

Is communicative function the fundamental determinant of language structure?

Abstract. Columbia School linguistics has been characterized as an instance of "radical functionalism" wherein the structure of language as an inventory of signs is motivated by the communicative function of language (Reid 1991:31). The present paper wishes to question whether a radically functionalist approach allows linguistics to account for the totality of its object. The fact that the linguistic meanings which functionalists deal with as allowing the speaker to achieve his/her communicative ends are at least partially determined by paradigmatic relations is a first indication that their nature—and consequently that of language itself—is determined by factors other than these communicative ends alone. This points to the need for an approach to language with a broader scope so as to take in both its communicative function and those aspects which are not determined by the latter. An important step on this direction is to recognize that the communicative function of language is possible only if language also serves a prior conceptualizing function. This broader view of linguistic theory will be shown to shed light on problems which a radically functionalist analysis seems unable to handle.

In a recent work dealing with subject-verb concord in English, the author offers a definition of "radical functionalism" as an approach wherein "the structure of language as an inventory of signs is motivated by the communicative function of language" (Reid 1991:31). This view of language as an "inventory of signs", i.e. a code, corresponds to a methodology which starts with the physically observable outward face of language and studies it as an instrument serving human communicative goals. Such an approach stands diametrically opposed to an analysis focussing on the inward side of language regarded as an abstract formal object with a rule-governed structure of its own, autonomous of the utilitarian purposes of its speakers.

Although I am going to argue in favour of an approach which does take into account the inward side of language, the first point I would like to make is that I would agree with many, if not all, of the criti-

cisms which this type of functionalism addresses to the rule-based sentence grammar approach which has just been referred to. Linguistic theorizing of the rule-based sort abstracts messages away from their communicative context and idealizes them as objects existing independently of the speaker and the hearer. This gives rise to a modular approach to language in which meaning and form are divorced from one another and analyzed separately—meaning in terms of logical parameters, form in terms of configurational patterns and the relations between them. These two levels are then artificially put back into connection with one another by the process of "mapping" semantics onto form, a task doomed to failure because the two are defined in terms almost totally foreign to one another, thus making the "rule" governing their relation an arbitrary fiat of the analyst. Indeed, in many cases it is simply impossible to give a formal rule capable of covering the full range of real live usage, which explains why formal-grammar approaches tend to idealize a special body of grammatical facts as the proper domain of linguistic theory, a procedure which is unacceptable from the methodological point of view in a science based on observation such as linguistics.

This type of theory leads moreover to the use of "grammaticality judgments" to establish a body of data to be explained, as a language is seen as a set of sentential structures related in a quasi-mathematical combinatory system which admits certain combinations but excludes others. Such judgments have nothing to do at all with a real speaker's activity of producing a linguistic utterance, as the speaker is not monitoring the grammaticality of what he/she is saying in order to determine what is "in" and what is "out", but rather attempting to express something which he/she has in mind as an intended message. Furthermore, viewing language as an inventory of sentences, the relations between which it is the job of linguistic theory to explore, does not seem a plausible starting-point for linguistic investigation in the first place, since the actual construction of discourse by the speaker goes in the opposite direction, from the word to the sentence, and not vice versa.

One can therefore be rightly critical of the referential approach to meaning, where categories are analyzed in terms of truth-values and forms in terms of patterns, in favour of an approach which takes into account the speaker's perspective as a communicator of messages about an experiential reality which by itself is open to multiple characterizations. The present paper wishes to question however whether a radically communicative-functionalist approach, even augmented by

recourse to the so-called "human factor" (cf. Garcia 1975:40 ff.), will allow linguistics to account for the totality of its object. In other words, the question which I wish to discuss is: Can one explain the structure of language, and even the way the speaker constructs discourse, by seeing him/her merely as a communicative problem solver who possesses the faculty of intelligence and is working with a limited set of signs? While not denying that the speaker does solve communicative problems, I will argue that language involves more than simply communication.

Even a radically functionalist position such as that expressed in Reid 1991 leaves room for a minimum of "purely arbitrary structure" in language, i.e. structure not accountable for by communicative function. This is comprised by the statement of the "signals" that constitute the morphology of the language, the fixed and arbitrary link between each signal and its linguistic meaning and the paradigmatic semantic relations among these meanings (cf. Reid 1991:30). That is to say, linguistic meanings, which functionalism views as mere means allowing the speaker to achieve his/her communicative ends, are at least partially (and in the case of grammatical meanings very heavily) determined by paradigmatic relations. This aspect of linguistic meaning, which radical functionalism does not attempt to deny, obviously reflects more than mere communicative exigencies, as there is nothing that requires that the elements of a code for transmitting messages contain paradigmatic sub-systems. All that is needed in a code is that each element be distinct from the others so as to serve as a distinguishing tool for keeping one message from being confused with another. The meanings which serve as tools for structuring messages, on the other hand, are more than just an inventory of items—they are organized into mental systems in which part of what they are is defined by their relation to the other members of the system. This fact then is a first indication that the nature of linguistic meanings—and consequently that of language itself—is not determined by communicative goals alone.

Another characteristic of meaning which shows that its nature is not determined solely by communicative function is the fact that linguistic meanings underdetermine messages, standing in a one-to-many relation to the latter. If the structure of language were conditioned purely by its function as a means of communication, one would ideally expect a one-to-one correspondence between meanings and messages. The fact that this is not the case shows that there is some other principle operating here besides the communicative function of the signal. Radical functionalism answers this objection by pointing to the discrep-

ancy between tool and task: a tool such a screwdriver can be used for many other tasks besides driving screws; linguistic meanings are also tools and so are open to use for various communicative purposes. However, the structure of a tool is determined by the one task which it was designed to perform and not by the multiple accidental uses to which it can be put, which are by definition unforeseeable by the tool-maker: one cannot explain the structure of a screwdriver by its use to replace the hinge-pin of a door, even though it can be utilized for this purpose. Consequently, if language were a mere tool for communicating messages, this would mean that there should be one message which any given meaning is designed to express, the others being felt to be accidental makeshift uses where the meaning is pressed into service for want of anything better, to communicate messages for which it is not really ideally suited. Radical functionalism itself observes, however, that linguistic meanings underdetermine all the messages which they are used to express, being used as prompts, clues and directions in the communication of the message rather than as discrete communicative fractions thereof. It concludes quite rightly that something besides mere communicative considerations is required to account for this property of linguistic meanings and hence has recourse to the so-called "human factor" (cf. Garcia 1975).

The "human factor" refers to the impact on the properties and use of language of the general physiological and psychological characteristics of human beings. As regards meaning, the argument runs like this: on the one hand, human beings have limited memory capacity to store the signs needed to express the infinite variety of human experience; on the other, they are also intelligent and so the speaker can assume that the hearer is able to infer from the same meaning many different messages according to the other contextual clues which the speaker gives him along with the word or form in question; these two factors explain why it is both possible and advantageous for linguistic meanings to be general and vague rather than particular and precise. The danger here however is that if the intelligence of the hearer is given too much importance as a principle of explanation, it doesn't really matter all that much how accurately one reconstructs the meaning of a form—the hearer's capacities of inference will allow him/her to decipher the message as long as the meanings point in the right general direction. This tends to make meaning a mere place-holder for the communicative strategies of the speaker and hearer to work from, something whose contribution to the message is less important than contextual factors.

Another more serious problem is that memory and intellect are very general psychological characteristics common to users of all languages; as such they cannot explain idiosyncratic language-specific strategies found in certain languages and not in others. A good number of these language-specific phenomena also seem impossible to explain on the basis of the principle that each element of a sentence must be fulfilling some purpose that contributes to the achieving of a communicative goal by an intelligent speaker with a limited memory. I will give only three examples so as to be able to discuss them in greater detail, but many more could be adduced. The first is the weak versus strong adjective opposition in Old English. Old English adjectives have two forms depending on whether the noun they modify is introduced by the definite article/demonstrative, in which case the weak adjective declension is used (*se ealda mann*), or the indefinite article or zero article, in which case the strong adjective declension occurs (*an eald mann, ealde menn*). Now what possible communicative function could such a distinction serve? The definiteness or indefiniteness of the noun is already signalled by the article or its absence. Why does Old English have this seemingly useless redundancy in the linguistic means used to communicate the message, which we get along quite well without today?

The answer of a functionalist approach might be that such redundancies play a role in cohesion or textual resonance: the indeterminacy of the sign calls for the maintenance within the linguistic code of multiple expressive devices for signalling the same feature of the message. But if textual resonance is a systemic compensation for the fact that signals can often not be identified on purely morphological grounds, why should there be so many more phenomena of agreement in languages such as Old English where the morphology is more developed and more explicit than it is in the present state of the language? One would expect the very opposite to be true.

Neither the notion of textual resonance nor that of communicative function seem applicable to certain other linguistic phenomena, thus leaving a purely functional approach with no tools of explanation to apply to them. One such phenomenon is the interaction between gender, case and number in the historical evolution of nominal forms used in direct object function in Russian. Among the most mysterious problems posed by the history of the nominal declension in Slavic is the merging of the case ending of the genitive with that of the accusative with masculine animates. In the oldest texts one can still observe the original masculine accusative ending *-ŭ* in alternation with the new

ending *-a*, the latter corresponding to a genitive that took its semiology from the Indo-European ablative in *-ōi/-ōd*, which already functioned as a genitive in proto-Slavic (cf. Meillet 1934: § 441, 450, 515; Vailant 1958: § 141, 160). In Russian, this intrusion of the genitive occurs not only in the masculine singular animate, but is also extended to the masculine plural, and then even to the feminine plural. The feminine singular, strangely enough, maintains a characteristic accusative ending. Masculine inanimates also have an accusative distinct from the genitive, their accusative being identical with the nominative case. The situation in modern Russian is thus as follows:

INANIMATE REFERENCE

Singular: *ja vižu stol*. 'I see the table.' (acc.)
Plural: *ja vižu stoli*. (acc.)

ANIMATE REFERENCE

Singular: *ja vižu malčika*. 'I see the boy.' (gen.)

Masculine
Plural: *ja vižu malčikov*. (gen.)

Singular: *ja vižu ženščinu*. 'I see the woman.' (acc.)

Feminine
Plural: *ja vižu ženščin*. (gen.)

What could such a variation in case according to animacy, gender and number possibly have to do with communicative function or textual resonance? If the genitive is redundantly signalling animate reference, why is it used only in the feminine plural and not in the feminine singular? And doesn't the whole phenomenon seem quite foreign to the concern of simply communicating the message that 'x' is the patient of the action signified by the main verb? Clearly the use of the genitive case must be due to some other factor.

The third particular problem which I wish to discuss where viewing the linguistic sign merely as a communicative device provides no means of explaining language-specific phenomena is infinitival usage after the verb *ought* in English. Some speakers of English (the present writer included) switch from the *to* plus infinitive construction to the bare infinitive when *ought* is used in the negative or the interrogative:

I ought to have called her.
I oughtn't have called her.
Ought I have called her?

How, once again, could a radically functional approach explain such a shift? It serves no direct communicative purpose: negation and interrogation are already signalled by other means. Moreover, these means must be communicatively sufficient, as adding *not* is enough to make all the other auxiliaries (*be*, *have* and *do*, as well as the modals) negative, and inversion with rising intonation suffices with auxiliaries to signal the asking of a question. It seems impossible therefore to explain this phenomenon using only communicative-functional parameters. Again there must be some other principle at work than simply the communication of a message.

The problems which have been evoked to this point are not meant to deny that language has a communicative function. They do point, however, to the need for an approach to language with a broader scope so as to take in both its communicative function and those aspects of its nature which are not determined by the latter. One such aspect is what one could call the conceptualizing function of language. Indeed, the communicative function of language is only possible if the latter also serves a prior role in conceptualization, for how can one communicate a message to someone else without first conceiving it in one's own mind? If one takes this fact seriously, however, it implies that language is subject not only to the constraints of communication but also to those of conceptualization and conceptual processing.

From what we can observe of language, one such constraint is the tendency for highly generalized meanings to be organized in paradigms. Thus whereas a lexical meaning such as *bird* is not defined directly by its relation to other lexemes such as *stereo*, the value of *-s* on the noun bears an obvious and necessary relation to the value of \emptyset . The implication of this for linguistic analysis is that the inflectional *-s* on a noun is always meaningful, even when in one particular context in discourse it cannot be opposed to \emptyset , as in the case of a noun like *acoustics*. The semantic value of *-s* is not defined by its opposition to that of \emptyset in discourse, but rather by the conceptual relation between the meanings of *-s* and \emptyset outside of, and previous to, any actual use in an act of communication. Consequently, even though the *-s* on *acoustics* cannot be opposed to a zero noun form **acoustic*, it is every bit as meaningful

as the *-s* on the noun *dinosaurs*. This is confirmed by Webster's definition of the word as 'the aggregate of qualities of an enclosure or other area that affects production, control, etc. of sound' and also by the fact that *acoustics* fits into a pattern of *-ics* words where this sign is associated with some form of conceptual plurality, so that, as Wickens (1992:227) argues, the *-s* is "'attributable to impressions of matters, laws, truths, theorems and principles (*physics*), of actions, procedures, methods, techniques or practices (*athletics*, *hysterics*), or of phenomena and qualities (*acoustics*, *mechanics*).'" Not to mention the fact that *acoustics* usually calls for the plural form of the verb when it is subject, as attested by Webster's example, *the acoustics of this room are excellent*. Thus even where the *-s* fulfils no communicative function it still reflects the way in which the referent is conceptualized by the speaker.

Another aspect of the conceptual side of language is the existence of what one could call units of conceptual processing. One such entity is the noun phrase, which forms a tightly knit unit of reference to any elements of experience which can be conceived in terms of categories such as number, gender and function. It should come as no surprise therefore to find phenomena of grammatical agreement among the constituents of the noun phrase, as the latter are mentally engendered at the same time and concur to constitute a conceptual unity which is put into relation as a unit with some aspect of our experience. Thus in languages where the article and the adjective decline for number, gender and function, they normally agree with the noun in these categories.¹ Old English goes even further and has its adjectives agree with the definiteness of the noun with which they form a unit, whence the existence of strong (indefinite reference) and weak (definite reference) declensions. Textual resonance may therefore be explained as the consequence of conceptual processing rather than merely as a compensatory communicative device for the fact that signals often can not be identified on purely morphological grounds.

A third aspect indicating that language is a means of conceptualizing our experience is the existence of phenomena which clearly have nothing to do with the mere communication of messages but only make sense when analyzed from the point of view of the conceptual relations pertaining between the significates of the words constituting the utterance. The examples given above of Russian case usage in direct object function and English infinitival usage with the verb *ought* illustrate this. I have already shown the pointlessness of attempting to account for these phenomena in terms of communicative function. They can be explained however in terms of relations between conceptualizations.

Valin (1994:355-372) demonstrates, for instance, that the situation of patient with respect to the verbal action is felt in a number of languages to be in contradiction with animate gender since the latter involves conceiving an entity as having the power to act on its own, while the patient is represented as passively undergoing the action performed by the agent. In Spanish this contradiction is felt with higher animates and leads to the use of the preposition *a* to introduce them in the function of direct object (e.g. *Veo a María/Veo el árbol*). Valin proposes that Russian has two degrees of animacy (major power, corresponding to masculine gender, and minor power, corresponding to feminine). This explains why the former is felt to stand in contradiction to the situation of patient both in the singular and the plural, while the latter only when its power is 'multiplied' in the plural. The recourse to the genitive case to signify this contradictory situation of an animate not conceived as acting but as acted upon can also be explained on conceptual grounds (Valin 1994:367-368). Valin connects it to the use of the partitive genitive, showing the existence of an analogy between the part/whole relationship, in which the part is momentarily extracted from the whole to which it belongs permanently, and the situation of temporary inanimation whereby an entity whose permanent nature is that of an agent is momentarily conceived as the patient of some action.

As for the shift from the *to*-infinitive to the bare infinitive with the verb *ought*, it has been demonstrated (cf. Duffley 1992) that the role of *to* is to represent the infinitive's event as the end-point of a movement in time, thereby implying the existence of some before-position with respect to this event. Consequently, whenever there is no before-position, this conceptual relation of the infinitive's event to something prior to it is not present and so the preposition *to* is not used. Since negating or questioning something can be a sign of not accepting it as a reality, one can argue that in negative and interrogative contexts some speakers do not feel *ought* to situate anything real in time capable of constituting a conceptual before-position with respect to the infinitive's event and therefore do not use *to* to introduce the infinitive. The distinction between non-modal usage with *to* and modal usage with \emptyset is parallel to that between *how to* and *why \emptyset* . In *How to study for exams*, the means (evoked by *how*) are conceived as existing and therefore constitute a before-position with respect to the event *study*, which explains the use of *to*. In *Why study for exams?*, on the other hand, the very existence of any reasons at all to study is called into question. The presumption that there are no reasons nullifies any before-position and as a consequence of this, *to* is not employed.

The examples which I have discussed in this paper should not be taken as meant to deny that language fulfils any communicative function. This is obvious and has to be taken into account in any analysis of discourse. But we must not lose sight of the fact that we can only communicate what we have previously conceptualized. Indeed, I would even argue that communication is a consequence of conceptualization, whereas radical functionalism seems to put communication first and build its analyses on the effect rather than the cause. We communicate because we possess something which is communicable. This something is not the particular experience had by the speaker, as an absolute singular is a reality completely unto itself and therefore incommunicable by definition. One cannot get someone else to feel exactly what one felt upon getting up this morning. In order to communicate that experience, all one can do is evoke what it has in common with the experience of the other members of one's language community, i.e. its general form, otherwise one cannot express it at all. This, however, involves conceptualizing one's experience, casting it into the moulds of the abstract mental categories which make it communicable. Since our everyday concepts are language-specific, language therefore is closely tied to conceptualization. As one thinker has put it, 'since thought is to a great degree linked to language—although I refuse to believe, as is widely held, that this link is an absolute one—consequently one can say that to think is to talk to oneself . . . ' (Ortega y Gasset 1964:249 [my translation]). I will end with a simple question then: If the defining purpose of language is communication, why is it that we talk to ourselves so much? What do we communicate to ourselves which we do not already know?

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ENDNOTE

¹The absence of agreement between article and noun in a case such as the Spanish sentence *Los Lopez vienen mañana a visitarnos* ('The Lopezes are coming to visit us tomorrow.') can also be explained on conceptual grounds. As the name of a family, *Lopez* is already conceptually plural and so does not need to be conceived in the mode of plurality for the purposes of this particular speech act as do concepts such as 'tree' or 'car'. However, if *Lopez* evokes the individuals bearing this name, then it does require plural construal to refer to more than one

individual, cf. *Organizaron una reunion para todos los Lopezes de Mexico.* ('They are organizing a reunion for all the Lopezes of Mexico.')

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