A SYSTEMIC FUNCTIONAL GRAMMAR OF ENGLISH

A Simple Introduction

DAVID BANKS

A Systemic Functional Grammar of English

Providing a simple – but not simplistic – introduction to the Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG) of English, this book serves as a launching pad for the beginning student and a review for the more seasoned linguist. With an introduction to SFG through lexicogrammar and the concept of rankshift, this book is the first introduction to SFG (including Appraisal) with examples exclusively sourced from twenty-first century texts. Written for those learning English and English linguistics as a foreign language, this serves as an easy-to-read introduction or refresher course for Systemic Functional Linguistics.

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Preface

No one writes a book like this without becoming indebted to a great number of people. For me these fall into two main groups. First, the numerous students who attended my lectures over a lengthy career, and who, probably unwittingly, helped me hone this version of the Systemic Functional model for beginners' consumption. Second, the many colleagues who over the years, at linguistic conferences and in informal discussions, have helped me move towards a greater understanding of language and how it works. The members of both these groups, whether they recognise themselves in these few words or not, have my grateful thanks.

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Note on activities and exercises

After each chapter, you will find a series of suggested practical activities, the aim of which is to help you deepen your understanding of what you have read in that chapter. A key of suggested solutions to these exercises can be found after the exercises. However, this requires a word of warning. Analysing language is not a mechanical affair. Language is created by humans, and humans are infinitely subtle in the ways they use language. So the fact that you have come up with a different answer to that given in the key does not mean that your answer is "wrong". It may mean that you have a different interpretation of the extract analysed to the interpretation implied by the key. You should then consider this difference in

interpretation. You may decide that your interpretation is much less likely than that given by the key and wish to exclude it, or you may decide that your interpretation is quite viable, in which case it is an alternative to that given by the key.

If you are using this book in a classroom situation, you can work in small groups (four or five persons per group) and discuss possible differences of opinion (and therefore interpretation) between yourselves, or the key, with your fellow students, and subsequently, if necessary, with your teacher or lecturer.

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1   Some introductory remarks to get us started

Language is a weird phenomenon. It is something we make use of constantly, every day of our lives, to communicate with those around us, and so it is fairly natural for us to suppose we know what it is. It is only when we begin to think about it, and to try to understand what it is and how it works, that we realize just how little we really know about it. Even the phrase which I have just used, "make use of", is misleading. This gives the impression that language is some sort of external object, albeit, perhaps, an abstract object, something "out there", a toolbox, a set of rules, which we can "use" in order to communicate. I would like to put forward the idea that language is not "something", not some sort of entity, but simply what happens when people communicate. From this point of view, language is not separate from the communication; it is not used to communicate, it is the communication.

There are many different ways of thinking about language, but I feel they fall into three broad groups. We can call these "formal", "cognitive" and "functional". Formal theories of language treat language as being basically form (hence the name); that is, they are structures which can be reorganized, moved around and built up in different ways. Without wishing to seem disparaging, I often think of this as the Lego model of language. The most well-known approach of this type is that of Chomsky and his followers. Chomsky is probably the nearest thing in linguistics to a household name, with the result that many people think that this is the only possible kind of linguistics, but, in actual fact, it is only one of several possible ways of looking at language. Cognitive theories of language are those which attempt to discover what happens in the mind of the speaker (I shall use "speaker" as a holdall term for speaker and/or writer) when he communicates. So, cognitive theories are about the thought processes which produce communicative language. The third possibility is that of functional approaches: these attempt to discover how language works (i.e. functions).
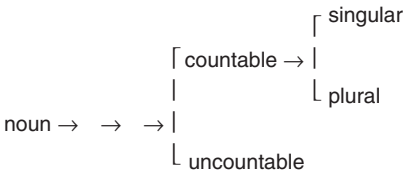
Each of these approaches has something to be said for it, and interesting work has been done in all of them. However, they do present different viewpoints. Cognitive and functional approaches tend to converge on

language from opposing directions, as if they were travelling in different directions along the same road, and thus might meet somewhere in the middle. Cognitive approaches start from cognition and move towards language. Functional approaches start from language and move towards cognition. Formal approaches are somewhat separate from the other two, but since language is ultimately expressed in forms, any approach must deal with the question of form at some point.
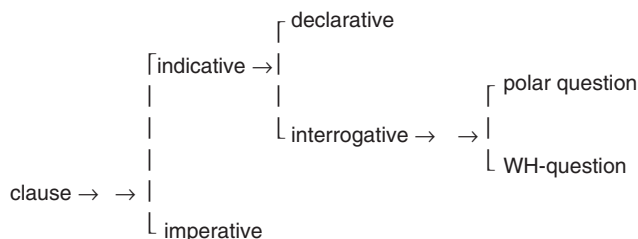
Within each of these three broad groups there are many varieties, and this applies to functional approaches too, of which there are many forms. However, the form which interests me, and which I shall outline in this book, is that of Systemic Functional Linguistics, which is based on the work of the linguist Michael Halliday. Systemic Functional Linguistics is functional in two ways. First, it is concerned with the ways in which the various parts of the language function together in order to provide the resources for meaningful communication. Second, it is concerned with the ways in which language functions in society as a means of communication. Different linguistic theories often have a common frontier with other disciplines, like logic or psychology for example. From this point of view, Systemic Functional Linguistics could be said to have a common frontier with sociology. At the same time, it is probably worth pointing out that linguistics, as the study of language, and from one point of view, is different from all other disciplines. If you study anthropology, the results of your study are expressed in language; if you study physics, the results are expressed in language; but if you study linguistics, that is language, the results are expressed in language! Linguistics is the only type of study where the object of study and the means of expression are the same.

As we have just explained, Systemic Functional Linguistics is said to be functional because it is concerned with the internal functioning of the parts of the language and the way it functions externally in society. The other term in the name of this approach, systemic, is perhaps more obscure. By systemic we mean that this approach is concerned with systems; systems are the networks of choices which are available to the speaker. For example, if we are at the point in the creation of a piece of language where we are choosing a noun, we are faced with the choice between countable and uncountable nouns. If we choose countable, we would then have to choose between singular and plural. This gives us a mini-system.

```
                                    ⌈ singular
                 ⌈ countable → |
                 |                  ⌊ plural
   noun →  →  → |
                 ⌊ uncountable
```

Or, if we are at the point where we are creating a clause, we have the choice between indicative clauses and imperative clauses. If we decide on

indicative, then we have the choice between declarative clauses (statements) and interrogative clauses (questions). If we subsequently decide that we want to ask a question, then we have the choice between polar questions (which require a *yes* or *no* answer) and WH-questions (those that begin with *who*, *when*, *where*, *why* or *how*). This again gives us a mini-system.

```
                                    ┌ declarative
                    ┌ indicative → |
                    |               |                      ┌ polar question
                    |               |                      |
                    |               └ interrogative →  → |
                    |                                      |
                    |                                      └ WH-question
   clause →   → |
                    └ imperative
```

These mini-systems are parts of a much larger network of systems, and ultimately the whole of a language would constitute a single, huge and fairly complicated system network. At each point in the system the steps which follow are obligatory. You cannot choose indicative without choosing between declarative and interrogative; it must be one or the other. So in creating language we move through the system from left to right, and the final choice that is made at the extreme right of this complex system is the choice of the individual words that make up our message. This is an important point. Most theories of language distinguish between the grammar of the language, and the list of words that are available in that language (frequently called the "lexicon"). Here we see that in Systemic Functional Linguistics, the lexicon, or vocabulary list, is part of the grammar itself, and not a separate item. The choice of an individual word is the final choice in a series of grammatical choices. For this reason, we usually speak of the "lexicogrammar". The fact that we present language in this way does not imply that the speaker actually consciously goes through all the choices; that is obviously not true. This is intended to be a model, or image, of what language is like and the resources that the speaker has available to him.

The lexicogrammar provides the functions whereby the message is expressed in speech or writing. In some ways it is the most immediately visible part of the language, the tip of the iceberg.

However, if the lexicogrammar exists it is only to express meaning. The meaning of a message, or its "semantics", functions in three different ways, which we refer to as "metafunctions". These metafunctions operate at the level of the clause. All three metafunctions are present in any clause, and none of them is more important than the others. In reality, they are woven together in the fabric of the message, which is the clause. However, in order to talk about them we have to separate them, and since I cannot write, nor you read, three things at the same time, I shall start with the "ideational" metafunction. The ideational metafunction deals with the way in which the clause represents the world in terms of a process, the participants in that

process and, sometimes, the circumstances in which the process takes place. For example, consider the following.

> Peter worked in my department for a long time …
>
> (*CAM*, 77, 2016)

In this single clause, there is a process, *worked*, one participant, *Peter*, and two circumstances, *in my department* and *for a long time*. The "interpersonal" metafunction concerns the relationships established by the speaker. These are of two types. The first type of relationship is between the speaker and the person or persons with whom he is communicating. The following example creates a relationship with the reader by suggesting future action that he should take.

> Discover how the magic of Christmas has been recreated through the years at Fenwick Newcastle.
>
> (Advertisement, 2016)

The second type of relationship is between the speaker and the message he is conveying. In the following example, the use of the modal verb *may* indicates that the speaker is presenting something as a possibility rather than a fact. Throughout this book, where necessary, relevant parts of examples are printed in **bold**.

> If your other half starts steering you towards Cyprus for your summer break, they **may** be thinking less about the sunshine than the state of their bank account.
>
> (*Metro*, 8 April 2016)

Finally, the "textual" metafunction deals with the way in which the message is structured. This metafunction, like the two others, functions at the level of the clause, but is also concerned with the ways in which the clauses are linked together to make a text. One of the main factors in the way the clause is structured is the element that the speaker selects as the starting point of his clause. This is known as the "theme". In the following example *Daniel Brine, director at Cambridge Junction* is the theme.

> **Daniel Brine, director at Cambridge Junction**, has also objected to the plans which could scupper his own vision for the square.
>
> (*Cambridge News*, 21 April 2016)

Language is not created in a vacuum; it is created in a context. We frequently tend to underestimate the extent to which context is important in the creation of discourse. To a large extent, language depends on the context in which it comes into existence; it could not exist without that context,

and in a different context the language would be different. So, in a sense, language is created by its context, but it then becomes part of that context, thus changing the context which created it. There is, then, a constant mutual system of modification going on between the context and the language which is created in that context. Systemic Functional Linguistics sees the context, or at least the close or immediate context, sometimes called "register", in terms of three functions. These are "field", "tenor" and "mode". Field is the ongoing activity of which the language is a part. Tenor is the relationship between the person who is communicating and those he is communicating with. Mode is the form through which the message is communicated, that is, basically, spoken or written.

This relationship between the lexicogrammar, the semantic metafunctions and the context has often been represented diagrammatically as a series of concentric triangles, with lexicogrammar at the centre, the metafunctions at the three points of the inner triangle and the functions of context at the points of the outer triangle, as in Figure 1.1. This also shows that there is a correspondence between field and the ideational metafunction, between tenor and the interpersonal metafunction and between mode and the textual metafunction.

An alternative to this, suggested by the iceberg metaphor that I used a little earlier, would be to see lexicogrammar as the tip of the iceberg, with the metafunctions below the waterline, and context at an even greater depth below the surface. This is shown in Figure 1.2.

Recent introductions to Systemic Functional Linguistics have tended to concentrate on the three semantic metafunctions (ideational, interpersonal and textual). The grammatical functions which constitute the lexicogrammar are hardly treated at all. However, it is this part of the model which those unfamiliar with this approach will find corresponds most closely to what they think of as "grammar". So that is where we are going to start
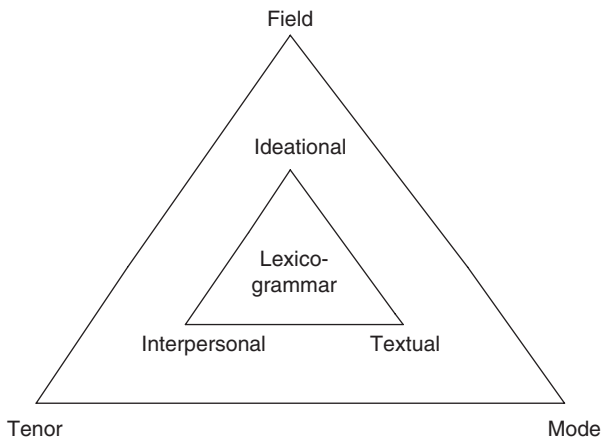

Figure 1.1 Triangular representation of the Systemic Functional Model.