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Systemic Functional Linguistics: A Brief Introduction

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Ignatius Tri Endarto
English Education Department, Universitas Kristen Duta Wacana
endarignatius@gmail.com

“when we analyse a text, ... we show what meaningful choices have been made, each one seen in the context of what might have been meant but was not”

(Halliday & Matthiessen)

Genesis

Language is a system so complex that not a single definition can be comprehensive enough to capture all aspects in it. Questions regarding the nature of language have been deliberated since the classical period of the ancient era of philosophy. Therefore, it is unsurprising that early linguistics was considered a part of philosophy and intellectual history in general (Campbell, 2003).

The trends in linguistics have been changing in the course of time. Several traditions, such as the Sumerian, Hindu, Greek, Roman, and Arabic grammatical traditions, arose in ancient linguistics mostly in response to religious concerns which gave prominence to prescriptive views favoring the preservation of the languages of religious texts over language change. As linguists and historians voyaged to distant lands and other parts of the world, they started to realize the similarities among languages and it gave rise to what is known as comparative-historical linguistics. In the 20th century, the tide of linguistics was redirected by the work of Ferdinand de Saussure to non-historical (synchronic) orientation toward the structures and systems of living languages.

Later in 1957, Noam Chomsky shifted the contemporary trend by introducing the transformational generative grammar which emphasizes the importance of native speaker's knowledge (competence) in attempts to establish the so-called universal grammar. According to Chomsky (1980), language or grammar is an innate system that is independent of instrumental purpose/function. This view however does not remain unchallenged. The functionalists, as opposed to Chomsky's view, highlight the significance of communicative functions of language under the general term *functional linguistics* or *systemic functional linguistics*.

Why Systemic Functional Linguistics?

If one were to ask why humans have or acquire language, the most typical answer would likely be “to communicate with it.” In other words, the ultimate goal of a person acquiring a language is not merely to produce or know the “correct” linguistic structures/forms, but to get the right meaning across and accomplish certain social purposes with that language. This kind of view is pretty much aligned with the notion of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) which was developed by M.A.K. Halliday in 1960s.

In SFL, language is considered primarily functional. The structure or form of language is important only to serve the function. Without function, structure would be completely pointless. As Fontaine (2013) puts it, “anyone who has tried to communicate with someone in an unfamiliar language or with a two-year-old will know that being grammatically correct is almost irrelevant.” In most cases, function matters more than structure. However, one needs to understand how language is structured in order to effectively produce and analyze its function. In this sense, both are like two sides of the same coin.

Halliday (in Fontaine, 2013) posits that “a theory of linguistics must incorporate the functions of language in use.” Unlike the traditionalists who tend to see grammar as an entity separate from meaning and context of use, the systemic functionalists perceive language as a social semiotic system—that is to say, a system in which its meaning and form are always driven by its context and speaker’s communicative goals.

Some Key Terms

SFL according to Halliday & Matthiessen (2004) is a broad term which covers various types of analyses, including the analyses of expression (*phonetics* and *phonology*), the analyses of content (*lexicogrammar* and *semantics*) and the analyses of context. Context is a pivotal concern because it significantly contributes to the process of meaning making. One does not speak and write in isolated sentences but in meaningful units called texts which are produced in and influenced by contexts.

In analyzing a text, one should begin with its context and type (*register* and *genre*). These aspects relate closely to three contextual variables, namely: *field* (the topic being talked about), *tenor* (the relationship of participants) and *mode* (the channel of communication). These variables help to explain how individual’s use of language is predominantly dependent upon functions.

Within the language itself, Halliday & Matthiessen (2004) emphasize a dimension called *metafunctions*, which consist of *ideational*, *interpersonal*, and *textual* components. The first refers to language’s ability to construe human experience into categories (*experiential*) and further configure them into complex patterns (*logical*). This metafunction mostly deals with the use of *transitivity*, which includes three main elements: *processes*, *participants* and *circumstances*; and *ideational metaphors*. Interpersonal metafunction embodies the ability of language to negotiate social roles and attitudes. It can be analyzed through the use of *mood*, *modality*, and what is known as *speech acts* and *interpersonal metaphors*. Last but not least, textual function is language’s ability to create *discourse* which entails *theme* and *rheme*, and the use of *cohesive* devices at both lexical and grammatical levels.

Systemic Functional Linguistics for Critical Perspectives

In SFL, the goals of grammatical analysis may vary depending on the objectives of the investigation. Those conducting research on political commentary, media texts, etc., might employ SFL to gain critical skills in analyzing the language. Since its development, SFL has provided an insightful basis for the critical linguistic analyses such as the so-called Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA).

SFL views language as a system of systems with the meaning potential by which its users convey meaning through making choices from a range of alternatives. The notion of choice here is very essential, especially for critical perspectives. Within this framework, critical discourse analysts could investigate a text by showing “the functional organization of its structure ... and ... what meaningful choices have been made, each one seen in the context of what might have been meant but was not” (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004). From this point, they can further relate these choices with the existing ideology and power exercised within society in which the text has been (re)produced.

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