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 compre-
hension 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, 1973, 25)

This approach which considers language as a means of communication can be re-
garded 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 be-
hind 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 "phe-
nomenon 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 lan-
guage as a social phenomenon i.e., in the role that language plays in communi-
cation, 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 func-
tions 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, read-
ing 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, 1973). 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 Vackek, 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 mutual 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 com-
> munication, or in other words, by the meaning to which his
> act of communication is seen to refer."
>
> (Vackek, in Fried, 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:

CONTEXT

MESSAGE

ADDRESSER ....ADDRESSEE

CONTACT

CODE

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:

REFERENTIAL

EMOTIVE   POETIC   CONATIVE

PHATIC

METALINGUAL

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.

38

sments, 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 commu-
nication 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 lan-
> guage."

> (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 expliciting 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 pro-
cesses in which participant and circumstantial roles are involved in the clause.
Roles such as actor, goal and beneficiary are structural functions or rules 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 sys-
tem.

> 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 rela-
ting itself to the context, to the situation and the preceding text. This func-
tion 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., sen-
tences). 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 intrin-
> sic 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 teach-
ing 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 pro-
cess where both reader and writer interact with each other. And I consider
language as the "linguistic system" in which the internal patterns of lan-
guage relate to the communicative operation of language use. Therefore, I
advocate an approach which aims at enabling the students to understand ut-
terances (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 con-
> tinuous 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 perform-
ing an action; one is not just saying something. One has to realize that
there is an "illocutionary force" in the statements one is uttering. There-
fore, students should be made aware of the "illocutionary force" that certain
statements have so that when reading they will be able to distinguish a com-
mand 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 gram-
matical 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 proposi-
tional 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 be-
tween the term "text" and the term 'discourse' the former referring to sen-
tences 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. There-
fore, for the learner it is very important to realize how sentences are con-
nected when forming passages of prose, to see the importance of the context
in which those 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 perspec-
tive 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 lan-
guage 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 commu-
> nity; and if we are not talking about "that" language
> there is something trivial in our proceeding."

(Lavob, 1972)

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