Functions, Functionalism, and Linguistics

Grand Ballroom 3
9:00 AM – 12:00 PM

Organizers: Shannon T. Bischoff (Indiana University-Purdue University Fort Wayne)
Craig Hancock (University at Albany)
Carmen Jany (California State University, San Bernardino)

Participants: Suzanne Kemmer (Rice University)
Brian MacWhinney (Carnegie Mellon University)
William Greaves (York University, Emeritus)
Craig Hancock (University at Albany)
Wallace Chafe (University of California, Santa Barbara)
Tom Givón (University of Oregon)

Functionalism, as characterized by Allen, (2007:254) “holds that linguistic structures can only be understood and explained with reference to the semantic and communicative functions of language, whose primary function is to be a vehicle for social interaction among human beings.” Since the 1970s, inspired by functionalism in the work of such linguists as Jespersen, Bolinger, Dik, Halliday, and Chafe, functionalism has been attached to a variety of movements and models making major contributions to linguistics in general and various subfields within linguistics, such as syntax, discourse, language acquisition, typology, documentary linguistics, and applied linguistics. The main goal of functionalist approaches is to clarify the dynamic relationship between form and function (Thompson 2003:53).

Functional research into grammar offers new explanations for linguistic structure whereby grammar is “conceived in terms of the discourse functions from which it can be said to have emerged” (Thompson 2003:54). This view has led to important work on discourse and grammar by Sandra A. Thompson, Paul Hopper, T. Givón, Joan Bybee, and others. Another major contribution of the functional perspective on grammar is typological, culminating in work such as The World Atlas of Language Structure (WALS) under the direction of Bernard Comrie. Comrie's seminal work on language universals (Comrie 1981) and his linking of typology and functional accounts of linguistic phenomena has had a profound impact on the field with WALS as an exceptional resource for linguists across the subfields, in particular researchers working on language documentation. Documentary linguistics --informed by and contributing to linguistic typology with a now substantial and growing body of literature-- has defined itself as a new subfield within linguistics, and data from previously unstudied or understudied languages is constantly re-shaping current linguistic theory, as shown in the work of Daniel Everett and Marianne Mithun, among many others. Work in languages documentation is based on how actual language use is reflected in linguistic structure, a key issue in functionalism.Dick Demers Other scholars, such as Halliday, who has long seen theory and use as dynamically connected, have heavily influenced discourse analysis and a genre focused pedagogy, most notably in Australia.

We now have a substantial body of literature from various perspectives on functionalism, making a positive impact on the field of linguistics in general and the various subfields, and pointing researchers in new and interesting directions. In an effort to bring leading scholars in this area together and to provide recognition to the impact of functionalist approaches on current linguistic theory, we propose a three-hour symposium highlighting the nature of functionalism as an emerging force within linguistics and beyond and defining its current and future directions. More specifically, the symposium presenters will touch on the issue of

“where do functions come from?” The three-hour symposium will consist of five presentations, with each speaker allowed 30 minutes, including 10 minutes for discussion. The final half hour will be open for general discussion and further interaction with the audience.

Each of the symposium speakers addresses a major contribution of functionalism to current linguistic theory and touches on the issue of where functions come from. Suzanne Kemmer looks at functions in terms of the individual and the group to address tension between cognitive and discourse-functional approaches to linguistic inquiry. Brian MacWhinney shows how language structures emerge across time, and how functions become automated in different ways across the different time scales. MacWhinney's approach is exemplified in the Competition Model which assigns a central role to competition in determining language processing, conversation, and change. Craig Hancock and William S. Greaves describe the impact of Systemic Functional Linguistics and its application to language pedagogy. In addition, how pedagogical approaches can reveal functions relevant to questions of linguistic universals. Wallace Chafe demonstrates that there is much to learn from cross disciplinary approaches to phenomenon associated with language and thought, and that functions play a key role. Tom Givón will identify functionalism approaches to linguistic inquiry throughout the history of the Western linguistic tradition, working from Aristotle to today's functionalists.

Suzanne Kemmer (Rice University)
Function in the individual and in the community

Two major streams have developed in the current of functional linguistics: Cognitive linguistics, which seeks to relate language to other aspects of the human mind, and Discourse-functional linguistics, which observes language in close relation to its communicative context and interpersonal functions. Both approaches seek explanation of linguistic forms and patterns through factors outside of language. Both thought and communication, the two primary functions of language, must be accounted for and integrated. Yet in practice there is a tension between the two approaches. Cognitivists think of social interaction as grounded in the knowledge of individuals; Discourse-functional linguists think of cognitive patterns as emergent from social interaction, which is taken to be more fundamental. In this paper I explore ways of resolving this tension, considering structures and their associated functions in light of the individual’s role in interpersonal interactions, and interpersonal situations’ effects on individuals and their linguistic behaviors.

Brian MacWhinney (Carnegie Mellon University)
Where do linguistic functions come from?

Where are the basic linguistic functions and where do they come from? These are the two core issues facing functionalist approaches to language. In this talk I will suggest that the complexity of the mappings from functions to forms arises from competition at the intersection of processes operating across these six divergent timeframes: sentence processing, social commitment, interactional involvement, developmental emergence, diachronic change, and phylogenetic evolution. Crucially, all of these temporal frames come together at the actual moment of speaking. The processor takes functions operative on these various timeframes and compresses them into a limited set of forms, based on the principles of peaceful coexistence between functions and consolation prizes for dispreferred functions. By working forward from psychology and backwards from linguistics, we can untangle the compression imposed by the processor, thereby deriving a clearer view of the source functions.

Craig Hancock (University at Albany)
William Greaves (York University)
Systemic Functional Linguistics: Basic principles and applications to teaching

SFL sees language as a social semiotic. Language is not well understood as a free standing formal system. Language re-presents the data of sense experience as symbols (construal: ideational work); enacts social relationships (enacting: interpersonal work); and weaves ideational meanings and interpersonal meanings into coherent messages (engendering message: textual work). A systematic exploration of grammar has largely disappeared from our English teaching curriculum, in large part because prevailing understanding reinforced the belief that grammar is innate, largely formal, and unrelated to higher level concerns. Functional approaches to language, in contrast, see grammar as deeply tied to those concerns. And usage based theories of language acquisition emphasize that acquisition of language is directly tied to social and cognitive maturation. Functional approaches can heal the split between grammar and discourse, grammar and teaching.
**Wallace Chafe** (University of California, Santa Barbara)

*Learning big things from small numbers*

Linguistic typology has found that many languages make an obligatory or optional distinction between singular and plural, that quite a few languages also include dual, and that a smaller number distinguish trial (Corbett 2000). Psychologists, since the mid-19th century, have noticed that people can immediately and reliably recognize that there are one, two, or three of something, an ability called “subitizing” (Trick and Pylyshyn (1994). This is a small but cogent example (1) of how separate disciplines can approach the same phenomenon from different angles without any awareness of what each other has been doing, and (2) of how triangulating on some mental ability can bring us to a fuller understanding of a frequently encountered and easily observable mental phenomenon. It shows how bringing separate disciplines together can chip away at a gradually fuller understanding of why both language and thinking are the way they are.

**Tom Givón** (University of Oregon)

*The intellectual roots of functionalism in linguistics*

This paper inquires into the intellectual roots of present-day functionalism in linguistics. Starting with Plato and Aristotle and touching briefly upon the Medieval logicians and Port Royal, grammarians, the paper traces the direct antecedence of late-20th Century functionalism through von Humboldt, H. Paul and O. Jespersen, the Prague School and subsequent work by D. Bolinger and M.A.K. Halliday. The impact of the three giants of structuralism—Saussure, Bloomfield and Chomsky—is viewed as an important catalyst, tracing the late-1960s advent of functionalist thinking back to the Generative Semantics rebellion of Ross, Lakoff and company. Following this immediate antecedence and its despair of Chomskian structuralism, one may interpret the expanding agenda of the 1970 as an attempt to integrate the multiple strands of the adaptive correlates of language structure: discourse/communication, cognition, language diversity and universals, diachrony, acquisition, and evolution.