prime Minister for speeding. They were not at first aware of the identity of the driver and did not realise the Prime Minister was rushing to the airport on official government business.

(NB: Within systemic theory, the meaning of the term ‘Theme’ is not the same as in everyday usage where it usually refers to the overall subject of a text. Under the systemic framework, the Theme is an element of each clause, with each clause having its own Theme.)

Reflection activity

In a previous reflection activity, I suggested that the following two sentences had a different meaning on account of the different choices as to Participants and Processes which were involved.

1. The leaves are falling from the trees.
2. The trees are dropping their leaves.

Now we can see, of course, that the difference in meaning is at least partially a textual one – a matter of the sentences having different Themes (sentence 1 is *about* ‘leaves’, while sentence 2 is *about* ‘trees’). In retrospect, then, do you think that the difference in meaning is primarily experiential (determined by different choices as to Participants and Processes) or primarily textual (determined by a different choice of Theme)? Or is it, perhaps, the result of a combination of the two?

It is difficult to do a word by word translation of sentence 2 into many languages. If you speak or are familiar with such a language, think about how

you might construct a sentence in which the ‘trees’ rather than the ‘leaves’ is Thematic – that is to say, in which the sentence is *about* ‘trees’ rather than ‘leaves’. Please note that, while in English, the Theme is what comes first in the sentence, this is not always the case. In other languages, other grammatical means may be used to indicate what the sentence is *about* (to indicate its Theme). In some languages, for example, a particle is attached to the word or words which are to be treated as Thematic, and these Thematic elements may come later in the sentence.

1.8 Summary

Systemic Functional Linguistics seeks to provide an account of the grammar of a language by reference to the social purposes and contexts of language use. Systemics is concerned with identifying the repertoire of meanings that a language provides (its linguistic resources) and with relating those meanings to the social context in which they occur.

Systemics identifies three broad types of meaning: experiential (also known as ideational), interpersonal and textual.

Experiential meanings enable speakers to provide representations of the constituents of some external reality through the identification of Participants, Processes and Circumstances.

Interpersonal meanings enable speakers to interact with others, to adopt positions, attitudes and social roles and to attempt to position others. The basic interpersonal meanings relate to whether an utterance is concerned with information or goods-&-services, and whether the utterance is an offer or a demand.

Textual meanings enable the speaker to organise and interconnect their interpersonal and experiential meanings, to relate what they are saying to what they said before and to the immediate context. The Theme is a textual function by which speakers indicate the angle or point of departure of their utterances.