

THE RELEVANCE OF A SOCIO-FUNCTIONAL APPROACH TO LANGUAGE

(With particular reference to a reading comprehension course)

Silvia Gutiérrez
 Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana,
 Unidad Xochimilco

Whenever we carry out some sort of a practical task, the decisions we make and the way we approach the task are in some way or other influenced by the view we hold about the object of study. Therefore, if one considers linguistics to be the scientific study of language, when trying to define what its object of study should be we should first ask the question, "what is language?" since our study of language will be influenced or even determined by what we believe language to be.

Language is a very complex thing to define; however, there have been several attempts to define it and these attempts in some way or other reflect what the theory behind those definitions is. Some examples would be the view of language as "behaviour", as "communication", as "knowledge", as "thought", as a "social semiotic", etc. However, for the purpose of this paper I prefer to adopt the division that Pit Corder makes between "language as phenomenon of the individual" and "language as a social phenomenon" because it enables us to draw more accurately the border line between the different approaches.

The approach to language as a "phenomenon of the individual" is concerned with the description and explanation of language as a matter of human behaviour. Since people write and speak, they also evidently read and understand what they hear. But people are not born doing so; they have to acquire these skills and do so in differing degrees. This view sees language as a part of psychology manifested through specific behaviour - the behaviour which has as its principle function the expression of thought. According to Pit Corder the study of language as behaviour can be seen

"as a study of the specific properties, processes and states of the mind whose outward manifestations are observable behaviour; what we have to know in order to perform linguistically."

(Corder, 1973, 23)

Chomsky believes that

"language is a mirror of the mind in a deep and significant sense. It is a product of human intelligence created anew in each individual by operations that lie far beyond the reach of will or consciousness."

(Chomsky, 1976, 4)

For him, therefore a linguist who adopts this approach is trying to establish certain properties of "human intelligence" and linguistics thus becomes simply the subfield of psychology that deals with these aspects of the mind. He also

points out that a

"theory of language is simply that part of human psychology that is concerned with one particular "mental organ", human language."

(Chomsky, 1976, 36)

Thus, this approach to language as a "phenomenon of the individual" is mainly concerned with explaining how we acquire language, and its relation to general cognitive systems and with the psychological mechanisms underlying the comprehension and production of speech.

The approach which sees language as a "social phenomenon" considers language to be a social event which can only be fully described in reference to the people who are involved in it. If communication is to take place, the participants must share the same conventions. According to Pit Corder we can communicate with people

"only because they share with us a set of agreed ways of behaving. Language in this sense is the possession of a social group."

(Corder, 1990, 25)

This approach which considers language as a means of communication can be regarded as a sociological way of looking at language, since it involves taking into account speaker and hearer as well as the many other features of the speech situation.

It is in fact difficult to make an unbiased judgement when comparing these two approaches since the judgement made will obviously be influenced by our own interests and points of view. That is to say, the "why" of wanting to know what language is. It is clear that in these two approaches the theory behind them is very different and that the explanations the people who support one or the other give, are also different. That is why I do not want to point out what I consider to be the weaknesses of the approach to language as a "phenomenon of the individual" but just say that as a theory of language I prefer the second one. The reason for choosing it results from my interests in language as a social phenomenon i.e., in the role that language plays in communication, and because I think it has more relevance for the language teacher. I think that linguists should study the problem of "what language is for", i.e., study the function of language as a means of communication and also the functions that language conveys.

From now on, I will try to explain why I would prefer the "functions of language" to be the object of study for linguistics. The socio-functional approach to language means first of all investigating how language is used; then trying to find out for what purposes that language serves us, and finally how we are able to achieve these purposes through speaking and listening, reading and writing. Halliday states that

"This approach (the socio-functional) also means seeking to explain the nature of language in functional terms; seeing whether language itself has been shaped by use, and if so, in what ways --how the form of language has been determined by the functions it has evolved to serve."

(Halliday, 1973, p.7)

Earlier attempts at describing what the functions of language are date back to Malinowsky, The Prague School, Bühler and Jakobson. For example, Malinowsky pointed out that language is entirely dependent on the society in which it is used in two senses: first, it has evolved in response to the specific demands of any given society, its use or any instance of its use in that society is entirely context dependent. His definition of meaning is derived "not from a passive contemplation of the word, but from an analysis of its functions, with reference to the given culture" (Malinowsky in Ogden & Richards, 1923). The major functions identified by Malinowsky in one Polynesian community are: 1) the pragmatic function (language as a form of action), 2) the magical function (language as a means of control over the environment), and 3) the narrative function (language as a storehouse of useful and necessary information through its preserved accounts). Malinowsky felt that the functions which he discovered in language had developed in response to the needs of the society which used that language.

One of the most successful achievements of the Prague School of Linguistics is the emphasis placed on the functions performed by language in a given language community. According to Vachek, the Prague conception of language involves a functional approach to the facts of language. This approach visualizes language as a tool for performing a number of essential functions or tasks in the community using it. The most outstanding of these tasks is undoubtedly its communicative function, serving the needs and wants of the actual understanding of individual members of the given language community. The followers of this approach were not only interested in what was communicated through language but also in the way it was communicated, i.e., they were interested in the way content is communicated. They believed that

"The use of language is prompted by the speaker's approach to the extra lingual reality reflected in his act of communication, or in other words, by the meaning to which his act of communication is seen to refer."

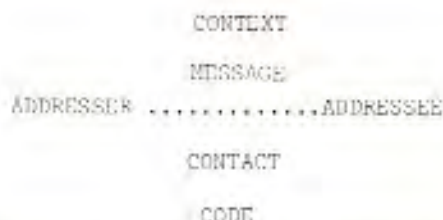
(Vachek, in Frind, 1972, 14)

Prague linguists also made use of Bühler's model for the functions of language. This model has undoubtedly thrown some light on the understanding of the way language is used. Bühler's model distinguishes three basic functions of language:

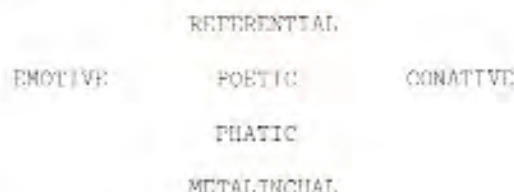
1. the function of expression (to provide a means of expression which characterizes the speaker as distinct from other speakers);
2. the function of appeal (to appeal to the hearer who is to be influenced by the given utterance); and
3. the function of reference (to refer to external reality, to convey the factual content reflecting the communicated extra lingual reality).

Bühler's model influenced not only the Prague Linguists but also some other important linguists - one of them Halliday.

R. Jakobson also gave a model for the functions that language fulfills. According to him, language must be investigated within all the variety of its functions. An analysis of these functions demands a concise survey of the constitutive factors in any speech event, in any of verbal communication. These are the six factors he proposes:



Each of these six factors determine the different functions of language. He points out that it is difficult to find verbal messages that would fulfill only one function. Thus, he states that the verbal structure of a message depends on the predominant function. The six basic functions of verbal communication he suggests are the following:



Another relevant question one needs to ask when defining the object of study for linguistics is, "Why is language as it is?". To which Halliday answers that language has evolved in a certain way because of its function in the social system. He mentions that

"The nature of language is closely related to the demands that we make on it; the functions it has to serve."

(Halliday, 1970, 141)

Although these functions are culture specific, underlying such specific instances of language use are more general functions which are common to all cultures. He states that it is not useful to just give an account of linguistic structure. One has to arrive at a balance between the two because it is of little use to look merely for the sociological or psychological aspects of language or to merely give an account of a linguistic structure which pays no attention to the demands we make of language. What he wants to arrive at is a specification of the functions which language has in society and then establish how these functions are reflected in the structure of language itself.

According to Halliday language has three macro-functions in society and these form the basis for the organization of the entire linguistic system. These are:

1. "Language serves for the expressing of content, that is of the speaker's experience of the real world, including the inner world of his own consciousness." This he calls the ideational function.
2. "Language serves to establish and maintain social relations for the expression of the social roles which include the communication roles which created by language itself - for example, the roles of questioner/respondent." This he calls the interpersonal function.

3. "Language has to provide for making links with itself and with features of the situation in which it is used." (Halliday, 1970, 143). This is what he calls the textual function, since this is what enables the speaker or writer to construct texts, or connected passages of discourse and enables the listener or reader to distinguish a text from a random set of sentences.

According to Halliday these macro-functions are the highly abstract linguistic reflexes of the multiplicity of the uses of language; these functions appear at a new level in the adult linguistic system, taking the form of "grammar."

Halliday's functions of language differ from those of Malinowsky and Bühler in that Malinowsky was interested in the ethnographic account of the functions of language and Bühler in the sociological and psychological enquiries of the use of language; but neither attempted to explain the nature of the linguistic system in functional terms. Here it is necessary to introduce Halliday's concept of "meaning potential" since according to him learning a language is learning the uses of language i.e. the meaning potential associated with these; structure, words and sounds are the realizations of this meaning potential. Learning a language is learning how to mean. For him language is a system of meaning potential i.e. a range of options opened to a player as performer and receiver.

Now, what follows is an analysis of each of these macro-functions and what each of them contributes to the functional description of language. Since Halliday states that

"from the educational point of view the problem of linguistics is to elaborate some account of language that is relevant to the work of the English teacher."

(Halliday in Allen & Corder, 1973, 56)

I will try to relate their relevance to language teaching. This by no means implies that I believe that an account of language by itself will provide an answer to the various problems of language teaching. I think that the answers to these problems have to be sought in the fields of education, psychology, and sociology. However, a comprehensive account of language does at least provide a framework within which the answers can be sought.

The interpersonal function covers all use of language to express social and personal relations, including all forms of the speaker's intrusion into the speech situation and the speech act. Halliday's basic unit of analysis is the clause and in the clause the interpersonal element is represented by mood and modality i.e. the selection by the speaker of a particular role in the speech situation and his/her determination of the choice of roles for the addressee (mood) and the expressions of his/her judgments and predictions (modality). Besides using language to approve and disapprove, to ask and answer, to include in the social group, or to exclude from it, there is the interpersonal component or function which provides the meaning potential for this element since it is present in all uses of language. Language has to provide for interaction between people, by allowing the expression of social and individual roles, statuses, assess-

gements, judgements and so forth which include participation in linguistic interaction. In the case of the language learner it is necessary to know the different roles that the speaker can take, i.e., giving orders, asking questions, making assertions and so on. These basic speech functions of command, question, statement, response, are expressed by the grammatical function of mood in which the main options are imperative, interrogative and declarative. The learner must be able to recognize the difference between "she is and "is she?" and realize that this marks a difference in the communication role adopted by the speaker in his/her interaction with the listener.

The main role of the ideational function is to transmit information between members of societies.

"It is a major component of meaning in the language system that is basic to more or less all uses of language."

(Halliday, 1973, 39)

It is present in all language uses because no matter what the speaker is doing with language he/she will find him/herself exploiting its ideational resources, its potential for expressing content in terms of the speaker's experience in the form of content. It not only determines the available options in meaning but also determines the nature of their structural realization. Halliday states that

"the clause is the unit by which we express a particular range of ideational meanings, our experience of processes -the processes of the external world, both concrete and abstract the process of our own consciousness, seeing, liking, thinking, talking and so on."

(Halliday, 1973, 39)

In this function, transitivity is the grammar of the clause. Halliday conceives of the transitivity of grammar as being the area which reflects the ideational function of language. He states that transitivity accounts for types of processes in which participans and circumstantial roles are involved in the clause. Roles such as actor, goal and beneficiary are structural functions or roles in transitivity. They represent the categories of our interpretation of experience. For the language learner it is necessary to realize that the words he/she chooses to express or transmit information can play different roles in the language system.

The textual function is a function which we do not find in Malinowsky nor in Bühler. It is the function that language has of creating text, of relating itself to the context, to the situation and the preceding text. This function deals with the way sentences are organized as messages, the way in which the propositional and modal elements are arranged so that they make sense as a piece of communication or a component of discourse. It fulfills the requirement that

"language should be operationally relevant that it should have a texture in real contexts of situations

that distinguish a living message from a mere entry in a grammar or a dictionary."

(Halliday, 1973, 42)

This function is very important since the basic unit of language in use is not a word or a sentence but a "text." If we are interested in finding out what the functions language fulfills in society are, then we would be mistaken if we took the sentence as the unit of analysis because language is not a set of isolated sentences. Language is connected passages of prose. One of the roles of the textual function is the establishment of cohesive relations from one sentence to another in discourse. In this function the clause is organized as a message; thus, in addition to its structure in transitivity and in mood, it also has the structure of a message, what is known as a "thematic structure." One of the main contributions of Halliday's textual function is the fact that it made linguists turn their attention to the analysis of language as used in discourse and not just language as reflected in isolated aspects (i.e., sentences). The work on discourse analysis has been in a way motivated by this function.

If we consider the relevance of a functional system which includes the three functions mentioned before, I would agree with Halliday in saying that

"the significance of a functional system of this kind is that you can use it to explain the nature of language, because you find that language is in fact structured along these three dimensions. So the system is as it were both extrinsic and intrinsic at the same time. It is designed to explain the internal nature of language in such a way as to relate it to its external environment."

(Halliday, 1978, 48)

Now I would like to comment on some of the contributions which the study of the functions of language, and in particular Halliday's model can offer to the teaching of reading comprehension. The fact that I have chosen the teaching of reading rather than the teaching of writing or speaking does not mean that such a study of language is only useful to the teaching of reading but just that reading is the field which most interests me. First of all, I have to point out that I conceive the process of reading as a communicative process where both reader and writer interact with each other. And I consider language as the "linguistic system" in which the internal patterns of language relate to the communicative operation of language use. Therefore, I advocate an approach which aims at enabling the students to understand utterances (or, in the case of reading, statements) which express certain concepts and perform certain communicative acts. When teaching reading we should aim at developing two abilities in the students:

"The first is the ability to recognize how sentences are used in the performance of acts of communication, the ability to understand the rhetorical functioning of language in use. The second is the ability to recognize and manipulate the formal devices which

are used to combine sentences as used to create continuous passages of prose."

(Allen & Widdowson, 1974, 5)

The former ability is closely related to Halliday's interpersonal function and the latter to his "textual" function. In the interpersonal function what Halliday calls the modal meaning of sentences has led linguists to the investigation of how sentences are used to perform different communicative acts. This has induced philosophers and sociologists, as well as linguists to study this aspect of language. For example, Austin (1962) and Searle (1969) stated that in uttering any sentence one is at the same time performing an action; one is not just saying something. One has to realize that there is an "illocutionary force" in the statements one is uttering. Therefore, students should be made aware of the "illocutionary force" that certain statements have so that when reading they will be able to distinguish a command from a warning, a promise from a threat and so on. As mentioned before the interpersonal function is not only realized through modality but also through mood. As far as mood is concerned the student should be able to recognize the different communicative roles adopted by the speaker (or writer). For example, the student should be able to relate the imperative form to the way instructions are given when reading manuals. The ideational function expressed through transitivity should also be dealt with since it refers to the way content is expressed in terms of the speaker's experience and that of the speech community. It also expresses the factual conditions of the processes expressed in the clause. This function deals more with the grammatical system as such, i.e., it is in this function where the choices of functional words take place. What comes out of the choices is the propositional content of an utterance and it is in the interpersonal function where the "force" of such proposition is conveyed.

The function which I consider most relevant to the teaching of reading is the textual function. Although distinctions have been made between the term "text" and the term "discourse" (the former referring to sentences in combination, the latter referring to the use of sentence to perform communicative acts; I am using the term "discourse" in the way Halliday does i.e. referring to both "text" and "discourse"). There has been a tendency to deal with language as a set of isolated sentences; however, currently there is more emphasis being placed on the teaching of language as discourse. Therefore, for the learner it is very important to realize how sentences are connected when learning passages of prose, to see the importance of the context in which these sentences are used, and to notice the use of cohesive devices. The fact that many linguists, as well as language teachers, have realized that a knowledge of how language operates in real communication does not automatically follow from a knowledge of how sentences are formed, has resulted in a change of focus from the sentence as the basic unit for the analysis and teaching of language, to the use of sentences in combination. Many people have now started working on the study of language as communication and in finding a grammar, different from a sentence grammar theory, which will provide a more complete theoretical framework. This is why I find Halliday's theory useful since he deals with grammar within a socio-functional perspective which is exactly what some people have argued for. Here again I want to make clear that, in my view, it is not in the linguistic description of language that the language teacher is going to find all the answers to the

problems of teaching. However, I believe that a description of language which takes into consideration all the factors involved is of great use to the language teacher. Another thing which I find in Halliday's approach which I do not find in other linguists who have given a description of language is the fact that in Halliday the psycholinguistic as well as the sociolinguistic aspects of language are included. In the ideational function the psycholinguistic aspect of language is included since it expresses the speaker's experience of the real world, including the inner world of his/her consciousness. The sociological aspect of language is expressed in the interpersonal function since it serves to establish and maintain social relations and to transmit information between members of societies.

I would like to conclude this paper which advocates a study of the socio-functional approach to the study of language with a quote from William Lavob.

"It is difficult to avoid the common-sense conclusion that the object of linguistics must ultimately be the instrument of communication used by the speech community; and if we are not talking about "that" language there is something trivial in our proceeding."

(Lavob, 1972)

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