Systemic Functional Linguistics and its Application to Foreign Language Teaching

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Este trabajo describe los conceptos básicos acerca de la relación entre la Lingüística Sistèmico Funcional y la enseñanza de lenguas, así como el desarrollo histórico de esta escuela funcional e implicaciones que lleven a la comprensión de su papel en la enseñanza de lenguas. La discusión incluye la relación entre la teoría y su aplicación, y diferentes orientaciones metodológicas en la enseñanza de lenguas, así como el papel del conocimiento explícito del lenguaje. Desde una perspectiva de la LSF, la teoría y la práctica no se consideran como separadas, ni en una relación jerárquica, sino en una relación dialéctica. Se puede clasificar la LSF dentro de los enfoques metodológicos comunicativos en cuanto a la enseñanza de lenguas, como una teoría del lenguaje con una base léxico gramatical extensiva. La LSF toma una posición que enfatiza el papel positivo del conocimiento explícito del lenguaje y su uso, especialmente el conocimiento acerca de la conexión entre los fenómenos del discurso y los patrones lexicogramaticales, como una contribución importante no sólo a la enseñanza de lenguas, sino también a la comprensión del lenguaje y de la naturaleza humana.

This paper discusses key concepts concerning the relationship between Systemic Functional Linguistics and language teaching, as well as historical developments of this functional school and implications for an understanding of its role in language teaching. The discussion centers around the relationship between theory and application, different methodological orientations in language teaching, and the role of explicit knowledge about language. The paper maintains that from a SFL perspective, theory and practice are not seen as separate or hierarchical, but rather as having a dialectical relationship. SFL can be situated within the communicative family of methodological approaches to language teaching, as a theory of language with an extensive lexicogrammatical core; SFL takes a position which emphasizes the positive role of explicit knowledge about language and its use, especially knowledge involving the connection between discourse phenomena and lexicogrammatical patterns, as an important contribution not only to language teaching but also to an understanding of language and human nature.

1. Introduction

In the following remarks, an attempt will be made to characterize one of the functionalist schools of linguistics in its interaction with the fields of Language Teaching (LT), and Foreign Language Teaching (FLT) in particular. Our focus on Systemic Functional Linguistics, henceforth SFL (cf. Halliday 1978, 1985/1994; Halliday and Hasan 1989; Halliday and Matthiessen 1997; Martin 1992; Fawcett 1980; Halliday, McIntosh and Strevens 1964), should in no way be interpreted as a claim that the contributions of other functionalist schools to LT are unimportant. On the contrary, linguistic schools such as West Coast Functionalism (cf. Givon 1979), Dutch Functionalism (cf. Dik 1979), and also the empirically and holistically-oriented work in Cognitive Grammar (Langacker 1987) have already begun to make an impact on LT, and will increasingly do so in the future. Furthermore, some of the more traditional orientations of functionalism in linguistics in Europe, e.g. French Functionalism (Martinet 1962), East German and Russian Functionalism (cf. Bondarko 1984), and Prague School Functionalism (cf. Danes 1974) have had a far-reaching influence on LT in many educational contexts for some considerable time. Our own focus on SFL in this paper is therefore only due to constraints of space and time, and to our own lack of sufficient familiarity with some of the developments of the other schools mentioned. Bearing these limitations in mind, let us concentrate on the contributions of SFL for the remainder of this paper.

We hope to address, on the one hand, teachers with an interest in SFL and its potential usefulness as a source of ideas for LT and FLT. A second more general group within our audience may be applied linguists. Apart from these two target audiences, it is hoped that we shall have a few things to say of relevance to linguists in general, as well as those with an interest in LT applications in the narrower sense.

A global goal of our remarks is the exploration of the interaction of SFL and language teaching. It may be seen as one of the characteristic features of SFL that this process is very much understood as an interaction, rather than as a unidirectional flow of ideas from a theory to its application: SFL sees theory and practice as united in a dialectical relationship where, on the one hand, the application (LT) would be unfocussed without a theory, yet where, on the other hand, the theory can only develop by growing out of the requirements, constraints, and feed-back provided by its applications. LT has been one of the shaping influences of SFL, and in terms of SFL's history, some would say THE decisive driving force for the further development of the theory. Therefore, a discussion of the interaction referred to here has a straightforward motivation, not only in the potential interest of the audience, but also in terms of the characteristics of SFL itself.

We shall attempt to give more profile to the specifically SFL inspired approach to (F)LT in the final paragraphs of our section 2 below. This will be done by contrasting SFL-based approaches with, and relating them to, approaches from outside the field of (F)LT on the one hand, traditional Grammar and Translation approaches and mentalistic approaches in linguistics on the other, and finally approaches mainly inspired by literary

theory and/or educational psychology. We hope the specific profile of SFL and its contribution to (F)LT will emerge with sufficient clarity: these contributions fall largely into the communicative functional and notional family of approaches. Within this family, they are characterized by a relatively strong orientation to lexicogrammar and explicit models of discourse.

The potential of being both communicative and language-oriented is due, among other factors, to SFL's understanding of its key terms "systemic" and "functional": SFL views its language model to be organized around systems of choices, rather than a hierarchy of structures. A description of, say, the system of English clauses is given in terms of the system comprising the choices, or features, organized around the categories of types of process (transitivity), participants, circumstances, time, and a few others, rather than conceptualizing clauses basically in terms of syntactic constituency patterns. The crucial role of the "system" ensures further access to semantic and functional, rather than syntactic and formal categories - something which is surely of prime importance for a view on language useful for teaching.

The other, and related, key term is "functional": it implies that linguistic descriptions are organized around meaning as function in context on the one hand. Furthermore, language is seen not only as functional, but as multi-functional, which enables SFL to fully integrate a modeling of language as encoding states of affairs (experiential meaning, the sole concern of many mainstream approaches) with a modeling of language as an instrument for the expression of speaker assessment, interpersonal relations, and emotional expression (interpersonal meaning). Finally, all these functions of language need to be realized through the textforming potential of language (textual meaning), such as managing of thematic progression and the managing of information flow in terms of given and new information. And last but not least, the term "functional" means that the basic interest of SFL, and of approaches to (F)LT based on it, is on discourse and text, and only through these on sentences and clauses. Language, the system, when it has to "function" necessarily becomes discourse and text, i.e. language in use, and it is this latter property of SFL which has always made it attractive to language teachers. Looking back at the two key terms "system" and "function", it appears that whereas the view on "function" is, at least partly, shared between SFL and other functional approaches mentioned above, the role of the term "system" as just characterized is fairly unique to SFL.

The form that our exploration will take will be that of a discussion of selected key concepts in the first place, and of some historical developments of SFL in the second. The key concepts will be those of Language Teaching and Foreign Language Teaching, the relationship between theory and application in an SFL-based understanding of linguistics, the opposition between methodological orientations in LT (Grammar and Translation vs. Pattern Learning vs. Communicative and Notional/ Functional approaches), and finally the particular understanding of the role of explicit knowledge about language in an SFL context. In our remarks on aspects of the history of SFL, we shall try to bring out a few characteristics of the interaction at issue here which may be due to the history of SFL in particular, rather than to principles and concepts in general.

Finally, given our straightforward orientation towards LT and FLT in the present paper, it might be useful to emphasize that SFL has had a number of important applicational contexts other than (F)LT, such as critical discourse analysis (Hodge and Kress 1988) and stylistics (Carter 1982), computational linguistics (Matthiessen and Bateman 1991), medical contexts (Rochester and Martin 1979), translation (Hatim and Mason 1990), literary studies (Halliday 1964), first language development (Halliday 1975) and others. All of these have shaped the SFL approach to language, but arguably none of them more than LT and FLT. We shall concentrate on (F)LT here, discussing key concepts and historical developments. To add some breadth of coverage without in any sense approaching comprehensiveness we shall add relevant publications to our references at the end beyond those referred to in the text, in those cases where it is felt that the particular reference is strongly representative of SFL work.

2.   Some key concepts in the interaction of Systemic Functional Linguistics and Language Teaching

One of the most straightforward ways to get an idea of the particular interaction between SFL and (F)LT may be an investigation of the specific meanings which some key terms take on within that process. Two of these key terms in our present context are Language Teaching (LT) and Foreign Language Teaching (FLT) themselves. In the culture of origin of SFL, British culture of the 1960's, LT and FLT were different activities institutionally, with the fairly traditional teaching of English as a native language on the one hand, and teaching of either English as a Foreign Language (EFL), or the teaching of other foreign languages in Britain, on the other. However, because of the particular role of English as a world language and in the context of increased migration patterns, LT and FLT can be more realistically seen to differ along a cline, rather than in a sharp binary and categorial way. Any teacher of English as a native and/or first language nowadays is operating in populations of students in which a certain percentage of students has one, or more, additional languages, and often even a different mother tongue. To the extent that this is the case, the teaching of English has to assume some features of FLT. Considering the other end of our cline, even where English is taught as a foreign, and/or second, language, e.g. in large parts of Africa or Asia, it will often serve in these contexts as the primary language of communication and instruction, and the same holds for the ever increasing number of students with a native language other than English in the British (and Australian and US-American) educational system. The position of SFL towards language teaching in general can therefore perhaps be described as one which views that process, just like any other communicative process, as embedded in contexts of situation, or registers, exhibiting variations along the dimensions of Field, Tenor, and Mode and their more delicate sub-variables: Language teaching then happens in a whole variety of ways, differing in a number of dimensions, with traditional (Native) LT instantiating one particular type of context, and with traditional FLT instantiating another. SFL has made

contributions to both of these types (cf. Doughty/Pearce/Thornton 1971; Carter 1990 for the first type, and Melrose 1991 or Mohan 1986 for the second). Interestingly, and this may be one of the promising routes into the future of this field, many of the contributions made negotiate, as it were, between traditional LT and FLT, recognizing the possibility that LT has to include the non-native student among its audience, and, at the other end of the cline, recognizing the possibility that, for many types of learners at least, FLT has to aim at degrees of competence and cultural awareness which in many registers may not be very different from those traditionally only deemed necessary for the native speaker (cf. Christie 1985, 1994, Christie and Martin 1997, Locke 1996, Downing and Locke 1992).

Let us turn now to the SFL conceptualization of the relationship between theory and application, because this conceptualization has led, in the past, to a substantial involvement of SFL in (F)LT, and promises to continue to do so. In much of Western mainstream linguistics (as in many other disciplines), there is an assumed hierarchical relationship between theory and practice, such that theory is associated with creativity, intellectual value, research, explanation, academic leadership, and intellectual and so-cial value in general. Within that perspective, application is usually assigned to the opposite poles of passive and non-creative execution of tasks, lack of intellectual creativity, teaching rather than research, description rather than explanation, and inferiority in terms of intellectual and social value. This split within Western conceptualizations is clearly mirrored in the widening gulf between professional organizations for "Theoretical Linguistics" and those for "Applied Linguistics", between journals for "theory" and "application", between undergraduate and post-graduate awarding institutions, between research and teaching institutions, between those that are judged to be worthy of support by national and international funding agencies for basic research, and those that are not.

SFL has never subscribed to the polarizing views just indicated. As a comprehensive approach to language, it is clearly committed to theory, explanation and freedom from the constraints of any one specific application. However, it also postulates that the source of inspiration for theoretical developments, the direction that the development of a theory takes, has to be sought in (often theoretically motivated) applications. In other words, a model of some aspect of language has to be a model for a particular (class of) task, because it is from there that the theory and the models take their specifications, such as which aspects to model, degree of granularity of modeling, degree of specialization, requirements of formalization, types of representation etc.. SFL theories and models of language clearly show the traces of the guiding contexts of development, and it is quite transparent that one of these guiding contexts has been (F)LT. Its breadth of coverage, its indebtedness to rhetorical and .grammatical (rather than logical) traditions, its postulate that meaning and form cannot be separated, its emphasis on discourse and text are all due, at least in part, to its attitude to, and often its involvement in teaching applications.

A third set of key concepts has to do with the way SFL positions itself relative to other orientations as regards (F)LT. In terms of historical development, SFL approaches to (F)LT evolved out of criticisms of the traditional Grammar and Translation approaches,

but also out of criticisms of the kind of Pattern Learning often associated with audio-lingual methods, evolving from applications of American Structuralism and Behaviourism to (F)LT. SFL-inspired teaching is undoubtedly situated within a third family of approaches, coming under headings such as Communicative and Notional, or Functional, approaches (cf. Melrose 1991:24ff, Wilkins 1976, Munby 1978, Widdowson 1978 etc.), and it is within this family that important further debates seem to be going on at this stage (cf. also Breen and Candlin 1980). One of the issues is that of how much input into (F)LT from linguistics is desirable, alongside educational psychology, sociology, philosophy, and literary studies, and especially how much input there should be from lexicogrammar. Within these debates, SFL is seen as being on the lexicogrammar-oriented side.

But there are interesting debates taking place outside the family of communicative approaches, too. Some features of the old Grammar and Translation approach are making a re-appearance in connection with a heavily prescriptive and elitist interpretation of Chomskyan linguistics in applications to language teaching. From that angle, SFL is sometimes accused of being not linguistics-oriented enough, and of being too "soft", as it were - an interesting counter-challenge to the occasional allegations of over-emphasis on lexicogrammar by SFL in some lines of argumentation within the discourse of "Communicative Language Teaching".

Finally, there has long been, and still is, very considerable influence on the (F)LT area from Literary Studies, and sometimes also Cultural Studies, resulting in applications such as creative writing and literary-based methods of discourse analysis. Relative to these approaches, SFL may again appear to somewhat over-emphasize lexicogrammar at the expense of more global structures such as genres - an unnecessary worry in the face of SFL's focus on "register" and "genre" in much of its research and teaching in recent years.

The position that emerges for SFL in the context of these and other debates would seem to be the following: SFL is a theory of language based on an extensive lexicogrammatical core. The primary motivation of this grammatical core is to serve as an explanation of discourse phenomena, which have been the focus of much of SFL research in the 70's and 80's. This position of SFL explains why it is often perceived to be too "pragmatic" as seen through the eyes of the formal and structural linguist, while it is occasionally seen to be too grammar-oriented from the perspective of the literary specialist, or the educational psychologist. However, the nature of SFL just indicated also explains why it has very often been relied on as a major source of inspiration by (F)LT people: it is a socially-based theory of human language, and one based on perhaps the most intricate social (and semiotic) system available to us, i.e. human language and (arguably) its most highly organized centre, i.e. lexicogrammar.

The final key notion that we want to address here is the understanding of the role of explicit knowledge about language in (F)LT. From a very broad perspective, approaches to (F)LT can be classified into those that postulate the usefulness of some sort of explicit knowledge of language vs. those that do not, or even go so far as to claim that explicit

knowledge is harmful. The latter claim is sometimes made by those believing that a language is best learned without any interference, and that a foreign language is best learned by spending time in the country where it is the (a) first language. This view is often found in disciplines outside the arts and humanities, philosophical and social science communities, and certainly in sectors of society at large. Closer to the linguistic and educational communities, there are variants of rather extreme versions of empiricism, for example some of those associated with neural networks technologies or models, where essentially similar claims may be found.

Members of the language-teaching professions usually do believe in the importance of some kind of explicit knowledge and teaching. Within this group, there are different orientations, which we have essentially mentioned in our discussion of types of (F)LT methodologies above. In the context of these debates, SFL-based approaches may be considered to belong to those strongly emphasizing the role of explicit knowledge, and, more precisely, of knowledge requiring the linkage between the lexicogrammatical core of language and those more global discourse phenomena realized by lexicogrammatical patterns. In summary, SFL-based approaches are often seen as emphasizing the positive and enabling role of explicit knowledge about language and its use.

We have discussed the interaction of SFL and (F)LT here, using a review of a small set of key concepts from the discourse of that interaction. The concepts were those of language teaching and foreign language teaching, theory and application, some basic methodological orientations in (F)LT, and the role of explicit knowledge of language in language teaching. In our short discussion, we have thus attempted to situate SFL in the conceptual space mapped out in these debates. One of the recurrent impressions one gets is that approaches of the SFL-type cannot easily be classified as belonging to only one of the various "camps" identified in these debates; instead, some of the terms of the debate themselves are brought into question. In the following section, an attempt will be made to show why SFL arguments cut across some of the established categories, partly due to certain aspects of its history.

3. The history of Systemic Functional Linguistics - implications for an understanding of its role in language teaching

The main origin of SFL lies in Firthian Linguistics, partly explaining its orientation towards anthropology and the social sciences (Firth 1957, Malinowski 1953). SFL, especially in the work of Halliday, displays added influences from Chinese linguistics, as well as certain aspects of Prague School work and Hjelmslev's views on language. It cannot easily be reduced to the second term of the dichotomy between "cognitive vs. communicative" approaches to language, nor to the second term in the dichotomy between "technologically-based approaches and art-and-humanities-based approaches", although SFL can be said to have closer affinities to the second member of the pair in each case. However, SFL does not fall neatly into the conceptual space indicated by these

dichotomies, in that it has developed its own meanings for all of the terms used here, meanings which cut across the simple dichotomy (cf. Steiner 1996).

Let us follow SFL's developmental path, looking at a few milestones in its evolution as far as (F)LT is concerned (cf. Steiner 1983 and 1991 for fuller accounts). Initially, i.e. roughly throughout the 60's and early 70's, Systemic Grammar, as it was often called in those days, had a strong influence on British Applied Linguistics (Halliday *et al.* 1964). Carter 1990 and related work can be seen as (partly) a continuation of that earlier period. From that earlier period, there was also a limited spill-over into Europe (cf. Geiger 1979), but also work on English Teaching in Spain (cf. Downing and Locke 1992) and Italy. Somewhat later, mainly during the 70's, there was a growing influence in North America (cf. Lemke 1985,1990, Mohan 1986, Fries 1995), which has never resulted in anything like a mainstream position for SFL, but which has, on the other hand, guaranteed a certain audience for SFL in (F)LT discourses in North America. Still later, from about the 80's onwards, there is a strong influence of SFL based (F)LT in education in Australia, cf. for example the work of Jim Martin, Frances Christie (Christie and Martin 1997), and the important Halliday and Martin 1993, and many others. As a combined result of Halliday's early time in China, and movements of British and Australian SFL-trained (F)LT people from both Britain and Australia into parts of Asia, there is nowadays a certain degree of influence in Japan, Singapore, Hongkong and China (cf. Locke 1996, Hu 1995). There are also, but again to a limited extent, influences in Africa, e.g. South Africa and Nigeria.

What are the possible implications of these historical movements for our understanding of SFL and (F)LT?

As already noted, the borderline between FLT and LT as regards the teaching of the mother tongue is not as sharply drawn as elsewhere. In many of the locations where SFL applications have developed over time, English was and is an official language, and is either the first language or an important second language, in the sense of frequency of use, for many people, without being the native language for many of them. This means that the language has to carry much of the functional load of traditional native languages, yet has to be taught as a foreign language in the traditional sense in parts of the US, Canada, Australia, Africa, and Asia, for example. As a consequence, at least in many parts of the world, SFL-based methods of (F)LT show clear traces of the recognition of a development within which the different degrees of mastery with which a language is used have become much more differentiated than they used to be when people still worked with a simple binary split between "native language teaching" and "foreign language teaching".

The different versions of (F)LT applications of SFL show interesting traces of encounters with diverse debates going on in various places at different times. Challenges which SFL-based methods had to meet include European-style language teaching based on traditional Grammar and Translation methodologies, Pattern Drill methodologies informed by American Structuralism and Behaviorism, literature-based language training in parts of Europe and Asia, Chomsky-inspired rationalist approaches to (F)LT in parts

of the US, and others. Think also of the encounter with very different native languages, in places where SFL-inspired notions have been used in FLT methodologies. The theory of SFL has become less English-biased as a consequence of these and other encounters. For the same reason, SFL-based discussions are somewhat less likely than some of the others to indulge too extensively in the well-known kind of "us-and-them" debates with particular rival approaches. The idea that there are many different ways in which to think about language in an educational context, and that the real challenge is more one of learning from each other than one of proving superiority in one dimension of comparison, has gained ground through these different encounters.

Finally, due to the particular path taken by the development of the theory, (F)LT applications of SFL have explored the potential of the theory on various levels over time. Whereas early (F)LT work inspired by SFL takes Halliday's Scale and Category Model as its basis (Halliday 1961), later applications become more semantic and, especially during the late 80's and 90's, socio-semantic in nature. From an SFL perspective, these are in no way contradictions, as information and interaction described at one level is always a necessary realization of one of the others, and/or is in turn realized by the other levels. A multi-level perspective for development of that kind will usually be allowed, or even required, by a stratified model of language, and, indeed, other semiotic systems.

4. Concluding remarksics - impl

By way of concluding, we would like to point out once more what we have been trying to achieve with our remarks here, and also what we have not been attempting:

Quite clearly, given our particular constraints of space and time, we have not attempted to give a comprehensive account of work done in the field of interaction between (F)LT and SFL. Given the breadth and depth, and also the spatio-temporal spread of this interaction, such an account would be extremely difficult, and perhaps impossible by now. As a consequence, we have had to be selective, as indeed most accounts do nowadays.

Perhaps a more serious limitation is that (F)LT teaching applications ceased to be the centre of my own activities some 13 or so years ago, and whereas since then I have always maintained contacts with the field, they have been less intense than the continuous involvement of those who are pursuing (F)LT teaching applications of linguistic work as their major research and teaching activities. What I think I am able to offer here are the views of someone who has actively and critically followed SFL work in a range of areas, especially critical discourse analysis, computational linguistics, multilingual discourse representation, and translation - and (F)LT as a focal interest until about the mid-80's, and as an active interest since then.

Yet another limitation may be seen in the somewhat Eurocentric orientation of the perspective that has been adopted here. Although I have tried not to let that perspective blind me to other possible views, I do not delude myself into assuming that I have been

able to avoid it. An account of the interaction between (F)LT and SFL from the perspective of, say, Chinese, Nigerian or Brasilian teachers and linguists would bring other properties and topics to the forefront. Yet, assuming that some sort of perspective is unavoidable, rather than trying to avoid having any perspective at all, we have tried to make ours explicit, while at the same time inviting and hoping for accounts from other perspectives.

What we are hoping to achieve here is a characterization of SFL's interaction with the field of (F)LT in terms of some key notions of the theory and in terms of the historical development of SFL. Such an account could serve as an orientation, for example as to whether or not one chooses to select this approach, rather than others, for closer consideration. More importantly, we would like to help towards an increased understanding of what this particular approach to language is aiming at, and why, therefore, it foregrounds certain issues and gives less space to others.

Perhaps the most important characteristic of SFL in the present context, however, is the fact that it resists all attempts to separate theory and practice, something which has been frequently attempted across various cultures to different degrees:

Many "formal" and "mentalist/rationalist" linguists will maintain that (F)LT-applications of knowledge of language are of little inherent interest for the theory of language. On that general level, the "formalists" are in some respects joined by some of the traditional philologists, either those of a more logic-based, or of a more Grammar and Translation-based orientation. The views pronounced there, from the lofty heights of the ivory towers of theory, as it were, have no place in the general approach of SFL, where a dialectical, rather than hierarchical, relationship between theory and practice has always been deemed a cornerstone of the underlying view of our knowledge of language.

But there is also the complementary challenge by those who maintain that in order to teach a language, all you need is an education in some other, preferably technical, field plus a well-organized exposure to the language as it is used, maybe through a stay in the community where the language to be learned is a first and/or native language. People holding these views will often deny systematic language teaching any role at all, and they will certainly not see the merits of some "theory" of language, at least not for teaching applications. Against attempts of that nature to separate theory from practice, there stands the premise of SFL that explicit knowledge of language, not least systematic knowledge of lexicogrammar, is an important contribution, not only to (F)LT, but to an understanding of language and the (social) nature of human beings. Knowledge of language, in that understanding, plays an essential part in the study of educational systems, and beyond that, an essential part of the study of social man and woman.

It is in debates such as those alluded to above that SFL and similar approaches display their profile very clearly, and it is in these same debates that SFL approaches prove important for language teachers in their attempts to define and further develop their position.

Acknowledgements:

5. References

In addition to the publications referred to in the present paper, the bibliography below contains a number of publications dating from roughly the past ten years which are not referred to in the text, but are included because they typify SFL-work in the area. We have largely restricted ourselves to monographs, including articles only in cases where they have a particular programmatic significance.

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