Language, context, and text: Aspects of language in a social-semiotic perspective

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Chapter 1

Context of situation

Introduction

Our general approach to the study of language, as our title is intended to suggest, is one that focuses upon the social: upon the social functions that determine what language is like and how it has evolved. Let me begin by saying a few words about both parts of our overall title.

Language in a social-semiotic perspective

The phrase ‘language in a social-semiotic perspective’ characterises the sort of approach that we have been following in our recent work, and which, I think, has been a feature of my own thinking ever since I became interested in the study of language. The term ‘social-semiotic’ can be thought of as indicating a general ideology or intellectual stance, a conceptual angle on the subject. But at the same time there is a more specific implication to be read into both of these terms, semiotic and social.

The concept of semiotics derives initially from the concept of the sign; and the modern word harks back to the terms semainon, semainomenon (‘signifier, signified’) used in ancient Greek linguistics by the Stoic philosophers. The Stoics were the first to evolve a theory of the sign, in the 3rd-2nd century BC; and the conception they had of the linguistic sign was already well advanced along the lines in which it was developed two thousand years later in the work of Ferdinand de Saussure.

Semiotics can therefore be defined as the general study of signs. But there is one limitation that has usually been apparent in the history of this conception of the sign, and that is that it has tended to remain rather an atomistic concept. The sign has tended to be seen as an isolate, as a thing in itself, which exists first of all in and of itself before it comes to be related to other signs. Even in the work of Saussure, despite his very strong conception of language as a set of relationships, you will still find this rather atomistic conception of the linguistic sign. For that reason, therefore, I would wish to modify this definition of semiotics.
and say that, rather than considering it as the study of signs, I would like to consider it as the study of sign systems—in other words, as the study of **meaning** in its most general sense.

Linguistics, then, is a kind of semiotics. It is an aspect of the study of meaning. There are many other ways of meaning, other than through language. Language may be, in some rather vague, undefined sense, the most important, the most comprehensive, the most all-embracing; it is hard to say exactly how. But there are many other modes of meaning, in any culture, which are outside the realm of language.

These will include both art forms such as painting, sculpture, music, the dance, and so forth, and other modes of cultural behaviour that are not classified under the heading of forms of art, such as modes of exchange, modes of dress, structures of the family, and so forth. These are all bearers of meaning in the culture. Indeed, we can define a culture as a set of semiotic systems, a set of systems of meaning, all of which interrelate.

But to explain this general notion, we cannot operate with the concept of a sign as an entity. We have to think rather of systems of meaning, systems that may be considered as operating through some external form of output that we call a sign, but that are in themselves not sets of individual things, but rather networks of relationships. It is in that sense that I would use the term 'semiotic' to define the perspective in which we want to look at language: language as one among a number of systems of meaning that, taken all together, constitute human culture.

Secondly there is the term **social**, which is meant to suggest two things simultaneously. One is 'social' used in the sense of the social system, which I take to be synonymous with the culture. So when I say 'social-semiotic', in the first instance, I am simply referring to the definition of a social system, or a culture, as a system of meanings. But I also intend a more specific interpretation of the word 'social', to indicate that we are concerned particularly with the relationships between language and social structure, considering the social structure as one aspect of the social system.

When we consider what realities there are that lie above and beyond language, which language serves to express, there are many directions in which we can move outside language in order to explain what language means. For some linguists (for example, Chomsky 1957; Lamb 1966), the preferred mode of interpretation is the psychological one, in which language is to be explained in terms of the processes of the human mind or the human brain. For other linguists, perhaps, the direction might be a psychoanalytic one, or an aesthetic one, or any one of a number of possible perspectives. For us, then, the perspective primarily adopted—not to the exclusion of the others, but because this is where we look first to seek our explanations for linguistic phenomena—is the social one. We attempt to relate language primarily to one particular aspect of human experience, namely that of social structure.

Why this particular angle? It is not that we are excluding other
directions as irrelevant; but that for the questions we are interested in, especially educational questions, the social dimension seems particularly significant—and it is the one that has been the most neglected in discussions of language in education. Learning is, above all, a social process; and the environment in which educational learning takes place is that of a social institution, whether we think of this in concrete terms as the classroom and the school, with their clearly defined social structures, or in the more abstract sense of the school system, or even the educational process as it is conceived of in our society. Knowledge is transmitted in social contexts, through relationships, like those of parent and child, or teacher and pupil, or classmates, that are defined in the value systems and ideology of the culture. And the words that are exchanged in these contexts get their meaning from activities in which they are embedded, which again are social activities with social agencies and goals.

Language, context, and text

The main part of our title reflects our view that the way into understanding about language lies in the study of texts. The terms, context and text, put together like this, serve as a reminder that these are aspects of the same process. There is text and there is other text that accompanies it: text that is ‘with’, namely the con-text. This notion of what is ‘with the text’, however, goes beyond what is said and written: it includes other non-verbal goings-on—the total environment in which a text unfolds. So it serves to make a bridge between the text and the situation in which texts actually occur. Within our general topic, we shall be focusing on the special area of what in linguistics is referred to as a text; but always with emphasis on the situation, as the context in which texts unfold and in which they are to be interpreted.

Let me try, then, to explain both these notions a little further. What do we mean by text, and what do we mean by context? I am going to do this in the opposite order: that is to say, I am going to talk about context first, for the reason that, in real life, contexts precede texts. The situation is prior to the discourse that relates to it.

Malinowski and the notion of context of situation

It could be argued, in fact, that there was a theory of context before there was a theory of text. I have in mind here the work of the anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski (1923, 1935), and in particular his theory of the context of situation. It is in that sense, or a closely related sense, that we shall be using the term ‘context’.

Much of Malinowski's research was undertaken in a group of islands of the South Pacific known as the Trobriand Islands, whose inhabitants lived mainly by fishing and gardening. Their language is referred to as Kiriwinaian. Malinowski, who as well as being a great anthropologist was also a gifted natural linguist, found himself at an
early stage able to converse freely in this language, and he did all his fieldwork among the island people using their own language. He then came to the problem of how to interpret and expound his ideas on the culture to English-speaking readers. He had many texts in Kiriwinian, texts that he had taken down in discussion with the Trobrianders; and the problem was how to render these in English in such a way as to make them intelligible. The culture that he was studying was, naturally, as different as it was possible to be from the culture that is familiar to Westerners.

In presenting the texts, Malinowski adopted various methods. He gave a free translation, which was intelligible, but conveyed nothing of the language or the culture; and a literal translation, which mimicked the original, but was unintelligible to an English reader. His principal technique, however, was to provide a rather extended commentary. This commentary, clearly, was not the same thing as the kind of commentary that a classical philologist engages in when he or she edits and translates some ancient written text. Rather it was the kind of commentary that placed the text in its living environment. Up to that time, the word 'context' in English had meant 'con-text'; that is to say, the words and the sentences before and after the particular sentence that one was looking at. Malinowski needed a term that expressed the total environment, including the verbal environment, but also including the situation in which the text was uttered. So with some apologies, in an article written in 1923, he coined the term CONTEXT OF SITUATION (Malinowski 1923). By context of situation, he meant the environment of the text.

For example, Malinowski studied the language used in a fishing expedition when the islanders went in their canoes outside the lagoon into the open sea to fish; when they had caught a cargo of fish, they had the problem of navigating a rather difficult course through the reefs and back into the lagoon. As they came in, they were constantly in communication with those on the shore. They could shout instructions to each other, and they were, so to speak, talked in, in the way that an aircraft is talked down when it is coming in to land. Furthermore, there was an element of competition, a race between the different canoes.

This kind of language was very much pragmatic language. It was language in action, in which it was impossible to understand the message unless you knew what was going on, unless you had some sort of audio-video record of what was actually happening at the time. So Malinowski provided this account in his work. He described the fishing expedition. He described the return of the canoes and the way in which the people in the boats and the people on the shore were interacting with each other.

But he also saw that it was necessary to give more than the immediate environment. He saw that in any adequate description, it was necessary to provide information not only about what was happening at the time but also about the total cultural background, because involved in any kind of linguistic interaction, in any kind of conversational exchange, were not only the immediate sights and sounds surrounding the event but also the whole cultural history behind the participants, and behind the kind of practices that they were engaging in, determining their significance for the culture, whether practical or ritual. All these played a part in the interpretation of the meaning. So
Malinowski introduced the two notions that he called the context of situation and the context of culture; and both of these, he considered, were necessary for the adequate understanding of the text.

In some instances, his texts were severely pragmatic. That is to say, they were language used for the purpose of facilitating and furthering a particular form of activity, something that people were doing, exactly in the same way as we use language ourselves if we are engaged in some co-operative effort: suppose, for example, that the car has broken down and we are trying to repair it, and there are two or three people involved and they are shouting instructions to each other and giving advice and probably getting angry as well—the language is all part of the immediate situation.

But there were other types of text in which the reference was not so immediate and the function was not so directly pragmatic. For example, Malinowski observed many occasions when in the evenings the members of the group would gather around and listen to stories. Like most narratives, these stories were not related directly to the immediate situation in which they were told. As far as the subject-matter was concerned, it was irrelevant whether they were being told in the morning or in the evening, outside or inside, or what the particular surroundings were. The context in one sense was created by the stories themselves.

And yet in another sense, as Malinowski saw, even these narrative texts were very clearly functional. They had a creative purpose in the society; they had their own pragmatic context, and could be related to the situation in a slightly less direct manner. Often the telling of a story was related in some way or other to the continuing solidarity and well-being of the group. For example, during the season of the year when food was scarce, and famine was always a threat, they would tell stories about great famines in the past and how the people had united to overcome them. So the setting was not irrelevant; a story might be associated with a particular accredited story-teller, or a particular place or set of circumstances. In other words, there was still a context of situation, although it was not to be seen as a direct relation between the narrative line and the immediate surroundings in which the text was unfolding.

When Malinowski first developed these notions, he had the idea that you needed the concept of context of situation only if you were studying a 'primitive' language, the language of an unwritten culture, but that you would not need such concepts for the description of a language of a great civilisation. But over the next ten years or so, he came to the conclusion that he had been wrong; and he was an honest enough scholar to say so. He wrote, referring to his earlier work:

I opposed civilised and scientific to primitive speech, and argued as if the theoretical uses of words in modern philosophic and scientific writing were completely detached from their pragmatic sources. This was an error, and a serious error at that. Between the savage use of words and the most abstract and theoretical one there is only a difference of degree. Ultimately all the meaning of all words is derived from bodily experience.

The general notion of context of situation is as necessary for the understanding of English or any other major language as it is for the understanding of Kiririwian. It is simply that the specific contexts of the culture are different. The activities that people are engaging in may differ from one place or one time to another; but the general principle that all language must be understood in its context of situation is just as valid for every community in every stage of development.

Malinowski was not primarily a linguist. He was not mainly concerned with explaining the Kiririwian language or language in general, although he has some very perceptive things to say about language. He was an ethnographer, concerned to explain the culture. But in the course of his work, he had become deeply interested in language as an object of study in its own right.

At London University he had as a young colleague the linguist J. R. Firth, who subsequently became the first professor of general linguistics in a British university. Firth was interested in the cultural background of language, and he took over Malinowski's notion of the context of situation and built it into his own linguistic theory. In Firth's view, expressed in an article he wrote in 1935, all linguistics was the study of meaning and all meaning was function in a context (Firth 1935).

In one sense, however, Firth found that Malinowski's conception of the context of situation was not quite adequate for the purposes of a linguistic theory, because it was not yet general enough. Malinowski had been concerned with the study of specific texts, and therefore his notion of the context of situation was designed to elucidate and expound the meaning of particular instances of language use. Firth needed a concept of the context that could be built into a general linguistic theory: one which was more abstract than that, not simply an audio-visual representation of the sights and sounds that surrounded the linguistic event. He therefore set up a framework for the description of the context of situation that could be used for the study of texts as part of a general linguistic theory.

**Firth's description of context of situation**

Firth's headings were as follows:

- the **participants** in the situation: what Firth referred to as persons and personalities, corresponding more or less to what sociologists would regard as the statuses and roles of the participants;
- the **action** of the participants: what they are doing, including both their **verbal action** and their **non-verbal action**;
- **other relevant features of the situation**: the surrounding objects and events, in so far as they have some bearing on what is going on;
- the **effects** of the verbal action: what changes were brought about by what the participants in the situation had to say.

Firth outlined this framework in 1950, and perhaps the best application of it is in a study done by Firth's former colleague Professor T. F. Mitchell, subsequently professor of linguistics at Leeds. Mitchell studied the 'language of buying and selling', the language of transactions in shops and markets and auctions, which he observed in North
Africa. The language studied is Arabic. In his article on the subject, Mitchell (1957) works out and illustrates very well Firth’s ideas regarding the nature of the context of situation of a text.

Since that time, there have been a number of other outlines or schemata of this kind by which linguists have set out to characterise the situation of a text. The best known is probably that of the American anthropologist Dell Hymes.

**Dell Hymes and the ethnography of communication**

In his work in the ethnography of communication, Dell Hymes (1967) proposed a set of concepts for describing the context of situation, which were in many ways similar to those of Firth. He identified:

- the form and content of the message;
- the setting;
- the participants;
- the intent and effect of the communication;
- the key;
- the medium;
- the genre;
- the norms of interaction.

Hymes’ work led to a renewal of interest in the different ways in which language is used in different cultures—the value placed on speech, the various rhetorical modes that are recognised, and so on.

**Determining the most appropriate model of the context of situation**

There are certain principles that we can use for choosing an appropriate way of describing the context of a situation of a text. They relate to the fact, a rather important fact, that people do on the whole understand each other. We are always hearing in linguistics, and more especially from our colleagues in other fields such as literature, or media and communication studies, about failures of communication, reflecting what is a very genuine concern with this problem in contemporary societies. And indeed failures do occur. But rather than being surprised at the failures, given the complexity of modern cultures, it seems to me we should be surprised at the successes. What is remarkable is how often people do understand each other despite the noise with which we are continually surrounded. How do we explain the success with which people communicate?

The short answer, I shall suggest, is that we know what the other person is going to say. We always have a good idea of what is coming next, so that we are seldom totally surprised. We may be partly surprised; but the surprise will always be within the framework of something that we knew was going to happen. And this is the most important phenomenon in human communication. We make predictions—not consciously, of course; in general, the process is below the level of awareness—about what the other person is going to say next; and that’s how we understand what he or she does say.
What the linguist is concerned with is: how do we make these predictions? The first step towards an answer is: we make them from the context of situation. The situation in which linguistic interaction takes place gives the participants a great deal of information about the meanings that are being exchanged, and the meanings that are likely to be exchanged. And the kind of description or interpretation of the context of situation that is going to be the most adequate for the linguist is one that characterises it in those terms; that is, in terms that enable him or her to make predictions about meanings, of a kind that will help to explain how people interact.

In Chapter 2 below we shall suggest a simple framework for describing the context of situation in a way that links it up with the expectations people have of what others are likely to say. Before this, however, we should say more clearly what we mean by the term 'text'.

**What a text is**

What do we mean by text? We can define text, in the simplest way perhaps, by saying that it is language that is functional. By functional, we simply mean language that is doing some job in some context, as opposed to isolated words or sentences that I might put on the blackboard. (These might also be functional, of course, if I was using them as linguistic examples.) So any instance of living language that is playing some part in a context of situation, we shall call a text. It may be either spoken or written, or indeed in any other medium of expression that we like to think of.

The important thing about the nature of a text is that, although when we write it down it looks as though it is made of words and sentences, it is really made of meanings. Of course, the meanings have to be expressed, or coded, in words and structures, just as these in turn have to be expressed over again—recoded, if you like—in sounds or in written symbols. It has to be coded in something in order to be communicated; but as a thing in itself, a text is essentially a semantic unit. It is not something that can be defined as being just another kind of sentence, only bigger.

Thus, we cannot simply treat a theory of text as an extension of grammatical theory, and set up formal systems for deciding what a text is. It is by no means easy to move from the formal definition of a sentence to the interpretation of particular sentences of living language; and this problem is considerably greater in the case of the text. Because of its nature as a semantic entity, a text, more than other linguistic units, has to be considered from two perspectives at once, both as a product and as a process. We need to see the text as product and the text as process and to keep both these aspects in focus. The text is a product in the sense that it is an output, something that can be recorded and studied, having a certain construction that can be represented in systematic terms. It is a process in the sense of a continuous process of semantic choice, a movement through the network of meaning potential, with each set of choices constituting the environment for a further set.
One method of describing a text is by exegesis, or *explication de texte*, a kind of running commentary on the product that reveals something of its dynamic unfolding as a process. The problem for this approach is that you need to look beyond the words and structures so as to interpret the text as a process in a way that relates it to the language as a whole. The commentary embodies no conception of the linguistic system that lies behind that text; and yet without the system, there would be no text. On the other hand, it is also necessary to describe the system of the language in such a way that it is conceivable that people could use it. Some attempts to devise a theory of language have done so in a way that makes it almost inconceivable that anybody could have used that system to produce a text. The problem for linguistics is to combine these two conceptions of the text, as product and as process, and to relate both to the notion of the linguistic system that lies behind them.

Now, with the sort of social-semiotic perspective that we are adopting here, we would see the text in its 'process' aspect as an interactive event, a social exchange of meanings. Text is a form of exchange; and the fundamental form of a text is that of dialogue, of interaction between speakers. Not that dialogue is more important than other kinds of text; but in the last resort, every kind of text in every language is meaningful because it can be related to interaction among speakers, and ultimately to ordinary everyday spontaneous conversation. That is the kind of text where people exploit to the full the resources of language that they have; the kind of situation in which they improvise, in which they innovate, in which changes in the system take place. The leading edge of unconscious change and development in any language is typically to be found in its natural conversational texts—in this context of talk as the interpersonal exchange of meanings.

A text, then, is both an object in its own right (it may be a highly valued object, for example something that is recognised as a great poem) and an instance—an instance of social meaning in a particular context of situation. It is a product of its environment, a product of a continuous process of choices in meaning that we can represent as multiple paths or passes through the networks that constitute the linguistic system. But of course any general characterisation of that kind is useful only if it enables us to describe specific instances. We must be able to characterise this or that particular text in such a way as to be able to relate it to this general concept. And at this point, I would like to give an example of one way in which it may be possible to define the context of situation of a text.

Let me return for a moment to the semiotic concept of meanings that are created by the social system—that in a sense constitute the social system—which are exchanged by the members of a culture in the form of text. The text, we have said, is an instance of the process and product of social meaning in a particular context of situation. Now the context of situation, the context in which the text unfolds, is encapsulated in the text, not in a kind of piecemeal fashion, nor at the other extreme in any mechanical way, but through a systematic relationship between the social environment on the one hand, and the functional organisation of language on the other. If we treat both text and context as
semiotic phenomena, as 'modes of meaning', so to speak, we can get from one to the other in a revealing way.

So let us pick up the questions, 'how can we characterise a text in its relation to its context of situation?' and 'how do we get from the situation to the text?'. This will then lead us to a consideration of how people make predictions about the kinds of meaning that are being exchanged.

The three features of the context of situation

I would like to give you two brief illustrations, each comprising a short English text together with a description of the context of situation in which it functioned (see Texts 1.1 and 1.2). The description is in terms of a simple conceptual framework of three headings, the field, the tenor, and the mode. These concepts serve to interpret the social context of a text, the environment in which meanings are being exchanged.

1. The field of discourse refers to what is happening, to the nature of the social action that is taking place: what is it that the participants are engaged in, in which the language figures as some essential component?

2. The tenor of discourse refers to who is taking part, to the nature of the participants, their statuses and roles: what kinds of role relationship obtain among the participants, including permanent and temporary relationships of one kind or another, both the types of speech role that they are taking on in the dialogue and the whole cluster of socially significant relationships in which they are involved?

3. The mode of discourse refers to what part the language is playing, what it is that the participants are expecting the language to do for them in that situation: the symbolic organisation of the text, the status that it has, and its function in the context, including the channel (is it spoken or written or some combination of the two?) and also the rhetorical mode, what is being achieved by the text in terms of such categories as persuasive, expository, didactic, and the like.

Text 1.1 is a legal document that can be used when someone is buying or selling a house; it is in a very simple form—they are usually much longer than this—but it is valid as a legal document, and you will immediately recognise it as a legal document. An interpretation of its context of situation is set out underneath. It is a document relating to a recognised social transaction, namely the exchange of immovable property. It is a formulaic text used by a 'member' to address the 'collective' with reference to some specific instance. And it is written to be filed away in somebody's filing cabinet as a document giving validity to the transaction. Moreover, it is performative in the sense that the text actually constitutes or realises the act in question.
Text 1.1

Transfer of whole (Freehold or Leasehold)

Title number—SY 43271604
Property—14 Twintree Avenue, Minford

In consideration of ten thousand five hundred pounds the receipt whereof is hereby acknowledged

1. Herbert William Timms, of (address)

as beneficial owner hereby transfer to:

Matthew John Seaton, of (address)

the land comprised in the title above mentioned. It is hereby certified that the transaction hereby effected does not form part of a larger transaction or series of transactions in respect of which the amount or value or aggregate amount or value of the consideration exceeds twelve thousand pounds.

Signed, sealed and delivered by the said Herbert William Timms in the presence of (witness)

Situational description:

Field: Verbal regulation of social interaction through sanctions of the legal system:
codification of exchange of property (‘deed of transfer’), including certification that transaction falls within particular class of transactions defined by value of commodity exchanged

Tenor: ‘Member’ (individual) addressing ‘collective’ (society) using formula prescribed by collective for purpose in hand

Mode: Written to be filed (i.e. to form part of documentary records); text gives status (as social act) to non-verbal transaction; text is formulaic (i.e. general, with provision for relating to specific instances)

Performative (i.e. text constitutes, or ‘realises’, act in question).

The three headings of field, tenor, and mode enable us to give a characterisation of the nature of this kind of a text, one which will do for similar texts in any language. But we can use the same general headings for the description of a text of any kind. Text 1.2 is a little passage from a broadcast talk that was given in England some years ago, by a distinguished churchman concerned with the status of Christianity in the modern world.

Text 1.2
(from a radio talk by the Bishop of Woolwich)

The Christian should therefore take atheism seriously, not only so that he may be able to answer it, but so that he himself may still be able to be a believer in the mid-twentieth century. With this in mind, I would ask you to expose yourself to the three thrusts of modern atheism. These are not so much three types of atheism—each is present in varying degree in any representative type—so much as three motives which have impelled men,
particularly over the past hundred years, to question the God of their upbringing and ours. They may be represented by three summary statements:

- God is intellectually superfluous;
- God is emotionally dispensable;
- God is morally intolerable.

Let us consider each of them in turn.

**Situational description:**

**Field:** Maintenance of institutionalised system of beliefs; religion (Christianity), and the members' attitudes towards it; semi-technical

**Tenor:** Authority (in both senses, i.e. person holding authority, and specialist) to the audience; audience unseen and unknown (like readership), but relationship institutionalised (pastor to flock)

**Mode:** Written to be read aloud; public act (mass media: radio); monologue; text is whole of relevant activity
Lecture; persuasive, with rational argument

The field is thus the maintenance of an institutionalised system of beliefs: the nature of the Christian religion, and of people's attitudes towards it, at a semi-technical level. The tenor is that of an authority to an audience. He is an authority in both senses: he holds authority in the Church, as a bishop, and he is an authority on religion, a theologian. He cannot see the audience, and does not know them; but his relationship to them is institutionalised in the culture, as that of pastor to flock. The mode is that of a text that was written in order to be read aloud, as a public act on the mass media; it was a monologue, in which the text itself was the whole of the relevant activity—nothing else significant was happening. And it is a persuasive discussion, based on rational argument.

In Chapter 3, I shall return to the second of these examples, in order to suggest the reasons for setting up this particular framework for representing the 'situation' of a text. As in a great deal of linguistics, the aim is to be able to state consciously, and to interpret, processes that go on unconsciously all the time, in the course of daily life—in other words, to represent the system that lies behind these processes. In this instance, the process we are interested in is that of producing and understanding text in some context of situation, perhaps the most distinctive form of activity in the life of social man.
Chapter 2
Functions of language

Introduction

What do we understand by the notion 'functions of language'? In the simplest sense, the word 'function' can be thought of as a synonym for the word 'use', so that when we talk about functions of language, we may mean no more than the way people use their language, or their languages if they have more than one. Stated in the most general terms, people do different things with their language; that is, they expect to achieve by talking and writing, and by listening and reading, a large number of different aims and different purposes. We could attempt to list and classify these in some way or other, and a number of scholars have attempted to do this, hoping to find some fairly general framework or schema for classifying the purposes for which people use language.

There are a number of familiar classifications of linguistic functions: for example, that put forward by Malinowski, which is associated with his work on situation and meaning referred to earlier. Malinowski (1923) classified the functions of language into the two broad categories of pragmatic and magical. As an anthropologist, he was interested in practical or pragmatic uses of language on the one hand, which he further subdivided into active and narrative, and on the other hand in ritual or magical uses of language that were associated with ceremonial or religious activities in the culture.

A quite different classification is that associated with the name of the Austrian psychologist Karl Bühler (1934), who was concerned with the functions of language from the standpoint not so much of the culture but of the individual. Bühler made the distinction into expressive language, conative language, and representational language: the expressive being language that is oriented towards the self, the speaker; the conative being language that is oriented towards the addressee; and the representational being language that is oriented towards the rest of reality—that is, anything other than speaker or addressee.

Bühler was applying a conceptual framework inherited from Plato: the distinction of first person, second person, and third person. This in turn is derived from grammar (its source was in the rhetorical gram-
mar that came before Plato)—based on the fact that the verbal systems in many European languages (including ancient Greek) are organised around a category of person, comprising first person, the speaker; second person, the addressee; and third person, everything else. On this basis, Bühler recognised three functions of language according to their orientation to one or other of the three persons. His scheme was adopted by the Prague School and later extended by Roman Jakobson (1960), who added three more functions: the poetic function, oriented towards the message; the transactional function, oriented towards the channel; and the metalinguistic function, oriented towards the code.

Bühler’s scheme was adapted and developed in a different direction by the English educator James Britton (1970), who proposed a framework of transactional, expressive, and poetic language functions. Britton was concerned with the development of writing abilities by children in school, and held the view that writing developed first in an expressive context, and the ability was then extended ‘outwards’ to transactional writing on the one hand and to poetic writing on the other. Transactional language was that which emphasised the participant role, whereas in poetic language the writer’s role was more that of spectator.

Desmond Morris (1967), in his entertaining study of the human species from an animal behaviourist’s point of view, came up with yet another classification of the functions of language, which he called ‘information talking’, ‘mood talking’, ‘exploratory talking’, and ‘grooming talking’. The first was the co-operative exchange of information; Morris seemed to imply that that came first, although in the life history of a human child it arises last of all. The second was like Bühler’s and Britton’s ‘expressive’ function. The third was defined as ‘talking for talking’s sake; aesthetic, play functions’; while the fourth was ‘the meaningless, polite chatter of social occasions’—what Malinowski had referred to forty years earlier as ‘phatic communion’, meaning communion through talk, when people use expressions like ‘nice day, isn’t it?’ as a way of oiling the social process and avoiding friction.

Although these schemes look very different, and all use different terms, and although apart from Britton, none of the proponents had read any of the others, there is a considerable similarity among them, which we can bring out by tabulating them in a single display. Figure 2.1 sets them out in rows, in such a way that there is a vertical correspondence: each entry corresponds more or less to those above and below it. When we do this, we can see that they all recognise that language is used for talking about things (informative—narrative—representational), and they all recognise that language is used for ‘me and you’ purposes, expressing the self and influencing others (mood—expressive—conative—active). More patchily, there is then a third motif of language in a more imaginative or aesthetic function.

**Function as a fundamental principle of language**

What such scholars were doing was essentially constructing some kind of a conceptual framework in non-linguistic terms, looking at language
Figure 2.1 Functional theories of languages, where function equals 'use'

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>pragmatic</th>
<th></th>
<th>magical</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>narrative</td>
<td>active</td>
<td></td>
<td>Malinowski (1923)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>representational</td>
<td>conative [3rd person]</td>
<td>expressive [1st person]</td>
<td>Bühler (1934)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>transactional</td>
<td>expressive</td>
<td></td>
<td>Britton (1970)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>informative</td>
<td>conative</td>
<td></td>
<td>Morris (1967)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>information talking</td>
<td>grooming talking</td>
<td>mood talking</td>
<td>exploratory talking</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>informative uses (orientation to content)</th>
<th>interactive uses (orientation to effect)</th>
<th>imaginative uses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>control other</td>
<td>mutual support</td>
<td>ritual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>express self</td>
<td>poetic</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: shaded portions represent uses not covered by the author in question

from the outside, and using this as a grid for interpreting the different ways in which people use language. In all these interpretations of the functions of language, we can say that function equals use: the concept of function is synonymous with that of use. But in order to pursue our own investigations, we have to take a further step: a step that interprets functional variation not just as variation in the use of language, but rather as something that is built in, as the very foundation, to the organisation of language itself, and particularly to the organisation of the semantic system.

In other words, function will be interpreted not just as the use of language but as a fundamental property of language itself, something that is basic to the evolution of the semantic system. This amounts to saying that the organisation of every natural language is to be explained in terms of a functional theory.

What I should like to do here is to illustrate the functional basis of language through the analysis of a single sentence. This is a risky thing to do, because there is always the danger that some incidental features that are the property of a particular sentence will be taken as if they are representative features of grammar in general. Of course, the features that are displayed in any particular sentence can only be incidental in relation to the linguistic system as a whole: they are the
ones that were chosen in this instance. So in interpreting a sentence, we try to relate what we say about it to general categories that are found in the grammar of the language.

Let us consider the following sentence:

Or leave a kiss within the cup, and I'll not ask for wine.

This is a sentence from a well-known English poem of the early seventeenth century (Ben Jonson: 'To Celia'). It is not the first line, as can be readily imagined. It is in fact the second line; but I shall not fill in the first line just for the moment. I want to try and perform some kind of an analytical commentary on that sentence; not, however, as a piece of literary analysis, but rather as a linguistic exercise in which we identify features that illustrate the general point—the functional basis of language.

**Experiential meaning**

First, then, let us look at this sentence from the point of view of what it is about—its meaning as the expression of some kind of a process, some event, action, state, or other phenomenal aspect of the real world to which it bears some kind of symbolic relation. If we take it more or less at its face value, it can be interpreted as in Figure 2.2.

**Figure 2.2 Experiential structure**

| 'you' doer | 'leave' action | 'kiss' thing | 'in cup' place | 'I' doer | polarity: 'demand' verbalisation | 'wine' thing |
| Actor | Process | Goal | Locative | Sayer | |

Consider the word *leave*. If we take this by itself, we shall interpret it as some kind of a process, more particularly perhaps some kind of an action. Then there is the *kiss*, which is presumably some kind of a thing, although it is not very clear just what kind of a thing it is, and is the domain or sphere of influence of the action. Connected with these is *in + cup*, which is some kind of a circumstantial element, presumably a locative element, a place. So we have the representation of an action, a thing that is acted upon, and a place. We might also feel that we have to supply for ourselves somebody who is actually going to perform this action. So let us put in—in brackets, because it is not overtly realised in the language—something we might call a doer, somebody who is going to do the deed.

Similarly in the second half: there is *wine*, which is a certain kind of a thing. There is *ask for*, which we may take as a single element; this is a process, but a different kind of process from the other one, since if you ask for something, you are going to use some kind of a signal, probably a linguistic signal, for the purpose. Let us call it a verbal process. There is also a doer; but the doer is present this time in *I*. Again, this is a different kind of doer; instead of being an actor, he is one who is engaging in a verbal process—or not engaging in it, since it is in fact negated. Let us call him a sayer.
So at the simplest level, the sentence can be regarded as a representation of some composite phenomenon in the real world. We know that there exist things like cups and wine. We know that when we speak, we become persons — 'I' and 'you', and we have some interpretations for these. We know that there are processes of demanding, and of leaving. We can even perhaps do something with this notion of 'a kiss', though that is a 'thing' of a different kind from the wine, because although it is coded grammatically as a noun, it is normally the name of an action, not the name of an object. However, if it is something that can be left in a cup, then presumably at some level of interpretation, we have to see it also as an object.

So far we have taken only one step in interpreting this sentence as a representation of some recognisable phenomenon. But we have isolated from this sentence certain features that can be thought of as representing the real world as it is apprehended in our experience. These could be said to display the experiential meaning of that sentence. Clearly, we shall have to add to this some further component that will take us into the realm of an imaginative or oblique representation of experience — another step in the interpretation that allows us to explain this rather quaint conceit of 'leave a kiss within the cup'.

We could refer to this as metaphorical, extending the term to mean any instance of representation that involves a transfer — the kind of transfer, for example, that is present here in what is really a double shift in the meaning of the word *kiss*, because the word *kiss* as a noun is already metaphorical in the sense that it is the name for a process rather than for an object. That first metaphorical step is one that is built into the English language. Here however there is a second step, a special use of the word *kiss* involving a return at a higher level to the concept embodied in the fact that the word *kiss* is a noun. Nouns typically stand for objects, and objects can be left around the place; so you can 'leave a kiss within the cup'. It has taken us two steps to reach this point, each one involving a kind of metaphorical transfer.

If we continue this line of reasoning one step at a time, we shall be able to build up a complex chain of metaphorical realisations, leading to the interpretation of this sentence as representing what we would code in a less metaphorical, more direct way as something like *your kisses are more desirable than wine*, and more directly still, perhaps, as *I like to kiss you more than I like to drink wine*. Even that, of course, is by no means the end of the story, because we then have to pursue the modes of expression and the literary conventions that determine that this wording is an appropriate way of giving a particular message; but in order to do that, we will have to shift away from the experiential mode of meaning into another one, and look at the same sentence from a rather different point of view.
**Interpersonal meaning**

Consider Figure 2.3.

**Figure 2.3** Interpersonal structure

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>'you' Subject</th>
<th>'do that' Residue</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>command:</strong> request</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>'I' Subject</th>
<th>'voluntarily' Finite</th>
<th>'do this' Residue</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>offer:</strong> undertaking</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the first half we recognise something that signals a request: ‘I request you to do this’. In the simplest semantic terms this is a variant of the general speech function of command. If we now look at the second half, we recognise the meaning ‘I will not do that’, or in other words ‘I undertake not to do that’; and this is something that we could code in the most general terms as an offer. So we have the basic speech functions of command and offer.

Here we are looking at quite a different aspect of the meaning of that sentence. We are not now considering it from the point of view of its function in the representation of our experience. We are considering it from the point of view of its function in the process of social interaction. It is being interpreted not as a mode of thinking but as a mode of doing. The meaning is ‘I request you to do something, and I undertake not to do something else’. Hence, a different kind of meaning is encoded in the same sentence, a kind of meaning that we will refer to as *interpersonal meaning*. The sentence is not only a representation of reality; it is also a piece of interaction between speaker and listener. Whereas in its experiential meaning language is a way of reflecting, in its interpersonal meaning language is a way of acting; we could in fact use that terminology, and talk about language as reflection and language as action as another way of referring to experiential and interpersonal meaning.

Notice that, in analysing the grammar, we now need to recognise another distinct set of elements. We are not now analysing in terms of participants and processes; we are using the concept of a subject, and other related elements not shown here. So in the second clause we have the subject ‘I’, and in the first clause we have the subject ‘you’: ‘you leave a kiss within the cup, and I will not ask for wine’.

**The logical meaning**

If we put the two interpretations together, the experiential and the interpersonal, we can account for each clause separately; but we still have to account for the ‘and’. In other words, these two halves of the sentence are related in some way. Now the form of the relationship looks like a simple co-ordination of one thing with another: you (do) leave a kiss ‘and’ I (do not) ask for wine. But the two halves have a different
speech function. The one is a command, and more specifically a request; the other is an offer. What is the meaning of the co-ordination of a request and an offer? Clearly this is something that we have to reinterpret as something other than a simple co-ordination of like elements. Normally when one co-ordinates (a) and (b), then (a) and (b) belong to the same class. Here (a) and (b) do not belong to the same class. One is a command, the other is an offer. What is the effect of their co-ordination? The effect is that we need to reinterpret them in terms of some other relationship, one that typically in English we would express not paratactically, as here, but hypotactically by the use of an 'if'. So the next step we need to take is to recognise that not only is there a metaphor in the experiential meaning, but there is also a metaphor in the interpersonal meaning, because something that has been coded as 'request plus offer' is in fact going to be interpreted as 'offer conditional on acceptance of request'. We could express this as if you leave a kiss within the cup, then I will not ask for wine. So the interpersonal meaning is 'if you (agree to) do this, then I will (undertake) not (to) do that'.

But in order to take this step, we have had to invoke a third function of language, a third aspect of the organisation of the semantic system, namely its expression of fundamental logical relations. There is in every natural language a relatively small network of fundamental logical relations, which are not the relationships of formal logic, but are those from which the relationships of formal logic are ultimately derived. The logical relationships that are built into natural languages are those that are expressed in the grammar as different forms of parataxis and hypotaxis. So in our example the third component, which we will have to take account of in order to explain this relationship between the two parts, is the logical element which represents the meaning 'if ... then ...': 'if you leave a kiss within the cup, then I will not ask for wine'.

We have now taken a number of steps in the interpretation of this line, towards an explanation of how it means what it does. If at this point we go back and pick up the gloss that I gave earlier, 'your kisses are more desirable than wine'; now that we have included the active, interpersonal component in the meaning, we can personalise this and reinterpret the line more adequately as 'I value your kisses more than wine'. We can then instantiate 'kiss' and 'wine' as processes: 'I like to kiss you (even) more than I like to drink wine'; and this reinterpretation serves as a way in to the final metaphor whereby the wording stands as a declaration of love.

There is, in addition, another instance of a logical relation in the line—the 'or' that links it paratactically with what has preceded it. However, we have not yet considered the overall texture. We have not looked at this line from the point of view of its property as discourse. In order to do that, we shall need a context; so to begin with we must fill in the first line of the poem before it:

Drink to me only with thine eyes
Or leave a kiss within the cup
And I will pledge with mine
And I'll not ask for wine
Now we notice a number of additional features of this text:

1. The pattern of 'you do (x) and I will do (y)' is in fact repeated on both occasions. So 'I request you to (do that) and I will (do this)'—and again the meaning is 'if': 'if you only drink to me with your eyes, then I will pledge with mine', paralleled by 'if you leave a kiss within the cup, then I will not ask for wine'. In both cases, there is the same pattern, a request followed by an offer, in both cases standing for an offer conditional on the acceptance of a request. This repetition is itself one aspect of the texture.

2. There is the thematic organisation of these two lines. In each case the speech function is signalled at the very beginning of the clause, which makes it stand as the theme. It is like announcing at the start 'what I am about to say is a request', or whatever it is going to be. This congruence of theme with mood is in no way unusual; in fact it is the typical pattern with offers and commands, where the speaker nearly always begins with the element that announces the mood. (The fact that it is typical does not make it less significant to the texture.)

3. Another component in the texture depends on rhythm and intonation, for which we shall have to assume a particular way of reading the line. I would say it as follows (the single or double slash marks a foot boundary; the caret marks a silent beat):

   //, or / leave a // kiss wi//thin the // cup//, and / I'll not / ask for / wine //

If you accept that reading, then we have three points of prominence: kiss, cup, and wine. Of course, this poem is more familiar to most English people as a song, since it was set to music, than as something to be spoken. But if it is spoken naturally without the music, then these are the likely places where the prominence would fall.

This kind of prominence is a feature of the phonological system of modern English, in which any passage of spoken discourse is broken up into a succession of tone groups, or melodic units, each having one melodic contour (these are indicated by the double slash (\//) in the example above). The tone group is not simply a unit of sound; it expresses a unit of meaning, one block of information in the total message. In every information unit, there is one point of prominence, the tonic nucleus (shown here by bold type); the prominence is also phonological—it is the segment with the greatest melodic movement—but again it expresses a prominence in meaning: it signals the focus of the information in the unit. This information focus marks the climax of new (either fresh or contrastive) information. So the two patterns—the division into information units, and the location of focus within each—together constitute a fundamental element in the texture of the spoken language.

4. The text is in fact a line of verse, and therefore has an idealised rhythm by virtue of belonging to a particular genre. In other words, it has a metre, determined by the particular verse form of which it is an instance. Here is the metric structure, set out in traditional form:
/ or leave / a kiss / within / the cup / and I'll / not ask / for
wine / . /

—except that in traditional metrics it would be said to have seven
feet, whereas actually it has eight, because there is a silent one at
the end. It is an eight-foot iambic line with one silent foot; and this
metric pattern is another aspect of its texture. The 'true' rhythm of
the line is a product of the tension between its metric structure and
the natural rhythm that it would have in conversational spoken
English.

We could if we wished go one stage further and analyse the line
in terms of its intonation when spoken aloud. Again there would be
the tension between the tone contours of natural speech and the melodic
properties of its musical setting.

All these features—the semantic and grammatical balance between
the lines, the thematic structure, the rhythm and information focus,
and the metric structure—represent different aspects of the texture of
the line. We refer to this as its textual meaning. The textual meaning
is what makes it into a text, as distinct from an artificial or fossilised
specimen of wording.

To sum up, we have now identified four different aspects of the
meaning of this line. These are, in fact, the four components in the
semantics of every language, and in order to be able to use these con-
cepts we shall need to be able to talk about them, and hence to give
them names. We shall refer to them as:

- experiential
- interpersonal
- logical
- textual

These strands of meaning are all interwoven in the fabric of the
discourse. We cannot pick out one word or one phrase and say this
has only experiential meaning, or this has only interpersonal meaning.
What we had to do in analysing our text was to go back each time over
the whole sentence and examine it again from a new point of view.

This is an important point to make, because there has been a lot
of misunderstanding of the concept of the functions of language. It
has often been assumed that each sentence has just one, or at least one
primary, function; or, even if the sentence is recognised to be multifunc-
tional, that it ought to be possible to point to each separate part of
the sentence and to say this part has this function, that part has that
function, and the other part has the other function.

But life in general is not like that, and language is certainly not
like that. Every sentence in a text is multifunctional; but not in such
a way that you can point to one particular constituent or segment and
say this segment has just this function. The meanings are woven together
in a very dense fabric in such a way that, to understand them, we do
not look separately at its different parts; rather, we look at the whole
thing simultaneously from a number of different angles, each perspec-
tive contributing towards the total interpretation. That is the essential
nature of a functional approach.
The relationship of the text and its context of situation

Before we finish with this line, let us now look at it from the point of view of the function of the whole thing in a wider context, adopting the point of view that I was discussing in Chapter 1 when I spoke of the relationship between the text and the context of situation. We may be able to say a little about this line, and by implication about the whole poem, in terms of the notions of the field, the tenor, and the mode. What can we say about it under these headings?

As far as the field of discourse is concerned—the general sense of what it is on about—clearly we could say that it is a love poem; in the broadest terms, therefore, the field of discourse is love. But it is love expressed as a metaphor, using the notions of drink and pledge.

Our second heading, the tenor of discourse, is concerned with the personal relationships involved: who are the participants in this text? Clearly, in the broadest terms it is man to woman, and more specifically lover to beloved. We should add, however, that there is a sub-motif here, because this is a poem; and that is that it is a public text. At what point in its existence it became a public text we do not necessarily know. It might have been performed as a public text right from the start. This was after all a recognised genre that was very fashionable at the beginning of the seventeenth century. On the other hand it might first of all have been written as a love poem by the poet to his mistress before it saw the light of day as a public text. Whichever is the case, it has a secondary tenor, that of a poet addressing his contemporaries.

Thirdly, as far as the mode of discourse is concerned, that is to say the particular part that the language is playing in the interactive process, in the first instance we are treating it as a spoken text. It is also, of course, a written document; so let us say spoken/written. We could characterise it in more detail as, perhaps, written down in order to be spoken aloud. But we also have to say that it is composed, as distinct from spontaneous. It is a composition in a recognised genre involving highly elaborated modes of expression, somewhat self-conscious, and often referred to as ‘conceits’: imaginative metaphors, some of them (though not all) striking us as very far-fetched. This is, in turn, the product of a particular stage in the socio-cultural history of England in the post-Elizabethan period.

What can we say about the relationship between these headings, the field, the tenor, and the mode, and the particular linguistic features that are found in the poem? We can see that the field—the fact that it is a love poem, with the concept of love realised metaphorically in this way—is reflected most simply in the vocabulary, in the naming of processes and participants. It is reflected in the use of the words drink and pledge and cup and wine and eyes and kiss. And these embody two basic notions. They embody on the one hand the motif of drink, in the words drink and pledge and cup and wine; and on the other hand the motif of love, in particular, the eyes and the kiss. And there is of course a complex interaction between these two motifs, embodied in the notion of the cup that is touched with the mouth like a kiss and the eyes that meet over the cup as in love.
But the field of discourse is not only reflected in the vocabulary; it is also embodied in the transitivity structures in the grammar: in the verbal processes of *pledge* and *ask for* and in the processes of *drink* and *kiss*—but not, you will notice, *drink* + wine or *kiss* + person. These are not transitive structures in the poem: there is no object for the drink or the kiss.

Now, if we look at this pattern more closely, we can see that the contextual features that we entered under the ‘field’ of discourse are by and large reflected in just one of the modes of meaning of the poem, namely that which we referred to as the ‘experiential’ mode. So there is some kind of systematic relationship between the two, such that we can say that the field is expressed through the experiential function in the semantics.

Secondly, if we consider the tenor of discourse, which has to do with the relationship of man to woman, specifically lover to mistress, and the poet to contemporaries, how is this aspect of the context expressed? On the one hand, through the choice of ‘person’ in the grammatical sense: ‘I’, and ‘you’. Those were the only Subjects in these two lines: ‘you’ then ‘I’ then ‘you’ then ‘I’. And on the other hand, through the choice of speech function: command (specifically, a request) and offer (specifically an undertaking). The command is realised grammatically as an imperative clause: *drink to me only with thine eyes, leave a kiss within the cup.* The offer is realised grammatically as a declarative, with Subject *I* plus the modal *will*: *I will pledge with mine, I’ll not ask for wine.*

These represent the tenor, the personal relationships that are involved, with their encoding in an elaborate metaphor as ‘you do this and I’ll do that, or you do this and I’ll do that’. And this in turn stands as a symbolic representation of the conventional relationship that is always present in this genre, the convention of the reluctant mistress, the one who has to be persuaded and cajoled. So just as we were able to recognise certain lexico-grammatical features as particularly reflecting the field, namely those that we identified as carrying the experiential meaning, so also we can recognise other lexico-grammatical features as particularly reflecting the tenor, namely those that we identified as carrying the interpersonal meanings. In other words, the tenor is expressed through the interpersonal function in the semantics.

Finally, when we come to the mode of discourse, that of lyric poetry in a genre associated with the metaphysical poets, this clearly determines, apart from the metric pattern, also the choice of the themes. It is a general feature of lyric poetry that it is strongly person-oriented in its themes, so that typically the poet and the person spoken to are thematic—‘I’ and ‘you’ come first. Moreover the poem is clearly a self-contained text; this is reflected in the strong internal texture, in the balance that we noticed between the first two pairs of clauses. All these features together reflect the mode. Once again, therefore, we can make a general observation that the mode is typically reflected in lexico-grammatical features that we were able to identify as carrying the textual meanings. The mode is expressed through the textual function in the semantics.

Summarising these last few paragraphs, we can formulate the relationship between the situation and the text as in Figure 2.4.
Figure 2.4 Relation of the text to the context of situation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SITUATION: Feature of the context</th>
<th>TEXT: Functional component of semantic system</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Field of discourse (what is going on)</td>
<td>Experiential meanings (transitivity, naming, etc.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tenor of discourse (who are taking part)</td>
<td>Interpersonal meanings (mood, modality, person, etc.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mode of discourse (role assigned to language)</td>
<td>Textual meanings (theme, information, cohesive relations)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Functions and meanings in a text

The kind of pattern we have found in our line of verse, whereby we could relate the elements of the context to the components of meaning in the text in a systematic way, is not just an artifact of that particular text, but is, in fact, a general feature of all texts. For an example of a text of a very different kind, let us look again at the extract from the broadcast talk given by the Bishop of Woolwich. This was a discussion of the nature of Christian belief and of the defence of this belief in the face of twentieth-century atheism; and we characterised its field, tenor, and mode in the following terms:

Field: Maintenance of institutionalised system of beliefs; religion (Christianity), and the members’ attitude towards it; semitechnical

Tenor: Authority (in both senses, i.e. person holding authority, and specialist) to the audience; audience unseen and unknown (like readership), but relationship institutionalised (pastor to flock)

Mode: Written to be read aloud; public act (mass media: radio); monologue; text is whole of relevant activity
Lecture; persuasive, with rational argument.

Let us see what there is in this text that reveals the various features of its context. Relating to the field, we have again most obviously the vocabulary—words in their function as names. There are lexical items expressing the meaning of Christianity and the maintenance of beliefs: not only the terms God and Christian, but also atheism and believer and expressions such as motives impelling [one] to question. There are also words to do with attack, and with resistance under attack. The military metaphor is foregrounded, as it always has been in Christian writings, where the concept of the embattled Christian is to the fore; so there is the word thrust, and if we added in the next two sentences following the extract, we should find the words defence and advance and surrender.

But once again it should not be implied that the experiential meaning is carried solely by the vocabulary. Words, in their function as
names, are really an aspect of the transitivity patterns in the grammar, the types of process that are being talked about; and it is these that really carry the experiential meaning. In this text, as one would expect from looking at the field of discourse, we find mainly two kinds of process:

1. On the one hand there are the mental processes reflecting what is a highly thoughtful piece of discourse, processes expressed by words such as take seriously, answer, expose oneself to, question, and consider. The importance of these is not the particular words so much as the fact that they are all expressions of a single kind of process in the language, namely that type of mental process which implicitly can be verbalised. They are thoughts that can be said aloud. It is their function in the semantic system of English that is foregrounded here.

2. The second kind of process found in this text, again as is to be expected, is the relational process: the argument centres around problems of existence and attribution, and these are expressed through relational processes with verbs such as represent and be. So the field of discourse is clearly seen in the patterns of transitivity, which are the primary linguistic expressions of the experiential function.

The tenor, as we saw, is that of the pastor to the flock; this is typically reflected in the sequence ‘I ask you (to do something)’ and then ‘let us (do something together)’. In other words, the interaction is of the form ‘Here I am, the pastor. There are you, the flock. I am inviting you to do something; but I want you to see this as something that we are involved in together. So let us ... (consider these in turn)’. And this same motif is continued in subsequent passages, where the speaker refers, for example, to their upbringing and ours; here ours means ‘yours and mine’, an inclusive we being intended.

Then there is the mood, the expression of speech function in the grammar, which shows an interesting pattern. The Bishop speaks as an authority; and he is, as I pointed out, an authority in both senses of the term. He is a specialist: that is, an academic authority, a theologian. But he is also a pastoral leader, an authority in the Church. His role as a specialist is encoded in declarative clauses, where the sense is ‘this is how things are, and this is the explanation’. His role as a leader is encoded in imperative clauses, where the sense is ‘this is what you (and I) should do about it’; and indirect imperatives of various kinds (for example, The Christian should take atheism seriously). So the overall impact is twofold: ‘This is the situation; I tell you as a specialist. This is what should be done; I tell you as a leader’. So again the tenor, the relationship between the speaker and his audience, is reflected in grammatical patterns that express what we call the interpersonal meanings.

Finally the mode is that of a written text—written to be spoken aloud, but very carefully written. It is extremely simple grammatically, and extremely dense lexically. This combination is a feature of formal written language; it is the opposite of spontaneous spoken language, which tends to be grammatically complex and lexically sparse.

this point will be taken up more fully in your coursebook
Spoken and Written Language (Halliday 1985a)
This text is characterised by simple grammatical structures, with an immense amount of lexical material packed into them. It is also a rational argument. So it proceeds through conjunctives: therefore, with this in mind, in turn, first, next, and so forth. It is highly textured, but mainly through its particular kind of cohesion.

Where there is anaphoric reference, as there always is in any textured material, it is typically anaphoric to the text. In other words, when the words these and they and them occur, they refer not to people or to things, but to passages in the preceding argument; and this is characteristic of closely argued, rational discourse. So once again, the mode, the particular part that the language is playing in the total event—the nature of the medium, and the rhetorical function—are reflected in what we have called the textual meanings, including the cohesive patterns.

This, I think, stated in its simplest terms, is the way in which speakers make predictions about the meanings that are to be exchanged, which was the point that I started from in the first section. Imagine that you come in, as we often do in real life, to a situation that is already going on. It does not matter what it is. It could be just a group of people engaged in any kind of activity. You, as an individual, come into this group from outside. Very quickly, you are able to take part in the interaction. How do you do this? You do it, I suggest, by constructing in your mind a model of the context of situation; and you do so in something like these terms. You assign to it a field, noting what is going on; you assign to it a tenor, recognising the personal relationships involved; and you assign to it a mode; seeing what is being achieved by means of language. You make predictions about the kinds of meaning that are likely to be foregrounded in that particular situation. So you come with your mind alert, with certain aspects of your language ready foregrounded, ready to be accessed, as it were, for taking part in this interaction. Something like this, I think, must be going on. Otherwise, it would be impossible to explain how it is that in real life we do so readily join in and take part in a situation that previously we knew nothing about.
Chapter 3

Register variation

Introduction

In the earlier chapters, I sought to develop a number of theoretical arguments. These could be summarised as follows:

1. The notion of 'context of situation'. This can be interpreted by means of a conceptual framework using the terms 'field', 'tenor', and 'mode': or, more fully expressed, field of discourse, tenor of discourse, and mode of discourse. These were the abstract components of the context of situation, if we look at it semiotically, as a construction of meanings.

2. The notion of 'functions of language'. These may be identified as the functional components of the semantic system of a language: (a) ideational, subdivided into logical and experiential; (b) interpersonal; and (c) textual.

3. The systematic relationship between the two. There is a correlation between the categories of the situation and those of the semantic system, such that, in general terms, the field is reflected in the experiential meanings of the text, the tenor in the interpersonal meanings, and the mode in the textual meanings. We could express this the other way round by using a complementary metaphor and saying that experiential meanings are activated by features of the field, interpersonal meanings by features of the tenor, and textual meanings by features of the mode.

These were discussed briefly in relation to Text 1.2. I propose now to discuss them more fully in relation to another text, Text 3.1, because this is an example where we can see very clearly the relationship between the situational and linguistic categories.

Linguistics and situational features of context

Nigel, aged 1 year 11 months, plays with a wooden train on the floor while he talks to his father.
Text 3.1
Nigel: [small wooden train in hand, approaching track laid along a plank sloping from chair to floor]

Here the railway line . . . but it not for the train to go on that.

Father: Isn't it?

Nigel: Yes it is . . . I wonder the train will carry the lorry.

[puts train on lorry (sic)]

Father: I wonder.

Nigel: Oh yes it will . . . I don't want to send the train on this floor . . . you want to send the train on the railway line [runs train up plank to chair] . . . but it doesn't go very well on the chair [makes train go round in circles]. The train all round and round . . . if going all round and round . . . [tries to reach other train] . . . have that train . . . have the blue train [= 'give it to me'; F. gives it to him] . . . send the blue train down the railway line . . . [plank falls off chair] let me put the railway line on the chair [= 'you put the railway line on the chair'; F. does so] . . . [looking at blue train] Daddy put sellotape on it [previously]

. . . there a very fierce lion in the train . . . Daddy go and see if the lion still there . . . Have your engine [= 'give me my engine!'].

Father: Which engine? The little black engine?

Nigel: Yes . . . Daddy go and find it for you . . . Daddy go and find the black engine for you.

Intonation: ' = falling tone; ' = rising tone; ' = falling-rising tone. Tonic nucleus falls on syllables having tone marks; tone group boundaries within an utterance shown by . . .

Situation
Field: Child at play: manipulating movable objects (wheeled vehicles) with related fixtures, assisted by adult; concurrently associating (1) similar past events; (2) similar absent objects; evaluating objects in terms of each other and of processes in which they are involved; and introducing imaginary objects into the play.

Tenor: Small child and parent interacting: child determining course of action, (1) announcing own intentions; (2) controlling actions of parent; concurrently sharing and seeking corroboration of own experience by verbal interaction with parent.

Mode: Spoken, alternately monologue and dialogue, task-oriented; pragmatic, (1) referring to processes and objects in the situation; (2) relating to and furthering child's own actions; (3) demanding other objects; interspersed with narrative and exploratory elements.

Field of discourse of a text

What semantic features of the text can we explain by reference to features of the situation?

1. Firstly, the manipulation of objects is clearly expressed in the language through the types of process that are being talked about, which
are all processes of either existence and possession, or movement and location.
Processes to do with existence and possession are involved when Nigel is talking about giving and having and finding and being. Processes to do with movement and location are those where he talks about sending and carrying, or going and putting.

2. Secondly, we have in the text the particular grammatical structures associated with these process types, determining the participants that are involved in them. Thus there are structures involving two participants, one person and one object, for example when Nigel moves the train, or the father gives the train to him.

3. Thirdly, there are particular names of objects involved in the context of situation. These include, for example, things like train and engine and lorry, and accompanying features including the identifying terms blue and black, pieces of furniture, the chair, the floor, the railway line, and so on.

4. Fourthly, there are past events recalled by Nigel as he plays. Hence, there is a system of time reference, so that both past time and present time are involved.

5. Finally, Nigel is also evaluating the objects, as good or suitable or efficient, and so we have expressions such as it will go and go well. All of these choices in the linguistic system belong to what we have called the experiential component, those meanings that express our experience of the world around us and inside us; and these reflect the field, the content in the sense of what is going on at the time. The child is playing with his toys and sharing the experience with someone else.

The experiential systems in Text 3.1 are shown diagrammatically in Figure 3.1.

**Tenor of discourse of a text**

If we consider the tenor, the personal relationships involved, we see a similar type of systematic relationship between the categories of the situation on the one hand and those of the text on the other.

1. Firstly, the interaction between parent and child is most directly expressed in terms of the person selections in the grammar. In this particular child's grammar, at this age, he refers to himself as you and to his father as Daddy; so the two personal forms are you, meaning 'me', and Daddy.

2. Secondly, Nigel is determining the course of action — he is the one who is carrying the play forward; and this is expressed through the choice of mood, again of course in terms of the child's grammar at the time. He has statements and questions on the one hand, and demands on the other.

As far as the demands are concerned, the child announces his own intentions, and these are expressed through his current version of the first-person imperative, namely you want to, which means 'I want to'; but he is also controlling the actions of the parent, and this is
Figure 3.1 Experiential systems in Text 3.1

processes (transitivity)

process type → relational

material: spatial

be located → in

on

move → straight

in circle

person as agent

object as agent

participant structure → benefactive

two participants

one participant

(neutral)

movable → (type of vehicle)

(representing property)

immovable (type of furniture)

relevant objects → movable

immovable (type of furniture)

capable

suitable

efficient

time → present

past

Realisations in text:

be located/2 participants be located/1 participant be located: in be located: on

move/2 participants: person move/2 participants: object move/1 participant move: straight move: in circle possess/2 participants possess/1 participant exist/2 participants exist/1 participant benefactive ('for me') movable: type of vehicle movable: identifying property immovable capable suitable efficient present

will (be) for (go) well (past tense) (present tense)
expressed through the other form of the imperative, namely want Daddy to, which is the form addressed to the second person meaning 'I want you to'.

As for the statements and questions, the child is sharing his experience with the parent; that is to say, he is verbalising his own experience of the play and using this as a means of checking, saying what he is doing so that the parent has the chance of agreeing or else contradicting if he thinks this is not an appropriate way of representing what is going on. Hence there are the statement and question forms in the dialogue with the function of asking and agreeing and contradicting.

Thus the systems of mood and person, which are interpersonal systems in the language, reflect very closely the father–child relationship and the form that the interaction is taking between them. These are shown diagrammatically in Figure 3.2.

**Figure 3.2 Interpersonal systems in Text 3.1**

![Diagram showing the interpersonal systems in text](image)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Realisations in text:</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>statement/question</td>
<td>(falling tone)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>demand</td>
<td>(rising tone)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>monologue/positive</td>
<td>(indicative)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>monologue/negative</td>
<td>(indicative +)noi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ask</td>
<td>I wonder (+ indicative)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>answer [cf. textual component]</td>
<td>yes/[no] (+ indicative)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I want to/positive</td>
<td>(I/you) want; (subjectless non-finite, e.g. have that)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I want to/negative</td>
<td>(I/you) don't want</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I want you to</td>
<td>let me [sic], (proper name) (I/you want (proper name) to)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>speaker</td>
<td>I; you [sic]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>addressee</td>
<td>you; (proper name, e.g. Daddy)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Mode of discourse of a text

The mode is, of course, spoken language, spontaneous speech alternating between monologue and dialogue. It is strongly pragmatic and task oriented. That is, it is related very closely to the task in hand, the actual manipulation of the objects, passing them to one another, and so forth.

1. The fact that this is dialogue is reflected clearly in the elliptical forms, the question-and-answer sequences involving ellipsis of one kind or another, like Which engine? The little black engine?—Yes.

2. The fact that the language is pragmatic and task oriented is reflected in the exophoric use of pronouns like it and that referring to the objects in the situation, in particular the trains.

3. The ongoing connectedness of the monologue is expressed through the patterns of anaphoric reference, pronouns referring back to items within the text, and also through occasional conjunctions linking one process to another, in this case the child’s use of but.

4. The theme structure is interesting. The way that the text is furthering the actions of the child is seen clearly in the thematic structure of the clauses; if we look at what is the theme in all these clauses, we find that when the child is making a demand, then the theme is either the child himself, or the parent, depending on who is the focus of the imperative, whether it is ‘I want to’ or ‘I want you to’. In those clauses that have two participants, one object and one person, then typically the child himself is the theme; and this reflects the fact that it is the child who is manipulating the train and other things. But where there is only one participant in the process, then the theme is the object: the lorry, the train, the railway line, or whatever it is.

5. Finally, the orientation to the task is seen in the patterns of the lexis: not the choice of individual words (which reflects the field), but the repetition of words and the collocation of one word with another—that is, the way in which the relationships among lexical items create cohesion throughout the text.

All these aspects of the texture, the meanings derived from the textual component, reflect the mode, the particular role that is assigned to the text in the situation: what the child is making the language do for him in that particular context. These are shown diagrammatically in Figure 3.3.

Figure 3.4 shows the relation of the semantic to the situational features of Text 3.1.

Text and context: predicting the one from the other

Our discussion of Text 3.1 has served as another example of how we can take a particular passage of text, analyse it in terms of its grammar and semantics on the one hand and in terms of the context of situation
Figure 3.3 Textual systems in Text 3.1

Systems:

- theme
  - person theme
  - object theme
- reference (objects)
  - to situation (exophoric)
  - to text (anaphoric)
- cohesion (processes)
  - conjunction
  - ellipsis (dialogue)
- demonstrative
- possessive
- adversative
  - (neutral)
  - 'yes/no'
  - modal

Lexical cohesion:
1. repetition of lexical items
2. lexical collocations

Information structure:
1. distribution into text units
2. distribution into 'given' and 'new' (information treated as recoverable/non-recoverable) within each unit

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Realisations in text:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>person theme: child</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>person theme: parent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>object theme</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>exophoric: demonstrative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>exophoric: possessive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>anaphoric</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>adversative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ellipsis: 'yes/no'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ellipsis: modal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lexical: repetition of items</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lexical: collocations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>information structure: text units</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>information structure: given-new</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'/you (initial): subjectless</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(non-finite)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(proper name initial)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(object name initial)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>this, that, the, here your ('my')</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>it, that, the</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>but; (fall-rise tone)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>yes/no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(modal element, e.g. it is, it will)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(e.g. train ... train)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(e.g. chair ... floor; train ... railway line)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(organisation in tone groups)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(location of tonic nucleus)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

on the other, and then see how the two relate together. It is this correlation between the features of the text and the features of the situation that justifies our analysis of the situation in terms of these concepts of field, tenor, and mode. We use this theoretical model because it helps
Figure 3.4 Relation of semantic to situational features in Text 3.1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Situational</th>
<th>Semantic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>manipulation of objects</td>
<td>process type and participant structure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>assistance of adult</td>
<td>benefactive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>movable objects and fixtures</td>
<td>type of relevant object</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>movability of objects and their</td>
<td>type of location and movement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>relation to fixtures</td>
<td>past time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>recall of similar events</td>
<td>modulation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>evaluation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>interaction with parent</td>
<td>person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>determination of course of action</td>
<td>mood and polarity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>enunciation of intention</td>
<td>demand, 'I want to'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>control of action</td>
<td>demand, 'I want you to'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sharing of experience</td>
<td>statement/question, monologue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>seeking corroboration of experience</td>
<td>statement/question, dialogue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dialogue</td>
<td>ellipsis (question-answer)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>reference to situation</td>
<td>exophoric reference</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>textual cohesion: objects</td>
<td>anaphoric reference</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>textual cohesion: processes</td>
<td>conjunction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>furthering child's actions</td>
<td>theme (in conjunction with transitivity and mood; typically, parent or child in demands, child in two-participant statements, object in one-participant statements)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>orientation to task</td>
<td>lexical collocation and repetition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>spoken mode</td>
<td>information structure</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

us to interpret the features that we actually find in the text. This is simply our way of explaining what the members of the culture, the participants in any given context of situation, actually do themselves.

The participants in a culture make use of this close relationship between the text and the situation as a basis for their own interaction. I have used the term 'prediction' to refer to this, and it is perhaps important to make one point clear. I am not saying, of course, that either the participant in the situation, or the linguist looking over his or her shoulder, can predict the text in the sense of actually guessing in advance exactly what is going to be said or written; obviously not. What I am saying is that we can and do (and must) make inferences from the situation to the text, about the kinds of meaning that are likely to be exchanged; and also inferences from the text to the situation. In the normal course of life, all day and every day, when we are interacting with others through language, we are making these inferences in both directions. We are making inferences from the situation to the text, and from the text to the situation.

There are instances where we have only one or the other to go on; and then, of course, we have to make inferences in one direction only. So there are certain kinds of text—literary text is an obvious example—in which there is no situation except the external situation of ourselves as readers, and we have to construct the inner situation entirely from our reading of the text. On the other hand, there are instances where
we find ourselves for some reason or another as if we were dropped from Mars into the middle of some ongoing situation; we simply have to do a quick survey of what is happening, and this enables us to zero in on the meanings and to make predictions about what is likely to be said.

Let me give some brief examples that will show what I mean by inferring the situation from the text. If you are a speaker of English, then from these short passages you will be able to make certain inferences about the context of situation in which each might have occurred:

- If you come across *once upon a time*, then you know immediately that you are being told a traditional story, probably a children's story. There is no other context in which that expression is used. You can therefore predict quite a lot not only about what is going to follow, but also about the situation in which that is actually being used, typically, let us say, someone reading out a story to a small child.
- If you see *this is to certify that* (you only see that in writing, you never hear it), it always means that some impersonal letter is being started, usually a letter that is going to certify that some individual holds certain qualifications or has performed certain actions.
- If you hear *four hearts*, it is probably not something taken from a teenage romance novel, but a bid in a game of bridge: it can only occur at certain points in a certain card game.
- If you hear *on your marks*, then you know that it is a sports occasion at a school, probably a primary school, and that a race is about to begin; the teacher starting the race is saying *on your marks, get set, go*.
- If you hear *30 please*, it could be in a shop, but it is more likely to be on some form of public transport where the cost of the ticket is 30c; the meaning is 'I want one 30c ticket, please'.
- If you hear *just a trim, is it?*, that can only be at the men's barber's shop, where the barber, hoping perhaps that he is not going to have to work too hard, starts off by asking you if all you want is a trim.
- *Rail strike threat averted*: that can only be a newspaper headline. It would never be spoken, even in a broadcast news bulletin; it has the special grammar that is typical of headlines.
- If you hear *348–1929*, that is likely to be the announcement of a telephone number; there are not many other contexts in which you string out a lot of numbers like that.
- *Sea slight on a low swell*: this comes from a weather report, and you can not only tell that but you can also say something about what part of the world it probably comes from, because it is likely to be a weather report in some area where people do a lot of sailing and need to be informed what the conditions for sailing are like in the open sea.
- *Hands up all those who've finished* is likely to be in a primary school classroom, where children are asked to put their hands up to give a signal that they have something to say, or have done whatever was expected of them.

We are getting away from fixed phrases, into more open-ended examples; but the context is still clear. For example, *add the eggs one
**at a time, beating well in between** — that can only come from a cookery recipe; there is no other plausible context for it. **From here, a short walk takes you to the fountain** — that can only be from a tourist guide. There is no other place that you will find that kind of grammar.

You will notice that it is not just the content, the experiential meaning alone, that indicates the provenance of the text. One has to take account of everything in it: the particular structures that are used; the forms of the sentences, and whether they are elliptical or not; what relationships there are between the words, and so on. **Body relaxed, arms swinging from the shoulders** — that comes from the health manual in which you are told how to perform your daily exercises. Here is one that I do not understand at all — yet I could tell what kind of source it comes from, even though I have no idea what it means: **Remove battery holding down bolts, or hook bolts at both ends of battery**. This must come from an instruction manual issued to somebody who is installing or assembling appliances of some kind. No doubt he or she would know enough to understand it, which I do not.

I have given short and rather clearcut examples, but they are not untypical: a great deal of our verbal interaction does involve clearly defined speech events of this kind. We are frequently involved in uses of language in which we only need half a dozen words and we can tell immediately what the context of situation is. If I cite longer passages, then we will be able to include not only specific uses of language like these but everyday discourse as well.

For example, you might hear something like this: ‘Well, I’ve come to see you because I’ve been having this pain. Had it on and off for ever such a long time and never done anything about it. Tried to forget about it, really, I suppose’. That will probably be a middle-aged or elderly woman describing her symptoms to the doctor. It is a woman’s language rather than a man’s language. It is an old person’s language rather than a young person’s. It is in a private doctor’s clinic rather than a hospital; and so on. We can reconstruct a lot about the situation just by attending to that little bit of text.

Any piece of text, long or short, spoken or written, will carry with it indications of its context. We only have to hear or read a section of it to know where it comes from. This means that we reconstruct from the text certain aspects of the situation, certain features of the field, the tenor, and the mode. Given the text, we construct the situation from it.

**The concept of ‘register’**

In order to incorporate this into our general theory, we need the concept of a variety of language, corresponding to a variety of situation: a concept of the kind of variation in language that goes with variation in the context of situation. This therefore is the point at which we need to bring in the notion of a **register**.

A register is a semantic concept. It can be defined as a configuration of meanings that are typically associated with a particular situa-
tional configuration of field, mode, and tenor. But since it is a configuration of meanings, a register must also, of course, include the expressions, the lexico-grammatical and phonological features, that typically accompany or realise these meanings. And sometimes we find that a particular register also has indexical features, indices in the form of particular words, particular grammatical signals, or even sometimes phonological signals that have the function of indicating to the participants that this is the register in question, like my first example once upon a time. 'Once upon a time' is an indexical feature that serves to signal the fact that we are now embarking on a traditional tale.

Variations in kinds of register

The category of register will vary, from something that is closed and limited to something that is relatively free and open-ended. That is to say, there are certain registers in which the total number of possible meanings is fixed and finite and may be quite small; whereas in others, the range of the discourse is much less constrained.

Closed registers

One example of a register in which the number of meanings was small was that which was familiar to those who were in the armed services during the Second World War. The set of messages that one was allowed to send home from active service by cable was strictly controlled, and the number was very limited, somewhere around a hundred, though you could combine two or three together and say things like 'Happy birthday and please send DDT'. Since the total number of messages was limited, there was no need for the message itself to be transmitted; the only thing that was transmitted was a number. That particular message might be transmitted as '31, 67' or something of that kind. It is a characteristic of a closed register, one in which the total number of possible messages is fixed and finite, that it is not necessary to send the message; all you need to transmit is an index number.

That kind of register is, of course, an extreme case; we could refer to it by the term introduced by Firth as a restricted language. It is a kind of register in which there is no scope for individuality, or for creativity. The range of possible meanings is fixed. Most registers are not like that; but there are some that we meet with in daily life that are near that end of the scale. For example, consider the International Language of the Air, which air crew have to learn in order to act as pilots and navigators on the international air routes today. They have to communicate with ground control, they have to use a fixed language in which to do so, and they have to keep the total messages within a certain range. They will not start discussing the latest fashions, or anything of that kind.

Many of the languages of games are of this restricted nature, like the bidding system in bridge that I referred to earlier. There are only a certain number of possible messages, like 'four hearts'. Of course, you can start chatting about other things in the middle of the game;
but then you are going outside the register. The register itself is restricted. Some such registers are interesting because they actually have a special language, which reflects their origins in the culture: in the West, for example, the register of musical scores is Italian, because Italian was the language through which musical culture spread around Europe in the fifteenth century. The language of menus, which is also a fairly restricted register, has traditionally been French.

**More open registers**

Coming to somewhat more open varieties, we can recognise the language of minor documents like tickets, and of official forms. Then in English-speaking countries we have a special register for verses on greeting cards, which are sent to people on their birthdays or other personal occasions. They are probably written by computer. Rather more open than these are the registers of headlines, and of recipes; still more open-ended, the registers of technical instructions, and of legal documents. Then there are the various transactional registers, like those of buying and selling at an auction, in a shop, or in a market; and the register of communication between doctor and patient.

There are styles of meaning associated with these registers, which simply have to be learnt. Medical students coming from overseas to English-speaking countries generally learn the technical language quite easily; but when it comes to having to communicate with the patients, they often have a great deal of difficulty, because this is a very different register, and one that is not taught in the textbooks. It is now being specially studied, with a view to helping foreign students to learn it.

Another register, or set of registers, to which a lot of attention is now being paid is the language of the classroom: the language used between teacher and pupils in primary and secondary schools. There is often quite some difference between these two levels in English-speaking countries, and one of the things that children find most difficult about the transition from primary school to secondary school is the need to learn a new set of registers, embodying a new pattern of relationship between teacher and taught.

We are now approaching the other end of the register scale. Consider our various kinds of conversational strategies, the forms of discourse that we use in everyday interaction with other people when we are trying to persuade them or entertain them or teach them or whatever it is we want to do. These are the most open-ended kind of register, the registers of informal narrative and spontaneous conversation. Yet even these are never totally open-ended. There is no situation in which the meanings are not to a certain extent prescribed for us. There is always some feature of which we can say, 'This is typically associated with this or that use of language'. Even the most informal spontaneous conversation has its strategies and styles of meaning. We are never selecting with complete freedom from all the resources of our linguistic system. If we were, there would be no communication; we understand each other only because we are able to make predictions, subconscious guesses, about what the other person is going to say.
Registers and dialects

Registers and dialects are two sorts of variety of a language.

A dialect, or dialectal variety, can be defined as a variety of language according to the user. That is, the dialect is what you speak habitually, depending in principle on who you are; and that means where you come from, either geographically in the case of regional dialects, or socially in the case of social dialects. In modern urban life, of course, the dialect pattern is predominantly a social one, so that dialect variation reflects the social order, in the particular sense of the social structure.

A register we can define as a variety according to use. In other words, the register is what you are speaking at the time, depending on what you are doing and the nature of the activity in which the language is functioning. So whereas, in principle at least, any individual might go through life speaking only one dialect (in modern complex societies this is increasingly unlikely; but it is theoretically possible, and it used to be the norm), it is not possible to go through life using only one register. The register reflects another aspect of the social order, that of social processes, the different types of social activity that people commonly engage in.

Hence, in principle, dialects are saying the same thing in different ways, whereas registers are saying different things. So dialects tend to differ not in the meanings they express but in the realisations of these meanings at other levels—in their grammar, in their vocabulary, in their phonology, in their phonetics. On the other hand it is precisely in their meanings that registers are differentiated from each other. Of course they must also differ in grammar and in vocabulary, because grammar and vocabulary are what express the meanings; but this is simply a consequence of the difference in semantic potential. Registers do not usually differ in phonology, although some registers do acquire distinctive voice qualities.

The extreme cases of dialectal differentiation are phenomena like anti-languages (dialects of criminal or other opposed subcultures) and mother-in-law languages (dialects for addressing those in a counterposed kinship relation). Such dialectal varieties have a special function in a culture, reflecting some sharp division within the social structure. Extreme cases of register differentiation are those I have been referring to as 'restricted languages', registers that have developed for some special purpose, which itself is narrowly restricted. These are the extreme cases.

Most of the time in everyday life we meet with intermediate cases. In dialects, we meet with subcultural varieties, dialects that reflect castes or social classes, or the distinction between town and country, or between parents and children, old and young, male and female, and so on. On the register side, the intermediate varieties are those technical and institutional registers such as doctor-patient communication, classroom discourse, and the like. These are less closed than weather reports and recipes, but less open than informal discussions among friends and colleagues.
The concepts of dialect and register are mutually defining, so that a functional relationship exists between the two. Registers are the semantic configurations that are typically associated with particular social contexts, defined as we have defined them in terms of field, tenor, and mode. They vary from, at one end, the kind of action-oriented registers in which there is a lot of activity and little talk, sometimes referred to under the name of 'language in action', to the talk-oriented registers in which most of the activity is linguistic and there is not much else going on.

But there is, also, a close interconnection in practice between registers and dialects. There is a division of labour in society: different social groups, speaking different dialects, engage in different kinds of activity. As a consequence of this, certain registers come to be associated with certain dialects. In a typical Western society, if you are using the bureaucratic register you switch on the standard dialect, no matter what dialect you speak at other times. And, on the other hand, different social groups often tend to have different conceptions of the meanings that are appropriate to given contexts of situation— that is, they have what Bernstein (1971) refers to as different coding orientations. So there are various lines of interconnection between dialect and register; but conceptually the two are distinct. See Table 3.1 for a summary of the differences between dialect and register.

When we face a particular text, in order to interpret it in relation to its context, we assign it to some register. We see it as an instance of that particular functional variety. Clearly, from one point of view, every text is different from every other text. Even if the same words have been spoken or written thousands and millions of times before, each instance is in a certain sense unique. Some texts are truly unique and are indeed highly valued for their uniqueness; it is this property we have in mind when we say that something belongs to the rather vaguely defined category of 'literature'. A literary text is a text that is valued in its own right, which must mean that it differs from all other texts.

But at the same time it is also true that every text is in some sense like other texts; and for any given text there will be some that it resembles more closely. There are classes of texts, and this is what gives us the general notion of a register. The feeling we have, as speakers of language, that this text is like that one is simply a recognition that they belong in some respect to the same register.
### Table 3.1 Varieties in language

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dialects ('dialectal varieties')</th>
<th>Registers ('diatypic varieties')</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Variety 'according to user'</td>
<td>Variety 'according to use'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dialect is 'what you speak</td>
<td>register is 'what you are</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(habitually)' i.e. determined by</td>
<td>speaking (at the time)'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>who you are geographically or</td>
<td>i.e. determined by what you are</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>socially (region &amp;/or social class</td>
<td>doing (nature of activity in</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>origin &amp;/or adoption)</td>
<td>which language is functioning)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dialect reflects social order</td>
<td>register reflects social order</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in sense of social structure</td>
<td>in sense of social process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(types of social hierarchy)</td>
<td>(types of social activity)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hence in principle dialects are</td>
<td>Hence in principle registers are</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>saying the same thing differently</em></td>
<td><em>saying different things</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>So dialects tend to differ in:</td>
<td>So registers tend to differ in:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>phonetics</td>
<td>semantics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>phonology</td>
<td>and <em>therefore</em> in grammar &amp;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>vocabulary</td>
<td>vocabulary (as expression of</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>grammar (to a certain extent)</td>
<td>meanings) but rarely in phonology (some require special voice qualities)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>but not in semantics</td>
<td>The extreme case of register</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>differentiation is:</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>'anti-languages'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>'mother-in-law languages'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intermediate cases are:</td>
<td>Intermediate cases are:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>subcultural varieties</td>
<td>occupational varieties</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>caste or social class</td>
<td>technical (scientific, technological)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>provenance (rural/urban)</td>
<td>institutional (e.g. doctor-patient)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>generation (parents/children)</td>
<td>other contexts having special</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>age (old/young)</td>
<td>structures &amp; strategies (e.g.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sex (male/female)</td>
<td>classroom)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Note: Members of a community</td>
<td>Note: Registers are the semantic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>often hold strong attitudes</td>
<td>configurations that are typically</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>towards its dialects, owing to</td>
<td>associated with particular social</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the function of dialect in the</td>
<td>contexts (defined in terms of field,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>expression and maintenance of</td>
<td>tenor, and mode). They may vary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>social hierarchy. One dialect may</td>
<td>from 'action-oriented' (much action,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>acquire special status as</td>
<td>little talk) to 'talk-oriented' (much</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>symbolising the values of the</td>
<td>talk, little action).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>community as a whole.</td>
<td>BUT there is close interconnection</td>
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<td></td>
<td>between registers and dialects; so</td>
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<td></td>
<td>there is no very sharp line between</td>
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<td></td>
<td>the two. There is 'division of</td>
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<td></td>
<td>labour': different members have</td>
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<td></td>
<td>different social roles — so certain</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>registers demand certain dialects</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(e.g. bureaucratic register:</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>standard dialect), and on the other</td>
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<td></td>
<td>hand different social groups may</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>tend to have different</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>conceptions of the meanings that</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>are exchanged in particular</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>situations (Bernstein's 'codes').</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Text as a metafunctional construct

We study language partly in order to understand language and how it works, and partly in order to understand what people do with it. The two questions are closely connected: the way language is organised has been determined, over the million and more years of its evolution, by the functions it is called on to serve. Like any other tool, it is shaped by its purposes. A ‘functional’ theory of language is a theory that brings this out.

From a very early age, before even the human child has started learning the ‘mother tongue’, he — we will call it ‘he’ — discovers that he can engage in acts of meaning. He can understand symbols that are addressed to him, and he can construct symbols that those around him will understand. Typically, by the time he is one year old, a baby has mastered the principle of such acts of meaning: that they have two basic functions — for doing, and for learning. Like the office memorandum, language is either ‘for action’ or ‘for information’.

You address a symbol to someone, by gesture, or by voice, either because you want them to do something for you — play with you, perhaps, or hand you something out of your reach; or because you are learning about the world and your place in it — noting what interests you and what you recognise as familiar, and sharing your experiences with them. And this dual motif becomes the prime strategy for mastering the mother tongue, the language of the adult world.

These are the two ways of meaning that lie behind the various functional approaches to language that we described in Chapter 2. They are the so-called metafunctions of systemic theory, which we refer to as interpersonal and ideational. (The term ‘experiential’, used in the descriptions, is simply the ideational metafunction minus the abstract logical component.) The interpersonal is the doing function; the ideational is the learning or thinking function. But these are not simply more fancy names for the same things. The meaning of metafunction is ‘that part of the system of a language — the particular semantic and lexico-grammatical resources — that has evolved to perform the function in question’. As we saw throughout Chapter 2, in English (as
in every other language), each of these metafunctions makes a clear
and distinctive contribution to the grammar. But it does so in a way
that is very different from the 'either/or' of the functional theories from
outside linguistics, according to which each utterance is either this or
that (either transactional or poetic etc.). This sort of exclusive alter-
nation is true in an infant's protolanguage, where each symbol is doing
only one thing. But it is not true of an adult language. Adult languages
are organised in such a way that every utterance is both this and that:
has both an interpersonal and ideational component to it. It does some-
thing, and it is about something. This is the basis of the 'metafunction'
theory.

We also noted that there is a third metafunctional component in
language to which there is no corresponding function in the sense of
'use' — it is not a way of using language, but rather a resource for en-
suring that what is said is relevant and relates to its context. This we
refer to as the textual metafunction.

To be able to read a text, or listen to it, effectively and with under-
standing, we have to be able to interpret it in terms of all these metafunc-
tions. In other words, anyone who is learning by listening to a teacher,
or reading a textbook, has to:

1a. understand the processes being referred to, the participants in these
processes, and the circumstances — time, cause, etc. — associated with
them [experiential];

1b. understand the relationship between one process and another, or
one participant and another, that share the same position in the text
[logical];

2. recognise the speech function, the type of offer, command, state-
ment, or question, the attitudes and judgments embodied in it, and
the rhetorical features that constitute it as a symbolic act [inter-
personal]; and

3. grasp the news value and topicality of the message, and the coher-
ence between one part of the text and every other part [textual].

By understanding the functional organisation of language, we are
enabled to explain success and failure in learning through language:
where a breakdown occurs, why it occurs, and how to overcome it and
prevent it from occurring again. We can also see how far the fault lies
in the learner and how far it lies in the language that is being used to
teach him or her.

Context of situation

All use of language has a context. The 'textual' features enable the dis-
course to cohere not only with itself but also with its context of situa-
tion. We have analysed the context of situation into three components,
corresponding to the three metafunctions. This enables us to display
the redundancy between text and situation — how each serves to predict
the other. The three components are:

1. field of discourse: the 'play' — the kind of activity, as recognised in
the culture, within which the language is playing some part [predicts
experiential meanings];
2. tenor of discourse: the ‘players’—the actors, or rather the interacting roles, that are involved in the creation of the text [predicts interpersonal meanings]; and

3. mode of discourse: the ‘parts’—the particular functions that are assigned to language in this situation, and the rhetorical channel that is therefore allotted to it [predicts textual meanings].

The context of situation, as defined in these terms, is the immediate environment in which a text is actually functioning. We use this notion to explain why certain things have been said or written on this particular occasion, and what else might have been said or written that was not.

The reason for doing this, however, is not only retrospective but prospective. Because of the close link between text and context, readers and listeners make predictions; they read and listen, with expectations for what is coming next. When someone is reading or listening in order to learn, the ability to predict in this way takes on a particular importance, as without it the whole process is slowed down. The whole point of a passage may be missed if the reader or listener does not bring to it appropriate assumptions derived from the context of situation.

**Context of culture**

Much of the work of learning a foreign language consists in learning to make the right predictions. If the student coming into school with a first language other than English finds difficulty in using English to learn with, this is likely to be in part because he has not yet learnt to expect in English—to use the context in this predictive way.

The context of situation, however, is only the immediate environment. There is also a broader background against which the text has to be interpreted: its context of culture. Any actual context of situation, the particular configuration of field, tenor, and mode that has brought a text into being, is not just a random jumble of features but a totality—a package, so to speak, of things that typically go together in the culture. People do these things on these occasions and attach these meanings and values to them; this is what a culture is.

The school itself provides a good example of what in modern jargon could be called an ‘interface’ between the context of situation and the context of culture. For any ‘text’ in school—teacher talk in the classroom, pupil’s notes or essay, passage from a textbook—there is always a context of situation: the lesson, with its concept of what is to be achieved; the relationship of teacher to pupil, or textbook writer to reader; the ‘mode’ of question-and-answer, expository writing, and so on. But these in turn are instances of, and derive their meaning from, the school as an institution in the culture: the concept of education, and of educational knowledge as distinct from commonsense knowledge; the notion of the curriculum and of school ‘subjects’; the complex role structures of teaching staff, school principals, consultants, inspectorate, departments of education, and the like; and the unspoken assumptions about learning and the place of language within it.
All these factors constitute the context of culture, and they determine, collectively, the way the text is interpreted in its context of situation. It is as well to know what we are assuming, as teachers, when we stand up in front of a class and talk, or when we set pupils a task like writing a report or an essay, or when we evaluate their performance in that task.

We have not offered, here, a separate linguistic model of the context of culture; no such thing yet exists, although there are useful ideas around. But in describing the context of situation, it is helpful to build in some indication of the cultural background, and the assumptions that have to be made if the text is to be interpreted—or produced—in the way the teacher (or the system) intends.

**Intertextuality**

The context of situation and the wider context of culture make up the non-verbal environment of a text. We have spoken of these as 'determining' the text, stressing the predictability of the text from the context; and this is an important perspective, since it helps us to understand how people actually exchange meanings and interact with one another. But in fact the relationship between text and context is a dialectical one: the text creates the context as much as the context creates the text. ‘Meaning’ arises from the friction between the two. This means that part of the environment for any text is a set of previous texts, texts that are taken for granted as shared among those taking part. Again, the school provides very clear examples. Every lesson is built on the assumption of earlier lessons in which topics have been explored, concepts agreed upon and defined; but beyond this there is a great deal of unspoken cross-reference of which everyone is largely unaware.

This kind of **intertextuality**, as it is sometimes called, includes not only the more obviously experiential features that make up the context of a lesson but also other aspects of the meaning: types of logical sequencing that are recognised as valid, even interpersonal features such as whether a question is intended to be answered or is being used as a step in the development of an argument. There are also likely to be 'coded' expressions that are carried on from one text to another, more or less formulaic sequences that may signal what is happening, or what is going to happen next. That is why it is so difficult to come in the middle of an ongoing discourse of this kind, such as joining in a new class half-way through the school year. The problem can be eased if the 'intertextual' assumptions can be made explicit — perhaps as a function of pupil solidarity, as when a newcomer is told 'When Mr Smith says “Well if there are no more questions”, it means he's going quiz us on what he's just been saying'.

At a deeper level the entire school learning experience is linked by a pervading 'intertextuality' that embodies the theory and practice of education as institutionalised in our culture. There is a sense in which the classroom is one long text, that carries over from one year to the next and from one stage of schooling to the next. Unfortunately most
studies of educational discourse have tended to concentrate on the mechanics of classroom interaction. Other study units in this program are attempting to get at more fundamental aspects of the linguistic processes by which school pupils learn.

Coherence

Finally we come back to the text itself; but at one level up, so to speak. Every text is also a context for itself. A text is characterised by coherence; it hangs together. At any point after the beginning, what has gone before provides the environment for what is coming next. This sets up internal expectations; and these are matched up with the expectations referred to earlier, that the listener or reader brings from the external sources, from the context of situation and of culture.

An important contribution to coherence comes from cohesion: the set of linguistic resources that every language has (as part of the textual metafunction) for linking one part of a text to another. In the next three chapters we shall be discussing these resources as they appear in English, under the headings of (1) reference, (2) substitution and ellipsis, (3) conjunction, and (4) lexical cohesion. These are the semantic relations that enable one part of the text to function as the context for another.

A teacher is often called on to judge the coherence of a text. Most typically, perhaps, when evaluating the pupils’ writing; and very often all the pupil is told is ‘this doesn’t hang together’—when what he needs to know is why it doesn’t hang together, and how it could be made to do so. Without an understanding of the linguistic resources involved it is impossible to give the explicit help that is needed.

But there are other occasions besides. There are many instances where it is the textbook that doesn’t hang together; and a critical linguistic analysis of a difficult passage of a classroom text can be extraordinarily revealing when the teacher is trying to find out where the students’ problems arise. Every sentence may be impeccable in itself; but if the preceding sequence of sentences does not provide a context with which what follows can cohere then the effect will be one of confusion: not simply ‘I can’t understand this’, but ‘I can’t understand what it is I can’t understand’.

Every part of a text, therefore, is at once both text and context. In focusing attention on the language with which people learn, we should be aware of both these functions. Each element in the discourse, whether just one phrase or an entire chapter or a book, has a value (1) as text, in itself, and (2) as context, to other text that is to come. A functional grammar enables us to take both these into account.

Text, context, and learning

We have identified five periods in the cycle of text and context:
1. the text, as a metafunctional construct: a complex of ideational, interpersonal, and textual meanings;
2. the context of situation: the configuration of field, tenor, and mode features that specify the register of the text;
3. the context of culture: the institutional and ideological background that give value to the text and constrain its interpretation;
4. the 'inter textual' context: relations with other texts, and assumptions that are carried over therefrom;
5. the 'intratextual' context: coherence within the text, including the linguistic cohesion that embodies the internal semantic relationships.

All learning is a process of contextualisation: a building up of expectancies about what will happen next. These include non-verbal expectancies: if I wire this in here, that switch will operate there. But most learning takes place through language, especially learning in school; and the linguistic expectancies are critical to its success.

To succeed in mathematics, for example, I need to understand the sentence:

Every regular polygon has rotational symmetry about a certain point called its centre for various angles of rotation.

To be able to understand it, I have to have a context for it. Into this context come elements from all five periods listed above. It would take a longish chapter to write them all out, and I shall not attempt to do so here. But only a very small part of the demands made by that sentence lies in understanding its technical terms. We need to bring to it a considerable resource drawn from (1) the metafunctional systems of modern English, (2) praxis in the study of mathematics, (3) accepted patterns of reasoning in the culture, (4) other mathematical texts, and (5) the surrounding matter, such as figures, in the text itself—and to be able to see its relationship to all of these.

We tend to think of learning exclusively as a cognitive process, and to neglect its linguistic aspects. What we are attempting to do here is to interpret learning as a linguistic process, taking some tentative steps towards a linguistic theory of learning that would complement the established cognitive models. This should enable teachers and others concerned to explore the value and critical role of language in education and to appreciate how deeply children depend on language in order to be able to learn.