NOTES ON THE FUNCTIONAL VIEW OF LANGUAGE

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1 Kinds of Meaning in Language

It may be useful to distinguish between two different kinds of meaning that a sentence can have: propositional meaning and functional meaning. We can also distinguish two kinds of functional meaning, though the distinction is not always clear.

A Propositional meaning

This is the meaning a sentence has if you hear or read it entirely without a context, i.e. if it is cited rather than used. We might also call it the **literal meaning**. A sentence in isolation (i.e. out of context) generally has a truth value — i.e. it can be asserted, denied or questioned — but not much else.

Functional meaning

This is the meaning a sentence acquires when it is used in a specific context, for a specific purpose, by a specific speaker (or writer) and in the case of meaning B, with one or more specific hearers (or readers). In the case of meaning C, it might be logically possible that there is no hearer/reader, though normally of course that will not be the case.

We should not press the difference between type B and type C meaning too far, but it has some usefulness.

To distinguish a sentence in use from a sentence in isolation, we shall use **utterance** to refer to the sentence in use, whether it is spoken or written.

B Sociolinguistic meaning (pragmatic meaning, illocutionary meaning)

This is the meaning an utterance has as a result of the interaction between the speaker/writer and the hearer/reader. It is what the speaker is doing with the utterance, his intention in using it.

For instance, *Are you talking*? has a propositional meaning that looks like a request for infor-

mation, and it may often be used in that way. But when used by a teacher to a pupil, the utterance may have the force of a command or threat.

C Contextual meaning (rhetorical meaning, discourse meaning)

This is the meaning an utterance acquires from occurring in a context: e.g. from being part of a longer stretch of language such as a conversation or a letter. The focus is not on the relationship between speaker and listener, but between one utterance and another/others in the same context.

The same sentence, occurring in different contexts, may have very different functions according to what precedes or follows it. For example, the statement *Hot air rises* has a different function in each of these cases:

(a) A: *Why are you positioning that heater so low down?*
   B: *Hot air rises.* **(Explanation)**

(b) A: *It's silly to put a heater on the floor when we know that hot air moves downwards.*
   B: *Hot air rises.* **(Contradiction)**

(c) A: *Can you give me some examples of general scientific laws?*
   B: *Hot air rises.* **(Example)**

2 Meaning in the Language Class

1 Traditionally in language classes we spend most of our time on meanings of type A. It is easy to see why: without them, meanings of types B and C can barely exist. But as the descriptions above show, language in use depends upon meanings of types B and C too: without them it cannot function. Therefore we cannot afford to ignore them. Functional teaching is concerned with these two kinds of meaning, but does not (cannot) exclude type A.

2 Notice that types B and C concern the meaning of language **in use**. It is not possible to deal with meanings of this kind out of context or in isola-

tion. You can only learn about them by observing language in use and using it yourself. The attention paid to meanings of this kind in the revised examination format therefore carries strong pedagogical implications which will be discussed later.

3 Meanwhile, for our own purposes as teachers we need to look more closely at meanings B and C. We need to understand some of the underlying theory if we are going to handle functional teaching effectively, but the theory is for us, not our students.

3 Functional Meaning

1 Meanings B and C can be considered together as **functional meaning** and for most purposes we shall not need to discriminate between them.

2 Meaning A depends mainly on the **accuracy** of the language used: choosing exactly the right word, tense, sentence structure to express our idea. Meanings B and C depend also on its **appropriacy**: the utterance we use must be the right one for the situation, as well as accurate. The way people interpret what we say will be influenced by the circumstances in which we say it.

3 Let's examine the distinction. Suppose you come home one day and find a new book (not in a parcel) lying on the table. You might ask:
   What's this?
Would you expect the accurate answer:
   It's a book.
or would you find that wanting? As far as **usage** (i.e. correct grammar) goes, it's faultless. But its use is wrong here. Your question requires an answer of this kind:
   It's a present from Uncle Raoff.
or
   It's Lim's English prize.
or
   I thought you'd enjoy it.
or even
   Wait a minute.

A grammatically correct utterance is not enough. It has to be appropriately used as well: it has to be right for the situation.

4 Among the factors which determine the situation, these are important:

(a) **Role:** Who is the speaker and who is he speaking to?; What is the relationship between them?

(b) **Intent:** Why is the speaker speaking?; What does he want his words to do?

(d) **Context:** What has the other person (or a third person) just said or done? And what preceded that? And what is going to follow?

4 Role

1 This means the speaker's status in relation to the status of others involved in the interaction (i.e. the conversation, etc.). It is usually a factor over which we have no control: it concerns the age, sex, social class, kinship, legal status, occupation and educational background of each participant in the interaction in relation to the others. These relationships affect the way we speak to one another.

2 In terms of each kind of status, we will either be equal with the other participants or superior/inferior to them.

3 Some examples of **equal (symmetrical) roles** are:

friend	—	friend
enemy	—	enemy
colleague	—	colleague
stranger	—	stranger
agemate	—	agemate

4 Some examples of **unequal (asymmetrical) roles** are:

parent	—	child
boss	—	employee
expert	—	tyro
teacher	—	pupil
customer	—	seller
host	—	guest
insider	—	outsider
official	—	public
leader	—	follower
man	—	woman
educated	—	uneducated
high class	—	lower class
winner	—	loser

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5 It is easy to see how the participants' roles affect the way they express themselves. Suppose A has done something that B dislikes: consider how B will express his disapproval if:

(a) A and B are friends
(b) A is a father, B is his son
(c) A is a son, B is his father
(d) A is an employee, B is his employer
(e) A is an official, B is a humble member of the public

As we shall see later (section 7) these differences raise some quite tricky problems for the language teacher.

5 Intent

1 To communicate your intent (i.e. to make sure that what you say has the effect you want), you must be a skilled speaker; but you also need an experienced and cooperative listener. All the participants in an interaction are jointly responsible for making sense of what is said: unless they cooperate, communication will be blocked.

For instance, take the example in 3.3. When you ask *What's this?*, a reasonable and cooperative listener knows that you're asking for some kind of explanation and not just for an identification. To answer *It's a book* would suggest either stupidity, extreme absent-mindedness or an intention to be rude and uncooperative.

2 So the listener must respond not merely to the words and sentence structures you are using, but also to your purpose: why you are saying something at all. To interpret successfully, he has to know who you are and what your background is (your role and the situation within which you are operating) and he has to infer what your likely purpose is. Naturally in your own role as listener, you have to do the same when he speaks: you have, for instance, to decide whether his answer signals rudeness or not, and your interpretation will influence what you do next.

3 Thus it is not only what you want to achieve, but also the attitude you adopt, that influences how you express yourself. As a speaker, if you want for example to be polite, you need to know how; and equally, you need to know how to be rude when occasion demands. As a listener, too, you need to be able to distinguish between these attitudes so as to respond appropriately.

4 Whereas your **role** in an interaction is usually not a matter for choice, your **attitude** usually is. ('A gentleman is a man who is never rude except on purpose.') It is therefore very much a part of your communicative intent. A list of possible attitudes might be pages long; here is a short selection of the more obvious ones:

polite	—	rude
cooperative	—	obstructive
interested	—	uninterested
friendly	—	hostile
concerned	—	indifferent
modest	—	arrogant/boastful
good tempered	—	bad tempered
appreciative	—	critical
confident	—	anxious

You can see that these pairs of terms often represent opposite ends of a spectrum, where the expected attitude will usually be the one in the left hand column, or a neutral (unmarked) one that is neither at one extreme nor the other.

5 While these attitudes are often conveyed by means of tone of voice and facial expression, they are also conveyed by the speaker's choice of utterance. A skilled language user is able to discriminate between many subtly different attitudes; a learner will need at least some awareness of the systems involved if he is to interpret correctly the way the language is used (i.e. its functions).

6 Context

1 The context is the stretch of language of which the utterance is a part. The way the utterance is formed will be influenced strongly by the preceding utterances (and possibly those that follow) in several ways. (It also occurs in a physical context: see 6.4.)

Referential context

The way a speaker phrases an utterance depends quite heavily on what he or a previous speaker has already said. Words like *it, he, the same, bigger,* etc. obviously cannot be interpreted unless

we can recover the reference from elsewhere in the text. Moreover, some parts of an utterance may be omitted altogether if the listener can be expected to supply them; e.g.:

(i) A: *Where did you find your car key in the end?*
   B: *My desk drawer.*
(ii) A: *I'm going to the cinema with John, James, Peter, Paul and Mary.*
   B: *And me.*
(iii) A: *There's been a policy decision that travel allowances are to be cut by 50%.*
   B: *Why?*

Any attempt to work out even the propositional meaning of B's remarks would fail if it did not take account of the context.

3 Rhetorical (discourse) context

Some of the functions that utterances perform can only be interpreted in relation to the overall type of discourse in which they occur, and to the other utterances that make up the whole. Some examples were given in section 1C.

Sometimes the function may be signalled by words like:

therefore, however, what's more, next, namely, to sum up, for example

But this does not always happen. Very often the listener must work out for himself the function of the utterance by considering how it fits into the rest of the discourse (e.g. its place in the argument or narrative).

The functions in section B and C of the list offered by Lembaga Peperiksaan are primarily rhetorical functions.

4 Physical context

As well as the language of which an utterance forms part, it is also part of a physical situation: it occurs in certain circumstances and at a particular place and time.

It is not very clear whether this should be considered here or in connection with sociological meaning, but this does not matter much since types B and C meaning are not always readily distinguishable. The important thing is to realize that the physical situation too affects the way an utterance is formed.

(a) The utterance may directly **refer** to the physical context (using words like *here, now, this*): we can't interpret such references without knowledge of that context.

(b) The location of the interaction may affect the choice of language in other ways; it may affect the dialect used, or make one meaning of a word more likely than another (e.g. the word *rubber* in (a) a stationer's (b) a commodity market).

(c) The **time** of the interaction may affect the form of the language (historical dialect) used, and the events that have preceded it will affect the way we interpret an utterance too. We could, for instance, imagine two people silently watching the progress of an experiment, until the point when one produces an utterance which in this context must be interepreted as an **explanation** of what has been observed.

(d) The **event** (or **situation**) involved will determine the type of language that is appropriate: the same participants would express themselves differently at a business meeting and a family party.

7 Cross cultural problem

1 We have seen that, in order to understand what a speaker means, the listener has to understand more than just sentence structure and vocabulary. He has to know the identity of the speaker and the context within which he is speaking, and he has to infer the probable purpose of the utterance. The less he knows about the speaker and the context, the less likely he is to interpret the utterance correctly, even if the utterance is grammatically perfect.

2 If one or more of the participants (speaker or listener) cannot use or respond to the language fluently and accurately — for instance, if one is a foreign learner of the language — communicative breakdown is a strong possibility.

3 The possibility is even greater when the language is used in societies of very different kinds. For instance, in para 4.5 we considered the appropriacy of various utterances. An American, an

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Englishman and a Malaysian would disagree about the appropriacy of at least some of the possible utterances, because of the different expectations of their societies.

Language, being a form of social behaviour and not just a matter of grammar and vocabulary, can be a sensitive issue. An American child might speak to his father in a way that would cause lifted eyebrows in Britain and shock in Malaysia. Moreover, different individuals will have differing ideas about what is appropriate in a given situation, depending on their personal style and background as well as their national identity.

So when we language teachers assert that a certain utterance is appropriate in a certain situation, we are being a little presumptuous, and we are certainly making a lot of unspoken assumptions about the standards of behaviour that are desirable or acceptable. The area is a quicksand once we go beyond the most neutral and generally acceptable forms.

4 A question follows from this: given that different cultures achieve similar purposes in different ways, whose language behaviour are we to accept as standard and recommend to our students? Here are some examples of the sort of difficulties that arise:

(a) In many forms of English, it is actively impolite not to apologise when you have hurt or inconvenienced someone. This is not the case in all societies, however.

(b) In many languages, it is rude not to respond (usually with a fixed formula) when thanked; but there is no equivalent in English. (*Not at all* is the nearest but often sounds inappropriate.)

(c) In some languages, expressions like *Where are you going*? or *Have you eaten*? are used as conversational oil for the mechanisms of everyday living, like *Nice day, isn't it*? in British English. Communication breaks down if the hearer treats such questions as requests for information.

5 Differences of this kind mean that again and again a teacher will be forced to decide between an expression acceptable to, say, a British speaker and one that a Malaysian would find appropriate. Who sets the standard of appropriacy? It is not culturally neutral, like grammar, but reflects the central values of our society or our individual personality. Because of this, some people are disturbed by the present emphasis on appropriacy: who are we to tell our students what behaviour they should adopt? Our job is to give them the language and nothing more: the student himself must decide what to do with it. We are language teachers, not purveyors of morality or manipulators of personality. I think any responsible teacher must heed such arguments, even if he cannot wholly accept them. As long as we are aware of the dangers, we can take pains to avoid them.

6 The dangers outlined may be somewhat exaggerated, however, since languages (and cultures) have a lot in common as well as a lot of differences. Certainly all languages seem to employ utterances in ways that might not be predictable from the literal meaning, and comparable kinds of utterance seem to be used in comparable ways across languages.

Can you, in your mother tongue, find parallels with any of these usages?
e.g. *Aren't you hot*?
    (= Please turn on the air conditioner.)
    It's four o'clock.
    (= Hurry up, it's late.)
    I'm very tired.
    (= No, I won't help you.)
    Are these your things?
    (= Please tidy up the room.)

It's likely that you, and your students, could interpret most of these utterances when used in a suitable context.

7 A learner will have many interpretive skills, acquired in dealing with his own language, which he can put to use in understanding a speaker of a foreign language. He will be aware of differences

in role, distinctions of attitude, the importance of context and so on, and he will often be able to infer the speaker's meaning by using this latent knowledge, provided the interaction is taking place in real life, with a real purpose. (Classroom interactions are more difficult to cope with because of their artificiality and lack of purpose. Teachers need to consider ways of reducing these problems.) These language-user skills, which all our students possess, are a very positive factor to offset some of the difficulties discussed. We can put them to good use when we teach functionally.

Attention !
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