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Functions

Functionalism in the study of language and other sociocultural forma-
tions has generally been a teleologic or teleonomic exercise. The
particular sociocultural form being considered is interrogated for its
instrumental role in some dynamic tendency—whether (1) of users of
language and cultural forms, (2) of social structure as a self-regulative
system, or (3) of a pre-linguistic or pre-sociocultural order to be found in
human "nature" or in sociocentric "infrastructure."

(1) In user-focused functionalisms, the "functions" of language involve
intentionalities, purposes, and strategic plans; these mental (intensional)
states are thought to be made manifest in the way that sending and receiving
verbal messages achieves or accomplishes various kinds of interpersonal
adjustments of the intensional states of the participants involved. Thus lan-
guage and other behaviors "function" to reveal the mental states of one
participant to another, principally propositionally modeled representations
of states-of-affairs in various worlds, and participants' intensional states
with respect to them. (Notice also that even communicative "ease" and "dif-
ficulty" are basically degree descriptions of language in these terms.)

One might think here also of ordinary language philosophy and its de-
velopment in speech act philosophy. Language is said to be used by senders
of messages for the purpose of making senders' intentions—apparently both
"actual" and "conventional"—manifest to addressees. Critical attempts to
turn such a functionalist program to cross-cultural empirical ends has re-
vealed the many ways in which it is no more than a Western philosophical
construction.

(2) In a functionalist perspective focused on social structure, the frame-
work construes events of communicating as the means of re-enforcing the
interpersonal social arrangements of categories of people in society, re-
cruited to communicative roles. Thus the language forms used in commu-
nicative events are referred to such a typology of events of language use.
Language use here thus "functions" institutionally as the primary channel

of social organization. One might think here of British structural-function-alism, which, insofar as acknowledging that people communicate, see events of interpersonal naming, joking, circumspection in verbal usage, etc., as role diacritics of an essentially autonomous social structure of positionalities, timelessly maintained (or at least maintainable) by such linguistic, as by other, social behaviors. Here, too, lies much of the "ethnography of speaking" (or of communication), in which the speech event, principally the public, ritual speech event, is assumed to have a function insofar as maintaining a structural-functional order.

It should also be noted in this connection that what in the disciplinary discourse of linguistics is—ironically—called "formalism" to distinguish itself from "functionalism" (of our type [1]), is actually a structural-functional perspective on language. From Ferdinand de Saussure through Leonard Bloomfield to Noam Chomsky and his followers, it has concentrated on the autonomy of language as an internally organized form. Thus the "function" of forms is to be integrated into the whole. Autonomous language form constitutes, moreover, a primary institutional fact in its own order, whether or not we want to call this order "mental" in this special sense. (This contrasts with the role-diacritic structural-functionalism, concerned as it is with social structure and social organization, characterized just above.) In the writings of Chomsky, structural-functional "formalism" has necessitated the claim that linguistic formedness is, in essence, its own function, the fact of formedness now being ultimately biologized and termed an autonomous faculty or "mental organ." Here, perhaps, is the deeper connection to "structuralist" thought in anthropology that sees culture as an autonomous, ahistorical, pan-specific fact of human mentality; both are a kind of "upward reduction."

(3) This leads, by contrast, to the two varieties of classically "reductive functionalism," the psychobiological and the sociocentric. Language and all other aspects of meaningful human social action are seen as merely an epiphenomenal packaging for functional tendencies that exist and can be defined in more basic orders of phenomena independent of the semiotic properties seeming to inhere in language alone, reflexive intensionality (language being its own meta-semiotic) the central one among them.

Thus in a reductively "functional" approach of one sort, one purports to discover in the individual human psychobiology that asymmetries in the syntactic form of case-marking code-and-conceal—but, when analyzed, reveal—the egocentrically focused cognitive capacity of humans; or it discovers that there is a universal and pre-sociocultural affective calculus of "face" (and "threats" to it) coded-and-concealed, and, thus, analytically, revealed, cross-culturally in the very language forms of degrees and kinds of "politeness." (This approach easily lends itself to meshing with the program of "evolutionary psychology" and human ethology, since aggressive animal nature, red in tooth and claw, can thus be seen to lurk behind every *tu* and *vous!*)

Again, at the level of a sociocentric system, sociocultural forms, including language, become codings-and-concealings ("mystifications" is the technical term) that can be analytically penetrated to reveal their relation to a stadial,

evolutionary scenario about the fundamental dimensions of the constitution of interpersonal relations in the means of production of economic value. See Pierre Bourdieu or Michel Foucault or any of the other extra-disciplinary writers on linguistic anthropology who use completely unanalyzed notions of "capital"—"real" as well as "symbolic"—and "power" as ether- or phlogiston-like properties of sociality in order to "reduce" communicational textuality and subjectively meaningful action to what seems to them to lie beneath.

All of these three kinds of older functionalisms—many, alas, still practiced though involving comparable teleological mystifications—present views of language constructed out of perhaps familiar folk ideologies of language in particular and of humans and their social formations more generally. At the same time, they do, in fact, duplicate in one or another way the various folk functionalisms of the very users of language whom we encounter as our interlocutory partners in trying to understand something of what we might mean by the term "functions of language." In the Malinowski-era Trobriands, language, properly formed and properly whispered over axes and other garden implements, puts some principle into the soil that made the yams grow big and fat. In the United States, language, properly formed by the decision of an infant's legal guardian(s) as communicated by a named licensee of the state and inscribed in the form of a (birth) certificate, actually creates the properly existent—because properly named or baptized—individual social person.

In contemporary theory, by contrast, the only viable notions of "functions" of language take the semiotic, or sign's-eye, view of the matter. Linguistic anthropology studies emergent real-time sign-structures called "texts" (and their parts) in relation to their "contexts" of occurrence, including larger "co-textual" structures of which they constitute aspects. Such contextualization-functions are studied as varieties of what one calls indexicality, how one thing signals the spatial, temporal, or causal co-presence of another. The role or "function" of language in social life is all based on the fact that linguistic—and dependent cultural—texts project (index) the metaphorically "surrounding" contexts in which they by degrees "appropriately" occur, as well as project (index) the contexts that, by their occurrence, they have "effectively" brought into being. All the rest is a development of this fundamental fact.

(See also *codes, competence, genre, grammar, indexicality, maxim, performativity, reflexivity*)

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