CHOICE IN GRAMMAR: A SYSTEMIC OVERVIEW *

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Resum.   **L'elecció en gramàtica: una visió sistemicista** . L'ampli ventall de teories lingüístiques de què disposem actualment suscita estudis metateòrics de tot tipus. Tanmateix, els lingüistes no són pas sempre conscients del pes que tenen les teories que proposen ni de la influència que exerceixen damunt d'altres models. L'objetiu d'aquest article ha estat valorar la importància de l'elecció en la Gramàtica Sistèmica Funcional (GSF) des d'un punt de vista metateòric. L'article analitza les conseqüències determinants d'orientar la gramàtica com a "el llenguatge com a elecció". S'hi examinen especialment dos camps: els principis ontològics generals que hi ha al darrere de la GSF (apartat 2) i la interacció entre l'objecte teòric i la teoria (apartat 3).

Paraules clau: Gramàtica sistèmica funcional.

Abstract.   The wide range of linguistic theories available nowadays encourages metatheoretical studies of all kinds. However, linguists are not always aware of the weight of the theories they propose and the influence they exert on other models. The aim of this article has been to assess the importance of choice within Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG) from a metatheoretical point of view. The paper explores the fundamental consequences of the orientation of grammar as "language as choice". Two main fields will be examined, namely: the general ontological principles underlying SFG (section 2) and the interaction between the theoretical object and the theory itself (section 3).

Key words: Systemic functional grammar.

1   Introduction

The field of theoretical syntax is wide enough to enable studies which try to explore interrelationships between the different grammatical approaches

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available on the market. Such studies gained worth, strength and liveliness after the upsurge of Chomsky's hypothesis on language, based on purely philosophical grounds. Theories founded on ethnographic or anthropologic presuppositions have not generally undergone a process of self-analysis, common practice in Chomskyan literature, so necessary and beneficial to come to a better understanding of the grammatical models proposed by linguists.

This is precisely the aim of this article. It is my intention in the subsequent paragraphs to provide a brief, sketchy insight into some of the basic assumptions present in Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG). What follows attempts to shed some light (not necessarily new, but from a different perspective) into the theory of SFG as a model of grammar which understands language as choice. I will defend the claim that the fact that language is viewed as a resource for meaning through choice leaves an undeniable trace both in how systemic grammarians conceptualize language and consequently in how they give shape to the model.

2 Ontological status

Halliday's primary interest is to account for the interaction between speakers/writers and listeners/readers in social situations (Butler [3, p. 3]). This standpoint contrasts with that of formalists, for whom language should be understood in itself, devoid of what they take to be external influences. As regards systemic ontology, two tags will be of help in my discussion to distinguish between at least two ways in which language is understood: $language_1$, by which I mean the set of human linguistic behaviour patterns related to how language is used; and $language_2$, the abstract system construed by the linguist.

Halliday defined $language_1$ as activity, a process which takes place between a speaker/writer and a listener/reader within a certain context of situation. The author claims:

> Language does not exist: it happens. It is neither an organism, as many nineteenth-century linguists saw it, nor an edifice, as it was regarded in the early modern 'structuralist' period of linguistics. Language is activity. (Joia & Stenton [19, pp. 90–91])

The set of visible linguistic behaviour patterns is interpreted, not through its static nature, but within its dynamic dimension, which connects with systemic concepts such as text as process *versus* text as product. It is clear that

Halliday's hypotheses are not about structures encapsulated in the speakers' brains (Chomsky's innateness tenet).

As far as language$_2$ is concerned, Halliday declared that language is an object in itself and must be studied as such, not dependent on other objects of study. Halliday has always raised questions about language although he has often used other things as instruments for asking questions about language (Joia & Stenton [19, p. viii]).

The objectlike view proposed by Halliday is understood within the social context in which speakers/writers use language. The essentials of language are to be found in its social use by human communicators. Halliday's hypotheses on language are founded on the premise that language is a social fact.

From the ontological point of view here presented, choice is given pride of place in the following manner: language is seen as a set of resources (Fine [9, pp. 214–215]). This set of resources is conceived of as a bundle of meaningful options available to the speaker/writer, who chooses some options and discards the rest in order to construct the meanings he wants to communicate.

Since language is activity, speakers/writers are bound to actively choose among the options available in the system. Choices viewed as actions may be regarded as what the speaker/writer performs in preparation for speaking/writing (Mann [20, p. 2]). For some authors, when we speak, we do not try to satisfy one or two goals, but we operate under conflicting goals for which no resolution exists. The full utterance is not planned out before speakers begin to speak (Hovy [18, p. 133]). Thus choices are selected in the course of the system traversal.

Together with other functionalist theories, SFG is interested in the communicative aspect of human exchanges. Whereas the formalists's main concern is the fact that people talk, the functionalists' "essential perspective on language is [...] that 'people talk to each other'. In other words, language is not a self-sufficient system but an instrument of communication." (Davidse [5, pp. 73–74]). In order to communicate, people eliminate paradigmatic alternatives within a system. "Information is certainty as opposed to uncertainty, and certainty is achieved through an exclusion of those paradigmatic alternatives that do not hold." (Enkvist [7, p. 3]).

Choice is triggered off whenever speakers/writers are faced with alternative actions, with paradigmatic alternatives. It might be believed that choices involve a conscious decision on the part of the speaker/writer. However, Enkvist [7, p. 12] reminds us that in rapid speech our choices are automatized and do not stem from conscious deliberation. One of the characteristics

of spoken language highlighted by Halliday and his colleagues is its uncon-
scious nature: in SFG, there is no suggestion of intentionality –voluntary
action– or of functional imperatives in the notion of "choice".

Some labels employed in the grammar also reflect this character. This is
the justification for the choose/opt distinction. Halliday [11, p. 142] prefers
to avoid the label *choose* in favour of *opt*. For him, the former implicitly
entails a conscious, deliberate action, whereas the latter conveys symbolic
behaviour.

3 Choice theory: description vs. generation?

The systemic approach to the question of the interaction of the theoretical
object and the theory itself has been said to be mainly descriptive. However,
other recent approaches, such as that of the members of the *Penman* project
at the University of Southern California [23], emphasize the dynamic per-
spective of interpersonal communication and foster a generative reanalysis of
what has been up to that point descriptive applied linguistics. The two alter-
natives are by no means mutually exclusive: SFG is an attempt to account,
either from description itself or from the principles of language generation,
for the mechanism speakers/writers have at their disposal once they want to
set up a meaningful piece of linguistic material. Performers are bound to opt
for one of the options available in the range of alternatives contained in the
system networks. Language, then, is the choice for some meanings against
others.

On a different level, and as far as the dimension covered by the theory
is concerned, choice represents what speakers/writers actually do mean, as
opposed to what they might have meant in a particular context. That is,
choice is present in the potencial/actual distinction. Halliday generally rejects
Chomsky's competence/performance dichotomy; his interest is focused on the
kind of choices speakers/writers make to mean, and not on what they know
about their own language. However, Halliday's empiricism and interest in
performance pervade the following quotation:

> if I was asked to characterize the work in which I have been engaged
> together with some of my colleagues, I would say that our aim is to
> show the patterns inherent in the linguistic performance of the native
> speaker: this is what we mean by 'how the language works'. [13, p. 22]

Choices may be viewed from either of two perspectives concerning the
type of statement used in grammar construction (Mann [20]): as actions the

speaker performs, or as classifications of the speech produced. The first inter-
pretation is dynamic, the second one, static. Apparently, systemic grammar
shows a declarative mode in this respect. However, there is much emphasis
being placed on the fact that it is the performer who is responsible for trig-
gering off the meaning potential. It is the performer who makes the choices.
The focus is then on the speaker/writer, not on the listener/reader.

This contrasts with the priority given to text analysis, rather than to
text generation (some authors view system networks as authentic generative
devices). If the emphasis is on how the performer constructs meanings, one
should expect the theory to foster a generative view of the meaning making
process. However, SFG turns out to be mainly descriptive.

Systemic grammarians feed the theory with observed language events
which contribute to establishing the theoretically relevant meaningful op-
tions in the system networks. One of the characteristic features of options
is that they contain, either overtly or covertly, patterns of what has been
thought of as distinctive in the culture of the social group using the same
language. Choices, in this sense, represent the most frequent options in ev-
eryday discourse. As Halliday says, "the instances constitute the system,
and the system defines the potential for each instance." [15, p. 73]. Con-
straints on the selection of one particular feature may stem not only from the
grammar itself, but from the context and the culture as well (Davidse [5, p.
46]).

From the point of view of the goals of the theory, SFG is specifically
interested in the study of particular languages and special varieties of such
languages (Berry [2, p. 21]). This primary aim does not necessarily entail
presenting a full account of the grammar of a language (mainly English in
this case) due to Halliday's [14, p. xiii] claim that a language is inexhaustible.
This implies that under no circumstances is it required to come to a full, com-
prehensive account of the grammar of a language, let alone of LANGUAGE
(in capital letters).

Systemic grammarians, therefore, attempt to provide a taxonomy (ex-
haustive in very few cases) of fragments of a language in the form of options
the speakers/writers choose to communicate. Worth mentioning are some
proposals by Fawcett [8] and mainly Martin [21] concerning the inclusion of
options void of semantic distinctiveness. On the one hand, Fawcett favours
a criterion to follow in the construction of system networks. He justifies the
inclusion of extra features –not necessarily semantically relevant– "in order
to aid the 'readability' of the network." [8, p. 101]. On the other hand,
Martin [21] similarly claims the need to include abstract features in the sys-

tem networks. This approach has undeniable advantages, perhaps the most outstanding one is the degree of simplicity it builds into the theory. However, abstract features, empty of any meaning contrast, may not be formally adequate in the overall conception of systemic theory, because the inclusion of such abstract terms automatically implies that the speakers/writers may choose empty meanings. Whatever the way out to this issue might be, this technical problem calls for more careful treatment in view of the possible consequences it may have in the understanding of the notions "choice" and "option".

SFG has always given pride of place to meaning/semiosis, and has always tried to incorporate as much meaning as possible in its formal apparatus.

> SFL [Systemic Functional Linguistics] is oriented to extravagance, rather than parsimony. It is oriented, in other words, to developing an elaborate model in which language, life, the universe and everything can be viewed in communicative (i.e., semiotic) terms. (Halliday & Martin [16, p. 23])

Halliday organized choice with respect to both rank and metafunction to achieve his description of English (Hasan & Martin [17, p. 5]). Choices are fundamentally semantic, which makes the theory reject yes/no judgements on language in favour of bringing scales of acceptability into the grammar. As Halliday [10, p. 259] says, "the more/less relation itself, far from being an unexpected complication in grammar, is in fact a basic feature of language and is treated as such by the theory."

A grammar accounting for isolated sentences underpredicts their (un-) acceptability –as utterances– in a discourse (Dijk [6, p. 47]). The acceptance of an utterance is not merely based on syntactic strategies. Choices, rather than focusing on strictly syntactic rules, allow for a range of meaning shades which make SFG most prized to research on language in context.

The choices made by the performer are not isolated choices. SFG dismisses what Beaugrande [1, p. 47] calls "null hypothesis".

> The null hypothesis would be that linguists can study language with no context at all, by merely presenting a word, a sentence, a meaning, etc., as an object independent of any particular use. But this hypothesis is untenable, because the act of presenting linguistic examples already creates one kind of context.

This is linked to the nature of the data regarded as relevant to the theory. Some authors remind us of the fact that "the notion ACCEPTABLE is not

to be confused with GRAMMATICAL. Acceptability is a concept that belongs to the study of performance, whereas grammaticalness belongs to the study of competence" (Chomsky's words –original emphasis– in Reich [24, p. 832]). The question of acceptability, then, seems to fall naturally from the examination of language exchanges.

To conceptualize language as choice also determines in a way both the fuzzy consistency and the holistic approach of the theory. Labels such as "lexicogrammar", "semantax", "pragmantax" show the lack of interest on the part of systemic grammarians in establishing limits between the levels of lexis, grammar, semantics or even pragmatics. "I try to operate with rather fluid boundaries." (Halliday [12, p. 43]). Constant territorial expansion is one of the most important, ever present aims of Halliday and his associates. SFG took on the challenge of incorporating into the theory those aspects in which there was a certain degree of confusion, aspects other theories rejected because they did not fit into their severe formalisms.

On the whole, functionalists take more facts about language into account, and do this in a more integrative way, than formalists do (Nuyts [22, p. 69]). As regards syntax, both are concerned with the structural organization of utterances: formalists do this in isolation without contemplating how the structure relates to what both the speaker/writer and the listener/reader are doing with it, while functionalists integrate considerations of structure and use. As far as semantics is concerned, both paradigms study the meaningfulness of utterances: formalists mainly concentrate on truth conditions for the logical patterns behind utterances without considering meaningfulness related to what the utterance is used for, while functionalists study meaning from the perspective of the uses of language. "Formalists restricted explanations of linguistic function to grammatical categories while sociolinguists explained language function in terms of social values." (Couture [4, p. 260]).

4   Conclusion

Needless to say, conclusions at this point are still very modest. I have argued that choice is in a way responsible for some basic theoretical assumptions present in SFG. To summarize, directing the grammar as language as choice moulds the ontology of systemic grammar. Language viewed as activity may be directly linked to the dynamic perspective of choice. Systemic description may also be taken, at least by some authors, to be the taxonomy of options performers choose to mean. It seems that issues such as data selection, the

predominantly descriptive approach of the theory, the priority given to scales of acceptability rather than to yes/no grammaticality judgements, and some others are naturally related through choice in Halliday's grammar.

I am aware of the fact that some (perhaps many) of the ideas have been poorly developed in this article. I merely intended to hint towards a possible interpretation of the role of choice in systemic grammar. Undoubtedly, choice may determine further decisions which have been ignored in the preceding paragraphs. I leave an investigation of such decisions and close scrutiny of the issues dealt with in this article for future research.

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