

Systemic Functional Linguistics: An approach to analyzing written academic discourse.

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ABSTRACT: *Written academic discourse refers to the way of thinking and using language that exist in the academy. Writers demonstrate knowledge and negotiate social relations with readers by means of written discourse. In order to understand these characteristics of written discourse, different approaches are followed. Some follow a linguistic approach to uncover the linguistic devices associated with coherence in a written text. Other follow a social approach to analyze the social cultural context in which a written text occurs. However, it is demonstrated that the linguistic and the social cultural elements in a written text cannot be disassociated and that an approach, which combine the two approaches is required. Such an approach is Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL). Therefore, this paper discusses the way in which SFL is used as an approach to analyzing linguistic features of academic discourses and how those features relate to social cultural context. In this paper, it is shown that SFL provides the means to analyze not only the linguistic resources employed in a written text but also the context in which the text is used. These linguistic resources are associated with the creation of ideational, interpersonal and textual meaning at the level of lexicogrammar and discourse semantic. The context is modelled through register and genre theory.*

Keywords: *Discourse analysis, genre, register, written academic discourse, SFL*

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I. INTRODUCTION

Discourse can be positioned as one of the most significant concepts that is used to understand how language functions in potentially all aspects of human life (Hyland, 2000). Scholars in linguistics and social sciences explore this idea from different perspective. Linguists seem to use discourse in order to study language beyond sentence (see, Leech, 1983; Schiffrin, 1994). The interest of linguists is to study the way sentences are connected within a text by a kind of extended grammar. They pay scant attention to the socio-cultural context in which language is used. Social scientists, on the other hand, use discourse in order to study how language is used to enact social relations, identity, knowledge, and power across different socio-cultural context (see, Fairclough, 1992; Foucault, 1972; Van Dijk, 2004). The interest of social scientists is to study socio-cultural elements through the analysis of written or spoken discourse. They pay little attention to linguistic features of texts. However, if one needs to study a discourse (written or spoken) as an element of social processes, as Fairclough (2003) points out, these two perspectives cannot be disassociated. Therefore, there is a need for an approach that combines the two perspectives.

Such an approach that has the potentiality to relate the linguistic features of texts to socio-cultural contexts is, as Hyland (2000) argues, Systemic Functional Linguistics (henceforth, SFL). SFL is a theory of language that provides a framework for conceptualizing the complex arrays of semiotic resources that are used to create meaning, and detailed practices for analyzing the meaning arising from the integrated use of those resources in discourse (O'Halloran, 2008). Therefore, this paper discusses SFL approach to discourse analysis. In fact, it discusses how SFL is used as an approach to analyzing written discourses. Specifically, it demonstrates how SFL is a framework for analyzing linguistic features of written discourses and how those features relate to communities' particular ways to conceive reality and knowledge.

II. SYSTEMIC FUNCTIONAL LINGUISTICS

SFL is a theory of language developed by Halliday and his colleagues (Halliday, 1985; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004; etc.). According to Halliday & Matthiessen (2004), the grammar of language is represented in the form of system networks, not an inventory of structures. A language is a semiotic resource for making meaning, and meaning resides in the systemic patterns of choices. These systemic patterns of choices are divided into three hierarchically interrelated strata (Cheung, 2017). First, there is the expression stratum, which consists of phonology/graphology. This is related to either speech or writing and realizes the second stratum, that of lexicogrammar. The lexicogrammar corresponds to the conceptual level of word, word group, clause and sentence, and it realizes the third stratum, that of discourse semantic. Discourse semantic corresponds to the

patterning of large-scale textual structure above the sentence- paragraph and larger text. These three strata are related to three modes of meanings, which are in turn associated with three main aspects of context- context of culture and context of situation.

Halliday & Matthiessen (2004) identify these three types of meanings, which are simultaneously created from semiotic resources. They call these meanings metafunctions or trinocular. These modes of meaning include ideational meaning, interpersonal meaning and textual meaning. According to Martin (2009), these three modes of meaning are linked to three main aspects of context- field, tenor, and mode. Ideational meaning includes resources for building field knowledge, enabling participation in domestic, recreational, academic and professional activities. Interpersonal meaning encompasses resource for valuing these activities and enacting tenor (negotiation of social relations). Textual meaning includes resource for phrasing ideational and interpersonal meaning together in textures sensitive to mode (spoken or written discourses).

These metafunctions provide the basis for analyzing the ways in which semiotic resources are instantiated in texts. Halliday & Matthiessen (2004) point out that the semiotic system of a language is linked to texts through the cline of instantiation. This means that when we study texts we identify patterns of semiotic resources that are used in those texts and link these patterns to the overall semiotic system of a language. In this way, we can study sample of texts by identifying patterns these texts share and classify them into text type. However, as Halliday & Matthiessen (2004) argue, texts vary according to the context in which they are used. Martin (2009) points out that context in SFL is modelled through register and genre theory.

II.1. Register and Genre in SFL

To realize context in any text, SFL concept of register and genre is important. Register is concerned with a configuration of “patterns of instantiation of the overall language system” associated with three semiotic functions (Halliday, 1978). These are field, tenor, and mode. Field is concerned with systems of activities; including descriptions of participants, processes and circumstances, these activities involve (Martin, 1992a). In academic context, field is illustrated by different activities in which teachers and students get involved. Tenor is concerned with social relationships between those involved in linguistic act. Martin (2009) argues that these social relationships are enacted through the dimension of power and solidarity. Mode is concerned with the channels of communication (spoken or written) through which we undertake activity (field) and simultaneously enact social relations (tenor). These contextual variables are linked to the three metafunctions.

Genre is “another level of context above and beyond tenor, field and mode” (Martin, 1992a). According to Martin (2009) genre refers to social processes, which are related to each other in a text. This has to do with the ways in which field, tenor and mode are phased together in a text. Therefore, genre is defined as a staged, goal-oriented, purposeful social activity writers/speakers engage as members of a society (Martin, 1986, p.33). The idea behind using genre in SFL is that members of a given culture organize meaning at lexical, sentence and discourse level through multiple stages (Cheung, 2017; Martin, 2009). This means that a text unfolds through stages or phases. For instance, stages in essays unfold as follows: (1) thesis stage, (2) supporting argument stage and (3) conclusion stage.

III. SFL APPROACH TO DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

Discourse analysis is concerned with the study of discourse (spoken or written) in order to uncover linguistic patterns and how those linguistic patterns are associated with the context in which the discourse is used (see, Brown & Yule, 1983; Cook, 1989; McCarthy, 1991; etc.). In fact, discourse analysis is concerned with the study of the way people use language for different purposes. Discourse analysts are involved in the study of discourses for different purposes. Some analyze discourses in order to uncover the linguistic resources that are used to create a coherent discourse and the context in which the discourse is used. Others study discourses in order to uncover the linguistic resources that are used to enact, confirm, legitimate, reproduce, and challenge relations of power and dominance in society (Van Dijk, 2001). Matthiessen (2012) has demonstrated that both the two groups of discourse analysts can draw from SFL description of language to carry out the analysis of discourses

SFL approach to discourse analysis is concerned with the analysis of linguistic patterns at the level of lexicogrammar and discourse semantic and with how these linguistic patterns realize ideational, interpersonal, and textual meanings. For instance, Matthiessen (2012) in his study explains how a group of researchers at the University of East Anglia in the mid 1970s drew on SFL description of language to conduct their analyses of discourses. These researchers drew on the SFL description of transitivity to analyze how journalists use the lexicogrammar resources to construe ideational meaning and how journalists can create selective experiential angles on events that get reported in the news (Matthiessen, 2012). Similarly, Haig (2009) draws on the system of transitivity to study the ways journalists use lexicogrammatical resources to construe experiential meaning. In addition, some studies pay attention to the construal of textual meaning through the analysis of linguistic resources that are used to construct a coherent discourse (Hewings, 2004; North, 2005). North (2005) draws

from SFL description of theme and information structure to analyze how clauses and sentences within written discourses are logically connected. The findings in this study are in accord with Martin's (2009) explanations of how cohesive devices at the level of lexicogrammar and discourse semantic are used to construe ideational, interpersonal and textual meanings.

Other studies focus on the construal of interpersonal and ideational meanings. For example, the studies by Lancaster, 2012, 2014, 2016; Hyland, 2016; Bruce, 2010, 2016; etc. analyze configuration of linguistic patterns at the level of lexicogrammar and discourse semantic, which are used in academic discourses in order to construe interpersonal meaning. These studies draw on the appraisal framework developed by Martin & White (2005) to expand the resources of interpersonal meaning. Appraisal framework include a configuration of linguistic resources for expressing social relations. These linguistic resources are classified into the system of attitude, engagement and graduation. Attitude encompasses linguistic resources for construing affect, judgement and appreciation. This roughly corresponds to lexical resources for expressing emotion, ethic and aesthetic. Engagement groups together all those locutions which provide the means for the authorial voice to position itself with respect to the other voices and alternative positions construed as being in play in the current communicative context (Martin & White, 2005, p.94). Graduation is concerned with the linguistic mechanism by which writers/speakers graduate the force of the utterance or the focus of the categorization by which semantic values are identified (p.94). Works within the framework of appraisal pay attention to the ways in which semiotic resources are used in discourses to express an identity, to make a voice, or to construct a valued discourse.

To sum up, analyzing discourses (spoken or written) from SFL framework involves identifying the linguistic resources used to express ideational, interpersonal and textual meanings. Discourse analysts draw on SFL's comprehensive description of discourse semantic and lexicogrammatical system to carry out their analysis in different contexts for different purposes. The contexts can be broadly mapped into academic and professional contexts. This paper is concerned with written discourse analysis in academic context. It provides an understanding of the kinds of discourses that are analyzed in the academic context and the reasons for such analysis.

IV. ANALYZING WRITTEN ACADEMIC DISCOURSE.

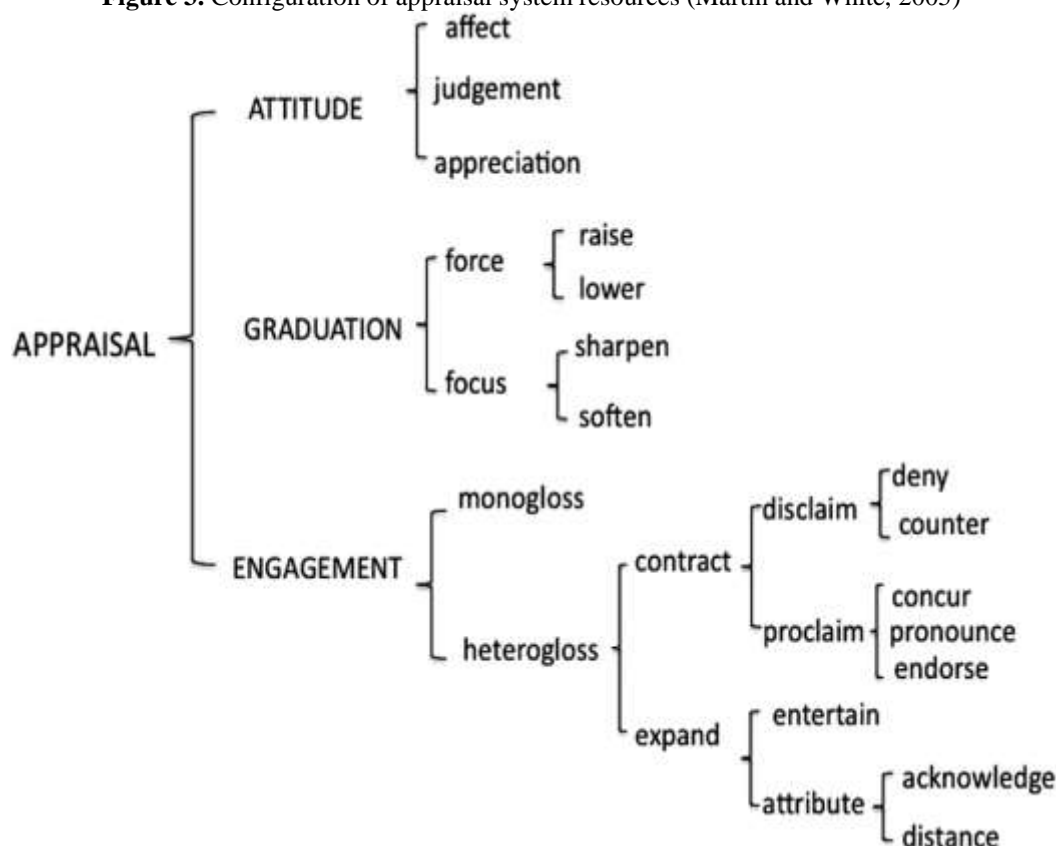
Written academic discourse refers, as Hyland (2009) argues, to ways of thinking and using language, which exist in the academy. Its significance lies in the fact that academic knowledge or disciplinary knowledge is built, disseminated and demonstrated through written text (Economou & Humphrey, 2015). However, written academic discourse does not only perform this role. Hyland (2009) says that it is the means by which social roles and relations are constructed, which create academics and students, and which sustain the universities, the disciplines, the creation of knowledge itself. He argues that individuals use writing to demonstrate their understanding of issues in ways specific to particular social groups, and in doing this they form social realities and personal identities. Therefore, analyzing written academic involves uncovering the linguistic features that are used not only to demonstrate knowledge but also to enact social relations and personal identities. More importantly, it involves relating linguistic features in written discourses to communities' particular ways to conceive realities and knowledge. In fact, it involves uncovering linguistic and discourse patterns associated with valued academic writing (Economou & Humphrey, 2015).

The guiding assumption of the analysis of the linguistic and discourse features in valued academic writing is that these features represent the ways mainstream academic discourses are constructed (Aull & Lancaster, 2014). This means that these features represent the ways expert and successful writers in different disciplinary communities construct written academic discourses. In order to investigate these features, many researchers draw on SFL theory of language to analyze how ideational, interpersonal and textual meanings are realized in those discourses (Lancaster, 2012, 2014; Martinez, 2001, Hewings, 2004; etc.). For instance, Ge, Yang & Zheng (2014) investigate transitivity system in English-medium medical research articles. Since transitivity system is concerned with the description of ideational meaning at the level of lexicogrammar, the objective of their study was to investigate the ways writers construct a stylistically appropriate research articles through selection of lexicogrammatical features to convey their experience of external world of the senses and the internal world of the mind. Other researchers (Hewings, 2004; North, 2005) investigate the use of themes in essays. Themes are initial elements of the clauses. Hewings (2005) say that the choice of the theme is important for the creation of the framework for the interpretation of the rest of the clause and for the creation of coherence within texts. Therefore, the studies by Hewings (2004) & North (2005) analyze the ways students realize textual meanings through the selection of themes to conform to disciplinary conventions of writing essays.

Other researchers investigate interpersonal meaning in academic discourses at the level of lexicogrammar and discourse semantic (Hyland, 2005; Aull & Lancaster, 2014; Lancaster, 2012, 2014, 2016; etc.). Many of these researchers draw on the appraisal framework to investigate the ways academic writers negotiate social relations. The main argument of these researchers is that academic writers use resources from

and within appraisal system (See figure 1) to engage dialogically with others' views and to recruit readers into the discourse. In other words, academic writers use resources from appraisal system to present persuasive and critical reasoned arguments in academic discourses (Economou & Humphrey, 2015). For instance, Lancaster (2014) demonstrates how appraisal analysis of students writing reveals the ways critical reasoning and analytical rigor, among other qualities, are achieved in high-rated essays at discourse semantic level.

Figure 3. Configuration of appraisal system resources (Martin and White, 2005)



To sum up, analyzing written academic discourse involves uncovering linguistic features associated with valued academic text. Those involved in the analysis of academic text draw on SFL theory of language to describe the ways writers create ideational, interpersonal and textual meaning at the level of lexicogrammar and discourse semantic. Aull & Lancaster (2014) say that the objective of the analysis of valued academic discourses is to make the linguistic features in those discourses explicit for L1 and L2 students.

V. CONCLUSION

SFL provides a framework for analyzing written academic discourses. Researchers involved in the analysis of written texts describe the semiotic resources that are employed to make three modes of meaning – ideational, interpersonal and textual at the level of lexicogrammar and discourse semantic. Some of them focus on the resources used to create ideational meaning at the level of lexicogrammar. These researchers draw on SFL transitivity system to describe how ideational meaning is realized in academic texts. Others focus on the resources used to make textual meaning at the level of lexicogrammar and discourse semantic. Many of these researchers draw on SFL description of theme, information structure and cohesion to analyze the ways writers create framework for the interpretation of the text and coherence within academic texts. Others focus on the resources used to make interpersonal meaning. Many of these researchers draw on SFL appraisal system to describe the ways writers enact social relations at the level of lexicogrammar and discourse semantic. All these resources that are used to create ideational, interpersonal and textual meaning are linked to the context of situation and the context of culture. The context of situation and the context of culture are modelled through register and genre theory.

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