Society, Context and Function: An Introduction to Systemic Functional Linguistics

By **Richard Ingold**, Apr 10, 2017, *Learning and Teaching at Navitas*

When studying something as complex as language, where should we begin? Richard Ingold introduces Systemic Functional Linguistics, which starts by looking at how language is actually used.

Imagine if humans had evolved in Margaret Thatcher's 'there's no such thing as society' vision of the world; or if we all lived hermitic existences in isolated desert caves. Would our brains have developed the capacity for language? It's rather unlikely. After all, language is essentially a tool used by people to communicate with each other. It's a social phenomenon, a part of human society. And this fact lies at the heart of the theory of language founded by the British-born linguist Michael Halliday (b. 1925): Systemic Functional Linguistics (commonly referred to as SFL).

systemic functional linguistics

noun | sys·tem·ic func·tion·al lin·guis·tics

Definition:

Linguistics identifies SFL as a theory of language.

Functional means it is primarily concerned with what language and its constituent parts actually do and how texts, sentences and words have meaning in real-life communication.

Systemic. SFL is not the only functional theory of language, but it is the only one which is explicitly systemic. It models grammar and vocabulary use as deriving from language systems - networks of interconnected (and usually unconscious) grammatical choices.

Context is everything

So if language grew out of human interaction, it follows that the social situations in which we use language will influence both the structure of language and our ability to understand it. For SFL, this is a fundamental idea. And it's an idea that developed from Halliday's fascination with the work of anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski (1848-1942), linguist J.R. Firth (1890-1960) and sociologist Basil Bernstein (1924-2000).

While writing up the findings of his fieldwork in Melanesia, Malinowski realised that the transcribed conversations he was using as data were practically impossible to understand. What they needed were detailed accounts of the cultures and specific situations in which they were produced. This led to the idea that all language, in order to be fully understood, has to be studied in relation to the situation in which it is used.

Firth, who was to become Halliday's PhD supervisor, embraced this view and developed a formal framework for describing the social context of language use. His framework described an interaction's participants, its actions and effects, as well as its surrounding environment. Firth added to this an understanding that language, being primarily a resource for communication, has to be studied in relation to what it actually means. This idea ran contrary to the established view of linguistics that language should primarily be studied in order to discover an underlying, context-independent set of formal grammatical rules.

Bernstein's insight was that language does not only have meaning in a specific socio-cultural context; it creates and replicates that context. Repeated patterns of language use bind groups of people together and dictate the ideas and beliefs which they value. This means that language plays an indispensable

role in ensuring that a society and its constituent groups will survive from one generation to the next.

These were highly influential ideas for Halliday. And he moulded them into a linguistic theory for which social context is as important as the structure of sentences. In fact, SFL views language as a 'social semiotic' – a system of signs which have meaning not in their own right, but because they are embedded in society.
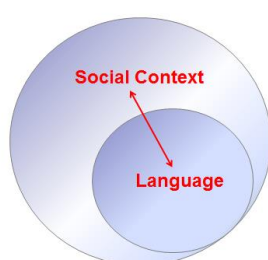
The relationship between language and socio-cultural context as modelled in SFL.

Of course, SFL recognises that every culture is expressed in myriad ways – through language, art, dance, music, dress – and so is far too complex to describe solely from a linguistic perspective. However, if we know enough about what is happening, who is involved and the role which language is playing, we can accurately describe specific situations within a culture and at the same time, predict both what people are going to say and how they are going to say it.

Now all of this might seem quite removed from our everyday experience of language. But it's not just part of an academic model. It sheds light on a really interesting aspect of human language use – that we understand each other quite well, quite quickly, virtually all the time. Think of the daily interactions you have. How many of them are marred by miscommunication? Surprisingly few. The reason for this is that in most situations, we tend to know what the people

we're talking to are going to say before they've even said it. We read the context, know that our linguistic choices and those of the people we're speaking to have been limited by that context and we prepare ourselves for what is going to be said. Imagine you're in a shoe shop, for example. You're holding one shoe and make eye contact with the shop assistant. What you are going to say and how the assistant is going to reply are effectively pre-determined. Hence, context has a direct role in the linguistic choices we make.

What this also means is that if we analyse a text carefully, the social context in which it was produced will become clear. Take a look at the following example:

> *One day, when Christopher Robin and Winnie-the-Pooh and Piglet*
> *were all talking together, Christopher Robin finished the mouthful*
> *he was eating and said carelessly: "I saw a Heffalump today,*
> *Piglet."*
> *"What was it doing?" asked Piglet.*
> *"Just lumping along," said Christopher Robin.*

You probably recognised these lines straight away as coming from the classic children's story *Winnie-the-Pooh* by A.A. Milne. However, you don't really need to know the story to guess the social situation in which it was produced. There are lots of linguistic clues. The time adverbial, "One day," at the start makes the fact it's a story a dead giveaway. The repeated use of names shows it's about a specific group of characters. The past-tense verbs and the verbs relating to speaking, "were talking," "said" and "asked," together with the quoted speech, indicates it's a narration of some kind. The diminutive names and the made-up words, "Heffalump" and "lumping," point to an intended audience of children

(and the adults who read to them). And we know that an author gets to dictate the direction of a story, so it's effectively a monologue. Also, if you see these lines in their original place, in a book, it's clearly a written text with the words on the page and the accompanying illustrations working together to create meaning for readers.

SFL focuses on these things and highlights the fact that there's a reciprocal relationship here. Social context determines the language we use and the language we use becomes a part of the social context.

The SFL account of grammar

But SFL is not just a macro-level theory of language. It also contains an exceedingly detailed account of grammar. And as it's a functional grammar, it foregrounds the fact that our choice of words and the structure of our sentences are influenced by the roles that language plays in our interactions. SFL makes this clear by looking at grammar from the perspective of three discrete yet concurrent functions of language, which Halliday named metafunctions.

The three **metafunctions** are:

The **Interpersonal** – Language is used between people to enact social relationships; when using language we are interacting with others.

The **Ideational** – Language represents human experience; it encodes our corporeal and psychological experience as signs.

The **Textual** – Language is ordered so that it is cohesive and coherent; information flows from one clause to the next.

The first of these intrinsic functions of language, the interpersonal metafunction, reflects the fact that language plays a direct role in human interaction. Think about why language evolved in the first place and what it helps us to do. Basically, it enables us to cooperate with one another, form bonds, negotiate, ask for things and instruct. By looking at the different types of clauses we use and how we use them, we can see how language helps us to do these things.

Let's go back to Winnie-the-Pooh, this time talking with Eeyore, for examples:

> *"…It's my birthday. The happiest day of the year."*
>
> *"Your birthday?" said Pooh in great surprise.*
>
> *"Of course it is. Can't you see? Look at all the presents I've had."*

The characters give information, "It's my birthday", and ask for it, "Your birthday?" "Can't you see?" (Both questions are signalled by question marks in the written form. But if spoken, the first instance would rely entirely upon intonation, which in SFL is as important a part of grammar as the words themselves, to mark it as a question.) There is also an imperative clause, "Look at all the presents I've had." This doesn't provide information; it instructs Pooh to take action.

The idea that clauses perform different speech functions is not unique to SFL, of course. What sets this theory apart is that clauses can be analysed from an interpersonal perspective, and they can also be analysed from another metafunctional perspective, with the same clauses, and their constituent parts, being shown to have distinct but complementary roles. This allows us to see how, at the same time as enabling us to interact with one another, language performs another vital social function. It allows us to talk about people and

things, their actions and relationships, and the places, times or circumstances in which events occur. This is the domain of the ideational metafunction.

Here's another excerpt from Milne's *Winnie-the-Pooh*:

> *One fine winter's day when Piglet was brushing away the snow in front of his house, he happened to look up, and there was Winnie-the-Pooh.*

In this example, it's easy to identify the main participants in each clause and how they affect or relate to each other. Piglet's brushing of snow, his shifting line of vision alerting him to the presence of Winnie-the-Pooh and the time and location of these events are all represented by discrete elements of these clauses – noun groups, verb groups and adverbials. These elements constitute what we would commonly think of as the content of language.

This probably seems really obvious. But it's a really complex phenomenon. This is because our use of language does not directly reflect an objective reality; it actually plays a role in shaping our experience of the world. A good example of this is our classification of colours. There are no dividing lines in the spectrum of light; no clearly delineated colours. But there definitely are real differences in the visual effects produced by different wavelengths of light, and we use language to categorise these differences. Once we've drawn a line between, for example, green and blue, our use of these words helps us to see the world as containing things which are green and things which are blue. Of course, the social nature of language is again really important. For communication to be effective, we have to broadly agree where green ends and blue begins – the number of colour words and the ways in which colours are differentiated vary between languages, by the way.

Also if, as SFL suggests, language influences how we see and understand the world, then people who speak the same language, dialect and/or sociolect will generally share a model of what the world is like and experience it in similar ways. This doesn't mean that because people speak in different ways, they think differently, but it does mean that it's easier to communicate with people who share our linguistic model of the world. Ever tried to read a biology research paper? If you haven't studied biology, you'll find one rather difficult to understand. This is not just because of the unfamiliar, technical words, it's also because the writer's language creates a model of the world which has no real meaning if you're not a part of the biologists' social group.

The third metafunction, the textual, also has a social purpose. As societies grow and become more complex, and as the ways we communicate develop from speaking to each other face-to-face to writing letters, emails, academic papers etc., we require ever more complex language to communicate effectively. Much of this complexity comes from the need to link ideas together into cohesive and coherent streams of information so that the people we're communicating with can follow our train of thought. We do this by sending out messages not as units of information to be processed like binary code, but as waves of information which flow into each other.

Here's a final example from *Winnie-the-Pooh*:

> *The Piglet lived in a very grand house in the middle of a beech-tree, and the beech-tree was in the middle of the Forest, and the Piglet lived in the middle of the house.*

Sticking with the wave metaphor, this example is a nice illustration of the information peaks and troughs which commonly organise text and make the

transition from one clause to another smooth and easy to follow. The starting point of the first clause, the trough in the information wave, is "The Piglet." The rest of the clause presents the information about where Piglet lives, which Milne wants us to focus on; that's the peak of the information wave. The next clause begins with a repetition of "beech-tree." This is no longer a new piece of information, but it's a clear starting point for the message; we're in the trough again. The location of the tree is presented at the end of the second clause and so we again rise up the wave to reach the most important part of the message, and so on.

Supporting the SFL account of language is the fact that, although the range of different strategies used – changing word order, the addition of affixes or use of intonation patterns – varies hugely, this linguistic trinity of meaning and function has been shown to be an integral aspect of, not just English, but all the other languages SFL linguists have examined. Even languages which are so separated by time and place that any direct links to other language groups have been entirely erased have been shown to exhibit metafunctional organisation. Why? Because we all need to interact with one another; we all need to communicate our experience of the world to others; and we all need to organise our messages so that they can be easily understood.

Holistic and appliable

So you may have noticed that in this brief SFL explainer, I haven't used many of the conventional linguistic terms you may be used to – semantics, pragmatics, syntax, phonology. There's a good reason for this. SFL doesn't divide language up in the same way that many other theories of language do.

Instead, meaning, use, grammatical structure and pronunciation are held to be inseparable. And this is where SFL's explanatory power comes from. It recognises the gestalt nature of a semiotic system that is a fundamental part of human society. This makes it a complex theory. But it's certainly far less complex than its object of study, language itself.

And there's one more key difference between SFL and traditional linguistics. SFL is meant to be used to analyse real language. While some theories concern themselves with invented clauses and the theoretical rules which make some sentences acceptable to native speakers of a language and others unacceptable, SFL looks at real-life language – conversations, political speeches, newspaper articles, advertisements and even the tales of Winnie-the-Pooh. It's designed to cope with the ambiguities of real language, to explain language use and to help people exploit it successfully. This makes SFL not just an abstract theory of language, but an intentionally 'appliable' one. It can be used to examine how language choice shapes and is shaped by political or religious beliefs; to help language learners see how language changes depending upon the situations in which it is used; and to help students from disadvantaged backgrounds to learn how to use language in a way that is valued by teachers and employers.

SFL is an expansive, social theory of language and grammar. It allows us to see that language is not an abstract entity that exists independently of those who use it. It helps us understand language as a resource that we draw on to express ourselves in innumerable ways. It highlights the reciprocal relationship between language and the social contexts we use it in. And it demonstrates how the structure of language is shaped by how we use it. SFL reveals this

intimate link between human beings and the language we use more clearly than

any other linguistic theory available.

Richard Ingold has a master's in Applied Linguistics from the University of Sydney. His SFL-based article 'God, the Devil and You: A Systemic Functional Linguistic Analysis of the Language of Hillsong' is available via the open access journal Literature & Aesthetics. He currently uses SFL to teach academic writing at Navitas English, Sydney, and writes about linguistics and ESL teaching. You can follow him on Twitter @RichardIngold.

Find out more

Books

Halliday, M. A. K., & and Hasan, R. (1985). *Language, context, and text: Aspects of language in a social-semiotic perspective*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

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Articles

Halliday, M. A. K. (1995). Language and the reshaping of human experience. In J. Webster (Ed.), *The language of science: The collected works of M.A.K. Halliday*, vol. 5: 7-23. London: Continuum.

Rose, D. (2006). A systemic functional approach to language evolution. *Cambridge Archaeological Journal*, 16(1), 73-96.

Online

Dr Annabelle Lukin curates an SFL Vimeo channel with some excellent introductory lectures and conference presentations.