



SYSTEMIC FUNCTIONAL LINGUISTICS (SFL) AND ITS RELEVANCE TO LANGUAGE TEACHING IN SECOND LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

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Abstract

The article examines the concept of systemic functional linguistics as pioneered by J.R. Firth and popularized by M.A.K. Halliday. The study sheds light on basic components of systemic functional linguistics such as unit, structure, class and system. Also cardinal frameworks that are germane to SFL such as language meta-functions, rankscale and rankshifting are explicated on. Particularly, the study argues that SFL is of tremendous value to our understanding of language structure and function. More importantly, the study submits that a sound knowledge of SFL helps in easy mastery of sentence formation and reading comprehension in second language classroom situations.

Keywords: The scope of systematic-functional linguistics, the value of SFL to our understanding of language structure and function

Introduction

The Systemic Functional Linguistics, which started as scale and category grammar is a product of Firth's (1962) intellectual reaction to the claim tenaciously held by the structuralist school and later pursued in early transformational grammar that meaning has no footing in grammar. Associated with M.A.K. Halliday, the Systemic Functional Linguistics (otherwise known as Neo-Firthian grammar) is said to be significantly influenced by the earlier proposition of the founder of the London School of Linguistics,

Firth (1962) that meaning, in linguistic analysis, is an overt process. This position contrasts sharply with Chomsky's argument that grammar is mentalistic, meaning that it describes the hidden competence of an ideal native speaker-hearer. Therefore, Firth (1962) explains that "meaning is situational relations in a context of situation and in that kind of language which disturbs the air and other people's ears, as modes of behaviour in relation to the other elements in the context of situation" (p.2 – 3).

By this, Firth means that grammatical expressions have meaning as long as they are context-based.

The Systemic-Functional Linguistic takes into account the context of situation of sentence utterance in its approach to sentence analysis. This is because the same sentence, in different grammatical context is capable of eliciting different meaning. for instance, "Good night", when uttered by someone to a friend around 11pm when it is bedtime, would mean differently from what it means when uttered in the course of a funeral oration delivered in the morning by someone in honour of his departed colleague.

Unlike the Transformational Generative Grammar, which is too sensitive to ungrammaticality, the SystemicFunctional Linguistics is not completely on grammaticality but the context of speaking. Therefore, while the TGG focuses on grammaticality, the SFL insists on acceptability. Thus, it is a sociological, behavioural approach to the study of language.

The Scope of Systemic-Functional Linguistics

The SFL recognizes four theoretical categories that appear in all languages and also, accounts for how these categories relate with one another in grammar. Halliday (1961) explains that these theoretical categories are obtainable in all human languages because they are such that account for grammatical structures that are basic to all languages. These four theoretical categories are unit, structure, class and system.

A unit is the category set up to account for structures of different shapes that carry recurrent grammatical patterns. Five units that are obtainable in the grammar of English are morpheme, word, group, clause and sentence. All these units form a hierarchy that is a taxonomy and the scale of abstraction that binds them is that of rank such that the sentence becomes the highest rank on the scale while the morpheme is the lowest rank on the scale. Each of these constituent units has a unique structure that makes it possible for us to pattern it according to its unit. Let us consider each unit in turns:

- a. Morpheme:
 - i. im + possible + ity = impossibility
 - ii. bat + s = bats
 - iii. close + d = closed
- b. word: growth, establishment, criteria, etc.
- c. Group: The boy, in the car, has gone, etc.
- d. Clause: after he had gone, how to sing a song, who have me a book, etc.
- e. Sentence: she has left, Kola is here, Have you come? etc.

A structure is the category set up to account for the nature of the patterns that the unit carries. The structure of a nominal word group or noun phrase is M H Q. M is modifier which refers to all the elements or words occurring before the head of the phrase. H is the headword (a noun) for the phrase while Q is the qualifier, which refers to a word, a word

group or clause that occurs after the head of the phrase.

A class is explained by Halliday (1961) as the "... grouping of members of a given unit which is defined by operation in the structure of the unit next above" (259–261). A class refers to members of the same unit. Thus, we speak of classes of verbs, of nouns, of adjectives, of adverbs, etc.

A system is the category set up to account for the choice made of one item rather than another among many items, which are open to choice. Halliday's explication of his theory of language reveals that language consists of a set of systems, each of which offers the speaker (or writer) a choice of expressing meaning. Choices here are mutually exclusive, meaning that one structure is not used where another has been used. A choice can thus be made of an interrogative sentence and an imperative sentence; active voice and passive voice; singular and plural; present tense and past tense, etc. Most of these linguistic choices that we make are, as Halliday hints, unconscious.

The Value of SFL to our Understanding of Language Structure and Function

Halliday's model of linguistic analysis sees language as "a system meanings". By this, is meant that when people use language, their language acts express meaning. Language is systematically organized as seen in vocabularies, sentences, sound, words, groups, etc. At each of this level, there is a system of organization. Going by Bloor and Bloor (1995), one can observe that the only approach to the construction of grammar that is likely to be successful will be such that recognizes meaning. This meaning is derived, based on the choice one makes from the full of expressions that language provides. The notion of linguistic choice is that which constrained Halliday to describe language as "a system of meaning".

The SFL through the mood system, enables us to achieve any desired meaning based on the linguistic choice we make out of the structures of language either at the clausal or phrasal or lexical level. In English, for instance, one can make a choice, at the clausal level, of the declarative, interrogative and imperative forms of sentence as instantiated below:

- i. I want you to see me. (declarative)
- ii. Can you see me now? (interrogative)
- iii. See me now. (imperative)

At the lexical level, a choice can be made by one from 'mum', 'mummy' and 'mama' to address one's mother while at the phrasal level, putting an adverbial phrase, either in the initial or medial or final position in a structure to achieve a desired meaning is a matter of choice.

Let us illustrate this as follows:

At the river, we met Dr.Ukazu, praying to God. (initial)

We met Dr.Ukazuat the river, praying to God. (medial)

We met Dr.Ukazu, praying to God at the river (final)

Worth adding, is the fact that any linguistic choice can be made, as allowed by SFL, along the paradigmatic or the syntagmatic axis and that the context of situation plays a vital role in influencing every choice that we make.

Another remarkable value of SFL to our understanding of language structure and function is its explanation that the meaning of a text is constructed out of its component parts

– its sentences, its clauses, its groups, its words and its morphemes. All these, as earlier explained, are smaller stretches of language. Halliday uses rank to represent each of these which refer to a unit of meaning.

It is therefore, not unnecessary, as we have enlightened by SFL to draw distinction between rank scale and rank-shifting as SFL's concepts. Rank scale refers to a hierarchical arrangement of grammatical units from the highest to the lowest such that a smaller unit is said to be, according to Bloor and Bloor (1995) “a constituent unit of a higher unit” (p. 7). This implies that a morpheme will be seen as a constituent unit of a word, a word as that of a group and so on. Our understanding of the grammatical rank scale is such that enables us to build morphemes into word; words into group; groups into clause and clause into sentence which is the highest unit as well as the boundary of grammar.

Rank shifting, in contrast to rank scale, is a linguistic situation in which a smaller unit is made to embody a higher unit. A higher unit in this regard, is said to have been rank shifted. As Muir (1972) explains, “there can also be rank shifting when a unit is made to accommodate another unit of equal rank” (p. 80). Relative clauses are usually rank shifted to operate within a nominal group as we have below:

The girl {{who plays golf}} is my friend.

We need to attend a school {{where discipline is enforced}}.

Nominal clauses are also rank shifted to operate within the slot meant to be occupied by nominal groups or nouns as we have below:

{{That you are my friend}} is no news.

The problem is {{how to pray}}.

A group can also be rank shifted within a group as explained below:

The man (in the garden) is my husband.

I admire the lady (beside the office).

All the grammatical elements in the double and single brackets given above are rank shifted clauses and groups respectively. Thus, we are properly guided in our sentence formation endeavour so that we do not confuse a clause with a sentence and vice versa.

SFL, has also shown us that language is functional in the manner in which it reflects the world. It must be noted that the basic unit of SFL is the clause. The clause has a special place in expressing meaning since it is at its rank that we begin to talk about how things exist and happen and how the people feel in the world around us.

SFL has made it possible for us to understand that language is made to perform both grammatical communication and meta functions Berry (1975). Each grammatical element (word or group or clause) has a function which it performs in relation to the linguistic system. SFL reveals to us that one type of linguistic analysis depends on assigning grammatical functions that are to be allocated the linguistic grammatical functions to be allocated the linguistic elements Bloor and Bloor (1995). “Some men” in “Some men are coming” may be allocated the grammatical function of subject.

Language Meta-Functions

SFL has revealed to us that language reflects variation in human experience. In this respect, the role of grammar in the relationship between language and social situation is evident. Grammar reflects what language is used for, why it is used and how it is used. In his explication on the capability of how language reflects our psychological and social

realities, Halliday (1973) classifies the meta-functions that language is made to perform by human beings. These meta functions are ideational, interpersonal and textual functions.

Language performs ideational function when it is used to perceive the world. This can be obvious in an individual's effort to express his experience of the external world and the internal world. Language, when used to express the following propositions:

The lady is pretty

Our house is the largest in our compound

is explained, by SFL, to be performing ideational function.

An interpersonal function is also performed by language when it is used to negotiate social; power and solidarity relationships. Such grammatical categories used in the mood system to make language perform interpersonal function are imperative and declarative sentences. Examples are as follows:

See me now. (imperative sentence used to negotiate power relationship).

Good afternoon to you. (declarative sentence used to negotiate social relationship).

May Nigeria be great. (imperative sentence used to negotiate social relationship).

Language performs a textual function when it is used to relate what is said or written to the real world and other linguistic events. It is the textual function of language that establishes the link between sentences in a text or utterances in discourse and the interface of meaning as a message from the language – situation interface (Lamidi 2000). To Halliday, every language has its own well-defined grammar that accommodates all the functions that language performs. In addition, SFL has sharpened our understanding to know that the ideational, interpersonal and textual meaning that are expressed by language are realized at the phono-lexico-grammatical levels in form of options from various grammatical systems such as transitivity, mood, modality, theme, person, tense, etc.

The Application of SFL Theory to Sentence Formation and Reading Comprehension as Areas of English Grammar in an ESL Classroom

Osisanwo (1999) argues that the sole aim of studying any language is to be able to use the language effectively. It is then one can be said to have acquired linguistic competence and in such a language. It is however, not uncommon to find a great deal of unacceptable forms in English usage in Nigerian context where English is acquired as a second language (ESL). This is contained with the phenomenon of interference, resulting from the contact of English with some other indigenous languages. It is against the background of the fact that learners or users of English have, as Osisanwo (ibid) explains, "... a poor knowledge of the grammatical structure and lexical forms of the English language", that we have such wrong forms of English usage manifesting at all levels of grammar. It is on this note that teachers of English in ESL classrooms do have a monster of grammatical infelicity to combat in students' spoken and written English both in the primary school, secondary school and tertiary institution. The poor knowledge of how morphemes can be combined into words is what often brings about students' spelling errors. Also, their (students) inability to recognize, as properly as expected, how the units of rank scale and rank shift (sentence, clause, group, word, morpheme, rank shifted clause and rank-shifted group) can be joined to form larger utterances normally result in their sentence formation errors. These sentence formation errors are evident in students' essay writing, analysis of grammatical structures in a text and

summary writing.

The application of the systemic grammar rank scale and rank-shifting concepts to the formation of English sentences appears very appropriate in an ESL classroom. Asiyanbola (2006) study on the potency of rank scale and rank-shifting in ensuring well-formed English sentences suggests five conditions which, if satisfied by learners of English as a second language, would keep them above the waters of sentence formation errors in English. These conditions, as given below, justify our position:

- o Learners must be able to join morphemes (the smaller meaningful units in grammar) to form words. Therefore, learners should be able to join 'learn' (free morpheme) and '-er' (bound morpheme) to form 'learner' (word).
- o Learners should be able to recognize content words i.e. the meaning-carrying words (such as nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs) and structural words (such as articles, conjunctions, auxiliaries, prepositions, demonstratives etc) and also, understand their distribution in sentences and how they co-occur with other words.
- o Learner should know the combination of words (both content and structural) to form groups such as nominal group, verbal group, adverbial group, adjectival group, etc. Learners should know how a relative clause can be rank shifted to operate within a nominal group such that the whole arrangement would still obey sentence formation rule. An example is shown below:

NP			VP		NP	
The lady {{who came here}}			is beating		the boy	
M	H	Q	aux	lexical	M	H

It is necessary for learners to recognize the head of every group.

- o Learners should understand the rank scale method of how groups can be combined to form clauses or simple sentences as shown above.
- o Learners should also be aware of how clauses (simple sentences) can be combined to form non-simple sentences such as compound, complex, compound-complex and multiple sentences.

At this juncture, learners should understand how clauses can be rank shifted within clauses to ensure dependency relation. Adequate satisfaction of the above-suggested conditions would empower learners to form correct and well delineated English sentences (no matter how long) in the course of writing an essay or summarizing a text.

Rank scale and rank shifting as concepts in the model of SFL can also be applied to the processing of reading English texts to arrive at the meaning of the whole text hence, the possibility of answering questions on such a text without tears.

Therefore, using the theoretical concepts of the grammatical rank scale and rank-shifting, a teacher can steer learners towards processing a text, written in Nigerian English, to assess the acceptability, intelligibility, grammatically and appropriateness of its language. Despite the fact that a text written in Nigerian English will necessarily have what Asiyanbola (ibid) calls “the Nigerian local flavour”, the SFL model, being sociological in approach, would interest itself in the intelligent manipulation of all the units of rank scale and rank shift (sentence, change, group, word, morpheme, rank-shift clause and rank shifted group) in the text to achieve a total meaning of the text.

The students' identification of these units and their understanding of their (the units') grammatical function and meaning will enable the students to surmount the monster

of reading comprehension. Through the application of rank shifting in the processing of texts, students will be aware of the fact that rank-shifted groups and other clauses are used to expand English sentences, that is, make simple sentences a non-simple one. Then, they would be able to summarize a passage (no matter how lengthy it is) in relatively few, simple and straightforward sentences by not including the rank shifted groups and clauses used for expanding the sentences in the passage itself. The following expanded sentences can thus be summarized:

1. (a) The boy in the room where many students are accommodated has just won a much coveted prize that many had been longing to win.
(expanded by rank shifted groups and clauses)
(b) The boy has won a prize. (summarized by shedding the rank shifted groups and clauses).
2. (a) Mrs. Landers, the newly elected chairperson of our club, is travelling, by 6am tomorrow morning, to Paris where many expatriates will be meeting her. (expanded by rank shifted groups and clause).
(b) Mrs. Landers is travelling to Paris tomorrow. (summarized by shedding the rank shifted groups and clause).

Through the shedding of the rank shifted units, we are able to access the main points or ideas contained in the above-given expanded sentences.

Conclusion

So far we have examined the tenets of systemic-functional linguistic as a grammatical model, evaluating its contributions to our understanding of language structure and function and also, describing how it could be applied to the teaching of two aspects of English grammar in a second language classroom. It is our argument in this paper that students would rise above the waters of their inability to form sentences correctly and summarize a text if they are taught how sentences are built and expanded through the application of two grammatical concepts of SFL, namely rank scale and rank shifting.

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