FUNCTIONALISM

The functionalist perspective, also called functionalism, is one of the major [theoretical perspectives](https://www.thoughtco.com/theoretical-perspectives-3026716) in sociology. It has its origins in the works of [Emile Durkheim](https://www.thoughtco.com/emile-durkheim-relevance-to-sociology-today-3026482), who was especially interested in how social order is possible or how society remains relatively stable. As such, it is a theory that focuses on the [macro-level of social structure](https://www.thoughtco.com/macro-and-microsociology-3026393), rather than the micro-level of everyday life.

Other writers have used the concept of function to mean the interrelationships of parts within a system, the adaptive aspect of a phenomenon, or its observable consequences.

A social system is assumed to have a functional unity in which all parts of the system work together with some degree of internal consistency. Functionalism also postulates that all cultural or social phenomena have a positive function and that all are indispensable.

The British anthropologist A.R. [Radcliffe-Brown](https://www.britannica.com/biography/A-R-Radcliffe-Brown) explored the theoretical [implications](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/implications) of functionalism as a relationship between a social institution and the “necessary conditions of existence” of a social system. He saw the function of a unit as the contribution it makes to the maintenance of a social structure—*i.e.,* the set of relationships among social units.

One of the American functionalist sociologists was Robert K. Merton, who divided human functions into two types:

1. [manifest functions](https://www.thoughtco.com/manifest-function-definition-4144979), which are intentional and obvious. In the manifest function of attending a place of worship, for instance, is to practice one's faith as part of a religious community. With common sense, manifest functions become easily apparent. Yet this is not necessarily the case for latent functions, which often demand a sociological approach to be revealed.
2. latent functions, which are unintentional and not obvious. This function may be to help followers learn to discern personal values from institutional ones.

**Theory Overview**

Functionalism posits that society is more than the sum of its parts; rather, each aspect of it works for the stability of the whole. Durkheim envisioned society as an organism since each component plays a necessary role but can't function alone. When one-part experiences a crisis, others must adapt to fill the void in some way.

In functionalist theory, the different parts of society are primarily composed of social institutions, each designed to fill different needs. Family, government, economy, media, education, and religion are important to understanding this theory and the core institutions that define sociology. According to functionalism, an institution only exists because it serves a vital role in the functioning of society. If it no longer serves a role, an institution will die away. When new needs evolve or emerge, new institutions will be created to meet them.

In many societies, the government provides education for the children of the family, which in turn pays taxes the state depends on to keep running. The family relies on the school to help children grow up to have good jobs so they can raise and support their own families. In the process, the children become law-abiding, taxpaying citizens who support the state. From the functionalist perspective, if all goes well, the parts of society produce order, stability, and productivity. If all does not go well, the parts of society must adapt to produce new forms of order, stability, and productivity.

Functionalism emphasizes the consensus and order that exist in society, focusing on social stability and shared public values. From this perspective, disorganization in the system, such as [deviant behavior](https://www.thoughtco.com/sociological-explanations-of-deviant-behavior-3026269), leads to change because societal components must adjust to achieve stability. When one part of the system is dysfunctional, it affects all other parts and

**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 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:

1. field (the topic being talked about),
2. tenor (the relationship of participants)
3. 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:

1. **ideational**, which 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.
2. **interpersonal**, which 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.
3. **textual components**, which refers to the language ability to create discourse which entails theme and rheme, and the use of cohesive devices at both lexical and grammatical levels.

Thus, it is one of the hallmarks of functional approaches to language to emphasize the discursive nature of language use and to analyze (at least some) sentential structures as being functionally dependent on the structures of text and talk. Unfortunately, among many grammarians, especially in the Netherlands, this discourse orientation is still often neglected for a more restricted focus on the structures of sentences: In everyday practice, sentence grammar continues to be seen as the proper task of the linguist, whereas the study of discourse is relegated to the domain of, e.g., conversation or argumentation analysis.

**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.