RESEARCH ARTICLE

SYSTEMIC FUNCTIONAL LINGUISTICS – THE METHODOLOGY OF MEANING

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ABSTRACT

Systemic-Functional Linguistics (SFL) is a theory of language, which has been centred on the notion of language function. While SFL accounts for the syntactic structure of language, it places the function of language as central (what language does, and how it does it), in preference to more structural approaches, which place the elements of language and their combinations as central. SFL starts at social context, and looks at how language both acts upon, and is constrained by, this social context. A central notion to language analysis is 'stratification'. That is language is analysed in terms of four strata: Context, Semantics, Lexico-Grammar and Phonology-Graphology. These days Systemic Functional Linguistics (abbreviated as SFL) is quite popular and very useful to describe and interpret language as a planned "meaning making source." Systemic-Functional Linguistics (SFL) is a theory of language, which has been centred on the notion of language function.

A central notion to language analysis is 'stratification'. That is language is analysed in terms of four strata: Context, Semantics, Lexico-Grammar and Phonology-Graphology. According to Halliday, Context is concerned with the Field (what is going on), Tenor (the social roles and relationships between the participants), and the Mode (aspects of the channel of communication, e.g., monologic/dialogic, spoken/written, +/- visual-contact, etc.). Systemic semantics includes what is usually called 'pragmatics'. Semantics is divided into three components: (1) Ideational Semantics (the propositional content), (2) Interpersonal Semantics (concerned with speech-function, exchange structure, expression of attitude, etc.); (3) Textual Semantics (how the text is structured as a message, e.g. theme-structure, given/new, rhetorical structure etc.). (4) The Lexico-Grammar concerns the syntactic organisation of words into utterances. Even here, a functional approach is taken, involving analysis of the utterance in terms of roles such as Actor, Agent/Medium, Theme, Mood, etc. (1975).

In our life, we regularly use language to chat, to read, to speak to others or to write and to perform innumerable activities of our daily life. Suzanne Eggins (2004, p. 1) stipulates that all the **times we have "to react to and construct bits of language that make sense**." In other words, it can be said that, we always have "to negotiate texts." This negotiation of texts aims at critical understanding of texts, for which from the late 20th century onwards theorists' focus was on texts to explore basic questions like: how do texts work on us? How do we work to produce them? How can texts apparently

mean different things to different readers? How do texts and culture interact? "Answers have been suggested from disciplines such as literary theory (----) and cultural studies (---) ----. Behind both perspectives lies a vast body of 'critical theory', proposed explanations about how we read texts, what texts are telling us, and how texts are (or should be) valued by the culture." (2004, p. 1). Therefore the paper intends to throw light upon 'Systemic Functional Linguistics' as the methodology to find out meaning in literary texts.

These days Systemic Functional Linguistics (abbreviated as SFL) is quite popular and very useful to describe and interpret language as a planned "meaning making source." Systemic-Functional Linguistics (SFL) is a theory of language, which has been centred on the notion of language function. While SFL accounts for the syntactic structure of language, it places the function of language as central (what language does, and how it does it), in preference to more structural approaches, which place the elements of language and their combinations as central. SFL starts at social context, and looks at how language both acts upon, and is constrained by, this social context. A central notion to language analysis is 'stratification'. That is language is analysed in terms of four strata: Context, Semantics, Lexico-Grammar and Phonology-Graphology.

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Suzanne Eggins (2004, p. 1) remarks that "One of Michael Halliday's major contributions to Linguistic analysis is his development of a detailed functional grammar of modern English (Halliday 1994[1]), showing how simultaneously strands of meaning (the ideational, interpersonal and textual metafunctions) are expressed in clause structures." In simple words, our language is organized around three major components – ideational, textual and interpersonal. They are generalized functions, which are built into language. These three functions form the bases of the organization of the whole language system. These three functions correspond to the abstract functions (often called as "meta-functions") of language, inherited in all uses of language.

Halliday in *Language as Social Semiotic* (1978) makes "four theoretical claims about language" on the bases of "different research emphases or application context" of scholars. These four claims are: (a)that language use is functional, (b)that its function is to make meanings, (c)That these meanings are influenced by the social and cultural context in which they are exchanged and (d)that the process of using language is a semiotic process, a process of making meanings by choosing. Halliday summarises that "language use is functional, semantic, contextual and semiotic" which can be summed up "by describing the systemic approach as a *functional – semiotic* approach to language. (1978).

Suzanne Eggins (2004, p.3) reveals that a functional- semantic approach, simply tries to answer two questions: (a) how do people use language? (b) How is language structured for use? In technical words, from a systemicist view point, the above two questions can be rephrased as: (a) how many different sorts of meanings do we use language to make? And (b) how is language organized to make meanings? Halliday (1985) argues that people use language to construct three main kinds of meanings at the same time. These three kinds of meanings, namely **ideational**, **interpersonal** and **textual,** due to "semantic complexity" are combined together in "linguistic units". This happens because language is a "semiotic system",

that is a traditional "code system" consisting of systematized "sets of choices." This simply means that "each choice in the system acquires its meaning against the background of the other choices which could have been made. This semiotic interpretation of the system of language allows us to consider the appropriacy or inappropriacy of different linguistic choices in relation to their context of use, and to view language as a resource which we use by choosing to make meanings in context.

Now, when it has become clear that people interact in order to make meanings, then the overall aim of language seems to be semantic one. Therefore each text, where in we participate, is a "record of meanings that have been made in the particular context." Thus it is the choice of words that determines that linguistically texts not only make single meaning but a number of meanings simultaneously. For this, according to Suzanne Eggins (2004, p.17) language functions as a semiotic system. Suzanne Eggins further explains that "signs in a semiotic system involve two dimensions: content or meaning, and an **expression**, or realization, and that the relationship between content and expression is arbitrary." In spite of this arbitrariness, signs in a semiotic system get their meanings just because the "meaning of any one sign stands in opposition to two other signs.

Saussure (1966) pointed out that linguistic signs happen to be along the two axes, **syntagmatic** axis and **paradigmatic axis**. Syntagmatic relations are the relations, by which signs are related with each other in sequences or structures that go before and after. Paradigmatic relations are those relations by which signs stand in opposition to other signs that may occur in their place. Thus syntagmatic relations provide a sequence of ordered elements in a linear arrangement to structures and on the other hand paradigmatic relations give paradigms. A paradigm is a set of oppositions or choices in particular context. Suzanne Eggins (2004, p.193) states that "functional grammatical approaches tend to prioritize the description of paradigmatic relations" to reveal the functional constituents that stand in opposition to each other.

Till now the description was focused on how people use language to make meanings in

cultural and situational context. It is also important to look at the second aspect of SFL - what is the function of grammar? Suzanne Eggins (2004, p. 113) writes that "Language ------ was seen to involve three levels of content (semantics and Lexico-grammar), encoded in phonology. The difference between the simple and the complex semiotic systems, then, was the presence of this level of wording, the Lexico-grammar." The complex semiotic systems like language is that it has an intermediate level of Lexico-grammar or also called as grammatical level. This grammatical level gives rules to combine sounds into words, words into utterances/clauses and sentences, which make different meanings. Thus through the grammatical level "unlimited creative potential" of a language is met. According to Suzanne Eggins (2004, p. 117) "It is" so, because "the structural differences that give us the meaning differences between making a statement or asking a question or commanding (technically, different mood choices)."   Therefore structural differences also bring differences in meaning when we discuss things happening now or habitually or in the past.

Grammatical rules can also be used to make meanings creatively in an unusual way. For example, a nasty student can be dealt with words choices, (a) "*shut up*" or (b) "*stop talking please*" or (c) "would you mind not talking while I'm talking?" The choices 'a' and 'b' are typical or usual ways of expressing command in the situation but the choice 'c' is an interrogative structure, still with the meaning of the command in the situation. According to Suzanne Eggins (2004), "This pattern of playing with the system, of using non-typical structures to express our meanings in ways that can be highly sensitive to contextual constraints, is one kind of **grammatical metaphor** (nominalization---------). Grammatical metaphor is part of the creative potential that grammar offers language users."

Suzanne Eggins (2004, p. 119) further elucidates that the Lexico-grammar besides allowing us to make more meanings, permits us to "**mean more than one things at a time**." For example, a singular Noun, 'Ram' can be uttered using intonation in actual situation. Thus the use of this word in actual situation not only provides the ideational

meaning of the person, 'Ram' but at the same time it also gives the interpersonal meaning, how I am related to 'Ram'. The same principle of simultaneous meanings also works with sentences. For example look at the following sentence:

Ram cooks tasty food.

The ideational meaning of the sentence is the meaning of the words, 'Ram' and 'tasty food' (participants involved), and the word 'cooks' (the process he is involved in). The ideational meanings are in contrast with sentences; like *Sham is reading books* or *The boy is studying Maths.*

But another part of the meaning of the clause is the structure, **Subject + Finite verb fused with Predicate + Complement**, which gives the meaning of 'declarative' (a giving of information). At this position the clause contrasts variants like, *Is Ram cooking tasty food?* (Here a question asking for information).

A third kind of meaning conveyed in the same clause is that 'this is a message about Ram'. Ram is the theme or departure point for this message, realized through the structure, putting 'Ram' in first position in this clause. This is the textual meaning of the clause. If we change the order of words like – *Tasty food cooks Ram.* Here the focus would be on what 'Ram' was cooking rather than who was doing the cooking. Thus in one clause we make three kinds of meaning simultaneously. This is because "Lexico-grammar enables language to have several simultaneous layers of structure. Suzanne Eggins (2004, p.121).

Conclusion

Systemic-Functional Linguistics (SFL) as theory of language, centred on the notion of language function is capable to stratify language analysis in terms of four strata: Context, Semantics, Lexico-Grammar and Phonology-Graphology. People use language to construct three main kinds of meanings at the same time. These three kinds of meanings, namely **ideational**, **interpersona**l and **textual,** due to "semantic complexity" are combined together in "linguistic units". The usage of language is functional, semantic, contextual and semiotic," which can be summed up by describing the systemic approach as a *functional – semiotic* approach to language.

References

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