

# SYSTEMIC FUNCTIONAL LINGUISTICS

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# 01. LANGUAGE AS SOCIAL SEMIOTIC

Source: Flowerdew (2013), Chapter 1

- **Theoretical Depth:**
  - **Language** is not viewed merely as a static set of grammatical rules (as in formal linguistics), but as a Social Semiotic.
  - **Definition:** It is a resource for making meaning that evolves to serve human social needs. The form of language is determined by the functions it serves in society.
- **Text vs. Discourse:**
  - **Text (Product):** The tangible linguistic output (written or spoken) that is recorded. It is the "object" of study.
  - **Discourse (Process):** The continuous process of social interaction, meaning negotiation, and ideological construction that produces the text.

# 02. FORMAL VS. FUNCTIONAL APPROACHES

Source: Flowerdew (2013), Chapter 1

## Formal Linguistics (The Chomskyan Tradition):

- **Focus:** Syntax, Morphology, and Phonology (Form).
- **Goal:** To describe Competence—the idealized, abstract mental knowledge of rules possessed by a native speaker.
- **Context:** Context is often excluded; sentences are analyzed in isolation to test grammatical correctness.

## Systemic Functional Linguistics (The Hallidayan Tradition):

- **Focus:** Semantics, Pragmatics, and Discourse (Meaning).
- **Goal:** To explain Performance—how language is actually used in specific social contexts to achieve goals.
- **Context:** Context is central. Language is a "meaning potential" (what the speaker can do, not just what they know).

# 03. SYSTEM AND STRUCTURE (PARADIGMATIC VS. SYNTAGMATIC)

Source: Yu et al. (2026), Chapter 1

**The System (Paradigmatic Axis – Meaning as Choice):** Language is organized as a huge network of choices. For any given meaning, the "System" offers a range of options.

- **Core Principle:** Meaning implies choice. The significance of a word comes from what was chosen against what was rejected.
- **The Structure (Syntagmatic Axis – Realization):** Structure is the linear sequence of elements that realizes the choices made from the system.
- **Extended Political Discourse Data:**
  - **Speaker: Nelson Mandela** (Inaugural Address, May 10, 1994).
  - **Excerpt:** *"We enter into a covenant that we shall build the society in which all South Africans, both black and white, will be able to walk tall... a rainbow nation at peace with itself and the world."*

- **Arabic Translation:**

"إننا ندخل في عهد بأن نبني مجتمعاً يستطيع فيه كل الجنوب أفريقيين، سوداً وبيضاً، أن يسيروا شامخين... أمة قوس القزح التي تعيش في سلام مع نفسها ومع العالم."

- **SFL Analysis:** The Apartheid system offered a binary choice: "White vs. Non-White." Mandela broke this systemic constraint by introducing a new metaphor ("Rainbow Nation"), thereby restructuring the national identity through a lexical choice that implies unity in diversity.

# 04. THE METAFUNCTIONAL PRINCIPLE

Source: Yu et al. (2026), Chapter 1

## **Poly-functionality of Language:**

- SFL posits that language is not mono-functional. Every single clause simultaneously construes three distinct types of meaning.
  1. **Ideational Metafunction:** Language as Representation. It reflects our experience of the inner and outer world (Reality construction).
  2. **Interpersonal Metafunction:** Language as Exchange. It enacts social relationships, power hierarchies, and attitudes.
  3. **Textual Metafunction:** Language as Message. It organizes the previous two meanings into a coherent, flowing text.

# 05. IDEATIONAL METAFUNCTION (TRANSITIVITY)

Source: Yu et al. (2026) & Kim (2025)

## Theoretical Depth (Transitivity):

- This system analyzes "Who does what to whom?" It breaks reality into: Process (the action), Participants (Actor, Goal), and Circumstances.
- Function: It reveals how a speaker manipulates agency and responsibility (e.g., hiding the actor to evade blame).

## Extended Political Discourse Data:

- **Speaker: Martin Luther King Jr.** ("I Have a Dream", 1963).
- **Excerpt:** *"In a sense we've come to our nation's capital to cash a check... It is obvious today that America has defaulted on this promissory note... America has given the Negro people a bad check."*

- **Arabic Translation:**

"بمعنى ما، لقد جئنا إلى عاصمة أمتنا لصرف شيك... من الواضح اليوم أن أمريكا قد تخلفت عن سداد هذا السند الإذني... لقد أعطت أمريكا الشعب الزنجي شيكاً بدون رصيد."

- **SFL Analysis:** King uses Material Processes (defaulted, given) where "America" is the explicit Actor. He transforms the abstract concept of "Justice" into a concrete "Financial Debt." This creates a logical entrapment: if America is wealthy, it must pay; if it doesn't, it is morally bankrupt.

# 06. INTERPERSONAL METAFUNCTION

Source: Yu et al. (2026) & Kim (2025)

## Theoretical Depth (Modality):

- Modality expresses the speaker's judgment on the probability or obligation of an event. It defines the "space" between Yes and No.
- High vs. Low Value: Choosing high-value modality (must, shall, will) constructs a persona of authority, certainty, and power.

## Extended Political Discourse Data:

- **Speaker: Winston Churchill** ("We Shall Fight on the Beaches", 1940).
- **Excerpt:** *"We shall go on to the end... we shall fight on the seas and oceans... we shall defend our Island, whatever the cost may be... we shall never surrender."*

- **Arabic Translation:**

"سنمضي إلى النهاية... سنقاتل في البحار والمحيطات... سندافع عن جزيرتنا مهما كان الثمن... لن نستسلم أبداً."

- **SFL Analysis:** Churchill relentlessly repeats "Shall" (High Obligation/Certainty) rather than the predictive "Will". In 1940s English, "Shall" carried a weight of destiny and divine will. He is not predicting the future; he is willing it into existence. The translation requires emphatic particles to convey this absolute inevitability.

# 07. TEXTUAL METAFUNCTION (THEME & RHEME)

Source: Yu et al. (2026), Chapter 1

## Theoretical Depth (Thematic Structure):

- **Theme:** The element placed at the beginning of the clause. It is the "point of departure" and signals the local context.
- **Marked Theme:** When a speaker places something other than the Subject (like a Time or Place) at the start, they are signaling a specific emphasis or contrast.

## Extended Political Discourse Data:

- **Speaker:** Barack Obama (Inaugural Address, 2009).
- **Excerpt:** "On this day, we gather because we have chosen hope over fear, unity of purpose over conflict and discord."

- **Arabic Translation:**

"في هذا اليوم، نجتمع لأننا اخترنا الأمل على الخوف، ووحدة الهدف على الصراع والشقاق."

- **SFL Analysis:** By using a Marked Theme ("On this day"), Obama foregrounds the temporal circumstance. He is signaling a "rupture" or a break from the past (the Bush era). The focus is not on "We" (the actors), but on the "Now" (the new era). A translator must preserve this word order to maintain the rhetorical signal of "New Beginnings."

# 08. CONNECTING TO CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS (CDA)

Source: Kim (2025), Chapter 3

## Theoretical Connection (Ideology):

- SFL provides the linguistic tools; CDA provides the sociopolitical interpretation.
- The Ideological Square (Van Dijk): A cognitive strategy to legitimize "Us" and delegitimize "Them".
- Emphasize Our good properties / De-emphasize Our bad properties.
- Emphasize Their bad properties / De-emphasize Their good properties.

## Extended Political Discourse Data:

- **Speaker: George W. Bush** (State of the Union, 2002).
- **Excerpt:** *"States like these, and their terrorist allies, constitute an axis of evil, arming to threaten the peace of the world."*

- Arabic Translation:

"دول مثل هذه، وحلفاؤها الإرهابيون، تشكل محوراً للشر، يتسلح ليهدد سلام العالم."

- SFL/CDA Analysis:
- **Lexicalization:** "Axis" triggers historical memory of WWII (Nazis/Fascism). "Evil" triggers religious morality (God vs. Satan).
- **Ideological Effect:** This constructs a Manichean world (Black & White). It removes the possibility of diplomacy. If the enemy is "Evil," they cannot be negotiated with; they must be destroyed. This language manufactured consent for the invasion of Iraq.

# 09. CONCLUSION

- Language is a system of choices, not just rules.
- **SFL Metafunctions** (Ideational, Interpersonal, Textual) allow us to dissect exactly how meaning is constructed in every clause.
- **CDA** allows us to understand why those choices were made (Power, Ideology, Manipulation).

## **Implication for Translation:**

- A translator is not a transcriber of words, but a re-constructor of discourse. They must recognize the political function of choices (like "Shall" or "Axis") to preserve the ideological impact in the target language.

# 10. REFERENCES

1. Flowerdew, J. (2013). *Discourse in English Language Education*. Routledge.
2. Kim, K. H. (2025). *Critical Discourse Analysis in Translation Studies*. Routledge.
3. Yu, H., et al. (2026). *Introducing Systemic Functional Linguistics*. Routledge.

THANK YOU

**SO MUCH!**