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Introduction to Systemic Functional Linguistics for Discourse Analysis

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Abstract

This course provides a basic introduction to Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) particularly in regards to those aspects most applicable to analyzing discourse.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Systemic-Functional Model of Language

1 What is Systemic Functional Linguistics

Systemic-Functional Linguistics (SFL) is an approach to language developed mainly by M.A.K. Halliday in the U.K. during the 1960s, and later in Australia. The approach is now used world-wide, particularly in language education, and for purposes of discourse analysis.

While many of the linguistic theories in the world today are concerned with language as a mental process, SFL is more closely aligned with Sociology: it explores how language is used in social contexts to achieve particular goals. In terms of data, it does not address how language is processed or represented within the human brain, but rather looks at the discourses we produce (whether spoken or written), and the contexts of the production of these texts.

Because it is concerned with language use, SFL places higher importance on language function (what it is used for) than on language structure (how it is composed).

2 Defining Concepts

Here, we will define what we mean by “systemic” and by “functional”.

2.1 System vs. structure (paradigmatic organisation)

When describing language, two important kinds of relations can be addressed:

1. **Syntagmatic relations:** concerning the ordering of linguistic elements within a larger unit;
2. **Paradigmatic relations:** concerning which language elements can be substituted for each other in a particular context.

Figure 1 (from Chandler 2011) provides a diagrammatic representation of the differences between these terms. Basically, the syntagmatic axis concerns how a sentence can be composed of a sequence of words, each serving a distinct grammatical function. The paradigmatic axis on the other hand concerns how different words could be substituted for each of the words of the sentence. These two terms are often glossed as “chain” and “choice”.

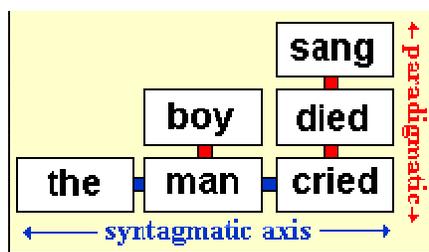


Figure 1: Chandler’s diagram differentiating syntagmatic and paradigmatic axes.

Chomskian grammars focus on the syntagmatic axis: they present a set of rules detailing grammatical sequences of units, e.g.,

- S → NP VP
- NP → det noun
- NP → det adj noun
- NP → pronoun
- VP → v_intrans
- VP → v_trans NP

This set of rules shows that a sentence (S) consists of a sequence of elements, NP and VP. An NP can be composed by three distinct sequences, det^noun, det^adj^noun or pronoun.

The paradigmatic relations here are hidden, in two ways. Firstly, the words that can substitute for det, adj, noun, pronoun, v_intrans and v_trans are not shown here. Secondly, the rules themselves hide the paradigm: where two or more rules have the same left-hand side (e.g., the 3 NP rules), there is an implicit paradigmatic relation. Wherever NP appears in a chain, we can substitute it for any of det^noun, det^adj^noun or pronoun.

A Systemic grammar, on the other hand, focuses on the paradigm: systemic grammars basically set out the choices available in a particular language context. The grammar also describes the possible syntagms (sequences of elements) that could be produced. However, this description is broken up into smaller descriptions (realization statements), each associated with the particular structural choice that it realizes.

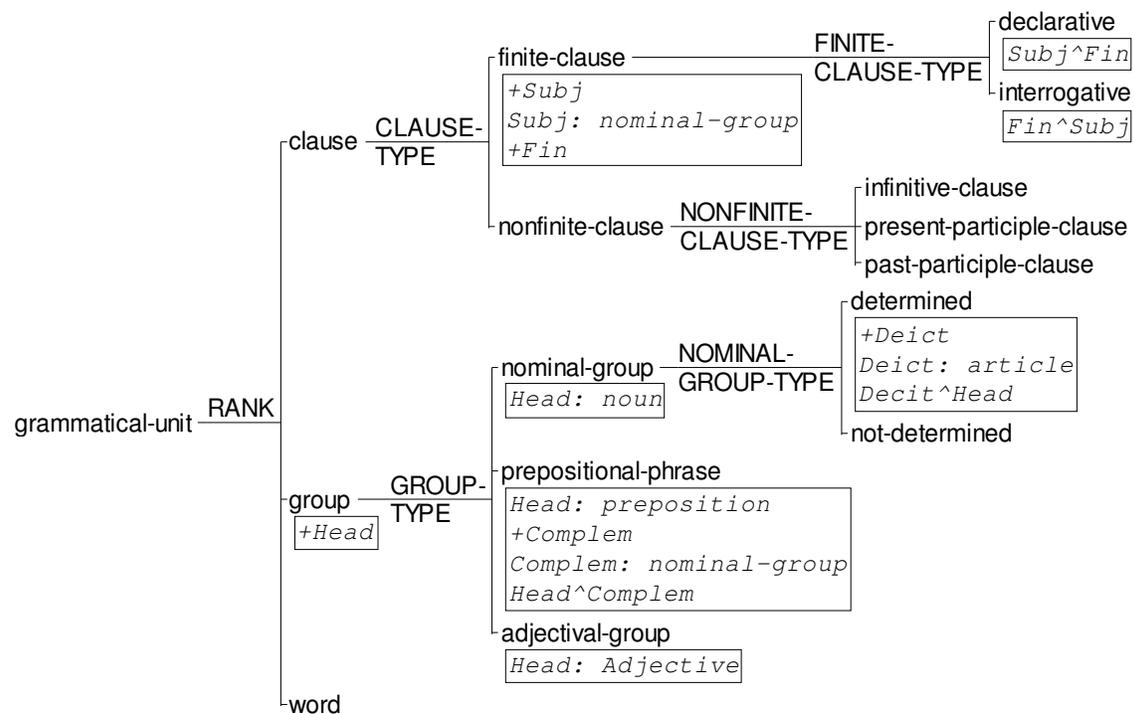


Figure 2: A small Systemic Grammar

Figure 2 shows such a network, a much simplified network for grammatical units. The first choice (that of RANK), concerns the choice between clause, group or word

(‘group’ corresponds to ‘phrase’ in traditional grammar). If one chooses clause, one then faces a further choice between finite-clause and nonfinite-clause, and so on. The set of choices in a particular linguistic context is called a ‘system’. For instance, clause, group and word for the system of RANK, while in this network, infinitive-clause, present-participle-clause and past-participle-clause also form a system.

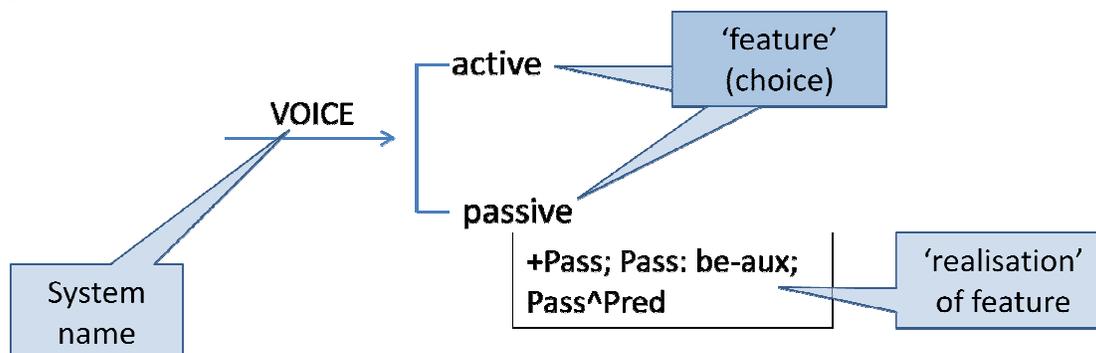


Figure 3: Parts of a System

The set of systems together for a particular linguistic level are called a **system network**. A systemic network describes the set of option available to the language user at this level, both in terms of the choices available, and also in terms of the structural consequences of those choices.

To use the network, one takes a ‘path’ through the network, and combines all the structural rules, e.g., Figure 4 shows a partial network and the structure resulting from combining the realisations of the choices of over clause, finite-clause and declarative.

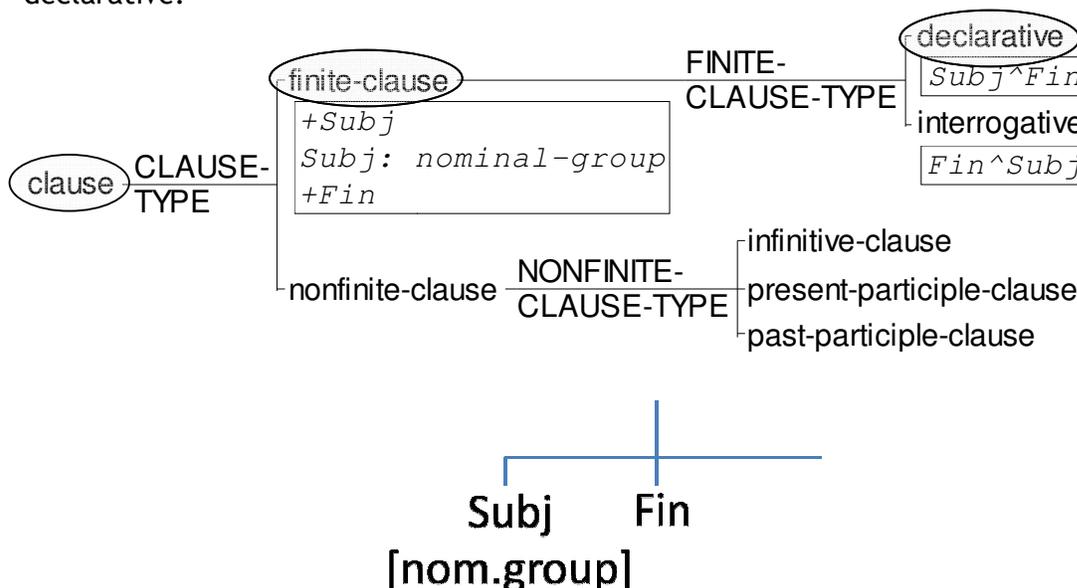


Figure 4: A paradigm and the structure constructed

A ‘systemic’ approach is thus one which views language in these terms, modeling language as a choice potential, with choices operating in a particular context.

A systemic approach allows you to focus on meaningful choices in language (e.g., active vs. passive) without needing to think of the particular structure that realises it.

A basic assumption of SFL is that “meaning implies choice”: if there is no alternative but to do something, then it is not meaningful. The reverse is also believed to be true: if there is a choice in any context, then that choice is meaningful. For instance, lexically we have a choice between “fag” and “cigarette”. The use of the first however is meaningful in that it marks the situation as informal, and may say something about the socio-cultural background of the speaker.

2.2 Functional orientation

SFL takes a “functional” orientation on several levels. In general, it means that a focus on what language does is more important than looking at how it does it (its structure). Some of the ways in which a functional approach is realized are:

1. **Function labels for syntactic elements:** Grammar is organized not only in terms of classes of units, but also in terms of functions (Subject, Actor, etc.). Some other linguistic theories also followed this approach.
2. **Orientation towards the Functions each utterance serves** (‘speech functions’): In SFL, each utterance is assigned a speech function (similar to speech act labels in other approaches), e.g., *giving information* (statement), *demanding information* (question), *demanding action* (order) or *offering action* (offer, promise, etc.).
3. **Views texts as a whole as serving distinct social functions:** conveying information, and establishing/maintaining social relations.
4. **Language is functional:** language is not primarily a tool for conveying ideas. Its main function is to get things done. Language does convey ideas, but only as one part of getting things done.

3 History of SFL

While SFL was largely developed by M.A.K. Halliday and his followers, it built on previous work of linguists. Two of the most influential were Bronislaw Malinowski and J.R. Firth.

3.1 Malinowski and language in context

Bronislaw Malinowski was a Polish-born anthropologist who did much of his work based in England. One of his key concepts was that to fully understand an utterance, understanding the “context of situation” of that utterance is highly important. As he says:

“Our task is rather to show that even the sentence is not a self-contained, self-sufficient unit of speech. Exactly as a single word is save in exceptional circumstances meaningless, and receives its significance only through the context of other words, so a sentence usually appears in the context of other sentences and has meaning only as a part of a larger significant whole. I think that it is very profitable in linguistics to widen the concept of context so that it embraces not only spoken words but facial expression, gesture, bodily activities, the whole group of people present during an exchange of

utterances and the part of the environment on which these people are engaged.” (Malinowski 1935, p22).

Another of his concepts is that the meaning of words lies in their ability to invoke the situation in which they have previously been used:

“In a narrative words are used with what might be called a borrowed or indirect meaning. The real context of reference has to be reconstructed by the hearers even as it is being evoked by the speaker. But situations in which the same words have been used with all the pragmatic vigour of a request or imperative, with all the emotional content of hope or despair, situations in which the use of a word is fraught with weighty consequences for the speaker and for his hearers, in such situations we have speech used in a primary, direct manner. It is from such situations that we are most likely to learn the meaning of words, rather than from a study of derived uses of speech.” (Malinowski 1935, p46).

3.2 J.R. Firth

J.R. Firth was a linguist, who established linguistics as a discipline in Great Britain. He and his followers became known as the London School of linguistics, since they were mostly based in the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) at the University of London. His central contributions in regards to SFL are:

- Firth picked up Malinowski’s idea about the centrality of the context of situation, and applied it throughout his linguistic model.
- He believed that the central concern of linguistics should be the study of meaning, which was very different from the dominant Bloomfieldian approach then current in American linguistics, which thought the study of meaning was not a concern for linguists.
- He developed an approach to phonology, called ‘prosodic phonology’, which allowed phonological features to be shared over successive phonemes, rather than each phoneme having its distinct features (segmental phonology)

3.3 Halliday

When Halliday began his Ph.D., he wanted to be supervised by Firth at SOAS. However, at that time, the University of London required prospective doctoral students to sign a declaration that they were not members of the Communist Party. Halliday refused to sign, and was thus refused admission. He went instead to Cambridge University, which was open to political diversity.

However, Firth agreed to act as Halliday’s supervisor, and Halliday often travelled down from Cambridge to meet with him. Halliday focused on the expansion of the Firthian approach into modelling grammar. Previously, most Firthian work had been in the areas of phonology, morphology and lexis.

When Firth died in 1961, Halliday was the most influential of his followers, and he inherited the leadership of what became known as neo-Firthian linguistics. His application of Firthian principles to grammar was called “Scale and Category Grammar” (see Halliday 1961).

Language education in Britain at that time was based on traditional theories of grammar. The Labour government of that time gave Halliday extensive funding to develop a kind of linguistics that would be more useful for teaching English in British schools (as a first language). Within this program, Halliday evolved his Scale

and Categories grammar into something more functional, what he called Systemic Grammar. While most of the use of linguistics up to that time had been to describe the many languages of the colonial world (Asia, Africa and the Americas), he developed a linguistics more suited to being applied in the classroom.

In 1969, Simon Dik called his grammar approach “Functional Grammar”. Halliday considered this unfair, since this is a generic name covering a wide range of grammars at that time. To reclaim the title, Halliday started to use the name “Systemic Functional grammar” for his approach.

In the late 1960s, Halliday and his wife, Ruqaiya Hasan, had a baby, and Halliday observed much of the language development of his child, developing an influential theory on child language development (e.g., see Halliday 1975).

Halliday moved to Sydney in 1975, becoming Chair of Linguistics at the University of Sydney. There, he focused on extending and developing his functional grammar, resulting in his most-read work “An Introduction to Functional Grammar”, which has since appeared in 3 editions, and has been translated into many languages.

3.4 Other Contributors to SFL

Halliday was not solely responsible for the development of the theory: he provided a framework to which many other linguists have contributed.

- **Ruqaiya Hasan**, his wife, developed the area of Cohesion (see Halliday and Hasan), and contributed to various areas of discourse semantics.
- Jim Martin was a student of Halliday...
- Michael Gregory
- Robin Fawcett
- Christian Matthiessen
- Margaret Berry
- Clare Painter

[To be completed]

4 SFL compared to other approaches

4.1 Functionalism vs. Structuralism

[TO BE COMPLETED]

Language function (what it is used for) is often more important than language structure (how it is composed).

While American-style linguistics evolved in the modelling of the world’s languages, SFL was developed to address the needs of language teaching/learning.

4.2 Socio-semantics vs. Cognitive Grammar

SFL can be contrasted with cognitive linguistics: For SFL language is something shared by a society, can be best studied by observing how language is used in its situation. (external manifestation), no need to hypothesize internal mental processes.

Central: language use must be seen as taking place in social contexts.

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