

## WHY FUNCTIONS?

*Elizabeth Hallam*

*Head of Programme: Undergraduate support*

*University of Waikato Language Institute*

The functions of language — exactly what the things are that one can do with language — have been an important topic in linguistics since the 1920s and 1930s (Yalden 1987,35). But in terms of what went on in the classroom, there remained a continued emphasis on grammar, and this was accompanied in the post-war decades, by a growth of new methods, such as the American Army Method and the Audio-Lingual and Audio-Visual Methods (Stern 1992,222).

In 1962, Austin's Harvard Lectures, on speech act theory were published (Austin 1962). His ideas were a reaction to the excesses of logical positivism according to which philosophy unless something could be said to be true or false, it was held to be meaningless. It was this impetus that opened up debate about speech acts. Through penetrating studies of ordinary language, Austin was able to show that some sentences can be perfectly sensible, even when not capable of being judged in relation to truth or falsity. Certain utterances (an utterance being defined as a stretch of language by one speaker within a context) are acts in themselves (as opposed to utterances which are statements about something). Examples are 'I promise...' 'I bet...' and 'I pronounce you man and wife.' Austin distinguished initially between these verbal acts ('performatives') and other utterances which can be proved to be true or false ('constatives'). He claimed that an utterance, in addition to meaning whatever it means, performs an action (or more than one) through having a specific (or more than one) performative force.

Austin argued, however, finally, that all utterances (including those which he initially called 'constatives') perform actions (have illocutionary forces). It is these illocutionary forces which have come to be referred to as the speech acts and which have recently been of great interest in second language teaching.

John Searle (1965) attempted to systematize the work of Austin. Questioning the previously held view that knowing the meaning of a word was simply a matter of knowing the rules for its use, he wrote: that 'one disquieting feature of such discussions is that no philosopher, to my knowledge at least, has ever given anything like an adequate formulation of the rules for the use of even one expression' (Searle 1965, 255).

The number of possible speech acts and the shades of meaning that can be conveyed is immense. There may be up to ten thousand performative verbs — and there is no reason to suppose that all illocutionary acts will necessarily be associated with a specific performative verb.

Between 1971 and 1975, a novel and influential approach to language curriculum design was taken by an international group of scholars who met regularly under the auspices of the Council for Cultural Co-operation of the Council of Europe. Their work culminated in the publication of the 'Threshold Level' Syllabuses, in which a threshold level of language ability was described for each of the languages

of Europe in terms of what learners should be able to do with the language. David Wilkins, Professor of Linguistics at Reading University, was an important contributor to the Council of Europe work. In 1976, his Notional Syllabuses was published (Wilkins 1976). This offered a whole new approach for language syllabus design. Wilkins argued that the meaning of an utterance derives from the whole situation in which language is used and not from words or sentences in isolation. According to Stern (1992, 132) he was 'attempting to organise second language curricula on semantic rather than on grammatical principles. In other words, instead of arranging a language course primarily in terms of the noun, the article, verb tenses, agreement of adjectives and the like, Wilkins suggested that basic categories of meaning should constitute the essential framework of the course.' (Stern 1992, 132) Wilkins proposed three sets of organisers:

- a semantico-grammatical categories;
- b categories of modal meaning;
- c categories of communicative function.

Wilkins listed speech acts under (c) – the largest of the categories: the term 'function,' as used in his work and in the Council of Europe documents, generally refers to illocutionary force in the widest sense and, therefore, can be seen to relate indirectly to the work of Austin.

In the wake of Wilkins' work, there developed a concern to make language teaching communicative by focusing on learners' knowledge of the functions of language, and on their ability to select appropriate kinds of language for use in specific situations. Ronald White notes that what was new here was the proposal that syllabuses could take notional/ functional categories as an organising principle.' (White 1988, 75).

Unfortunately, however, the pioneering but clearly provisional work on functions by Wilkins was taken up and trivialised and presented to learners almost as if there were a one-to-one correspondence between form and function. 'In the 1970's, many courses were built around the idea of analysing speech events, breaking them down into speech acts or language functions and then teaching the linguistic forms that were appropriate to realise the function within a given speech event' (Yalden 1987, 37). Syllabuses which aimed to teach various linguistic activities (eg complaining, instructing, requesting) through focusing on particular situations (eg a restaurant, a bank) in which learners might find themselves, mushroomed. One such publication is Leo Jones' Functions of English (Jones 1977). The *Introduction* states that the units in the book are based on real-life situations and cover 'the main language functions and the exercises involve all sorts of people in all sorts of places and talking about all sorts of topics'. Each unit is divided into several sections – Conversation, Presentation, Practice, Communication Activities and Written Work. Topics include:

- Getting people to do things;
- Offering to do something;
- Asking permission;
- Giving reasons;
- Complaining;
- Apologising;
- Forgiving;
- Expressing disappointment.

At the time as the functional approach to syllabus design was becoming known, Grice's work on

conversational implicature was also receiving attention. His work makes it clear that 'function', in the Council of Europe sense, is just one of a whole range of things which would have to be considered in drawing up any theory of language use. In his 1962 William James Lectures, he first propounded his views on conversational implicature: a theory which can clearly be seen to link into the work done previously on speech acts. According to Grice, there are four basic maxims underlying the efficient, co-operative use of language. These maxims – of quality, quantity, relevance and manner – jointly express a general co-operative principle whereby conversational exchanges may be conducted rationally. Yet, for all practical purposes, the work of linguists in areas of pragmatics other than functions (deixis, implicature, reference and so on) have largely been overlooked by language teachers. It was functions they seized upon. So why did this come about? Partly, it was a matter of timing. In Crombie's view 'there can be no reason apart from historical accident for giving privileged status in our syllabuses to illocutionary force' (1990, 14).

Brumfit and Johnson (1979, 117) cite Widdowson's claim that the original motivation for adopting a communicative approach in the early 70s was 'remedial, an attempt to overcome the inadequacies of existing structural syllabuses, material and methods'. Students, especially students in developing countries, who had received several years of formal English teaching, frequently remained 'deficient in the ability to actually use the language and to understand its use in normal communication, whether in spoken or written mode (Brumfit and Johnson 1979, 117).

There have been many criticisms of those who attempted to build courses that depended on teaching language functions as their core. The chief allegation was that they fell into the same error as those who had tried to build courses upon structurally realizable aspects of meaning only. In both cases, the other components of meaning had been thrust aside and, in particular, the textual component had been neglected or ignored (Yalden 1987, 37). Yalden's own suggested design for a 'proportional syllabus' legitimised structural as well as functional components, but varied the proportions as the course progressed.

Stern (1992) quotes Paulston, author of Notional syllabuses revisited: some comments, who criticises the notional syllabus on the grounds that 'one cannot in fact divorce function from form in language; it makes more sense... to organise a syllabus along linguistic forms which can generate infinite meanings and many functions rather than to organise content along a finite list of functions (Stern 1992, 165).

Howatt (1984) is somewhat scathing of the role linguists have played in all of this. He notices an apparent failure of applied linguists to keep more than one variable in play at one time. He observes, for example, that in the 1960s there was a general consensus about what a syllabus should contain and most syllabus discussion was limited to questions of ordering and presentation. There was, however, a 'lively controversy over methods of teaching which was reflected in a number of ambitious research projects into such matters as the difference between traditional and audiolingual approaches and the learning of grammar by 'direct methods and by 'traditional' methods'. Disappointment with the inconclusive outcomes of large-scale research projects and/or scarcity of funds then saw 'the ballast shifted to the other side of the ship, so to speak, with new energy and inventiveness being devoted to the design of syllabuses and the production of classroom materials' (Howatt 1984, 283). On the other hand, it must be noted that language teachers did not challenge linguists in any fundamental way.



They were, in general, insufficiently aware of the theoretical basis of work on speech acts to do so. And there was the matter of expedience. Course writers were encouraged to produce materials with great intrinsic interest and topics which engaged students' attention. The concept of function-based materials setting out a series of exercises in a straightforward, easily accessible manner must have been very seductive. The demands, in terms of preparation and teacher training, appeared minimal: almost any competent native speaker would be able to lead eager students through these materials. A huge and lucrative publishing industry grew up. Students apparently found some of the material interesting and were lead to believe that the functional approach 'worked'. Widdowson says that the stereotype of people in language schools represents them not so much groping as grasping, so that there is a temptation to seek the achievement of short term practical results by the most direct and economical route: 'the national-functional syllabus, like the structural syllabus before it, must have sounded, and must still sound, exceptionally good to some teachers, and the temptation to accept it as a creed and to suspend a critical investigation of the theory in favour of immediate application...must have been, or must still be, very difficult to resist' (Widdowson 1984, 34-5).

Another factor to be considered is the uneasy relationship between classroom teachers and linguists, which persists to this day. As Stern observes that there is 'a difference in purpose and function between the role of linguist and language educator and we must expect to find that the practical needs of language teaching as an applied activity and the theoretical interests of linguists as a science do not always coincide' (Stern 1983, 148). The idea persists that linguists do their research in ivory towers, and/or with very small groups of subjects under ideal conditions, and on this basis proceed to make recommendations. Certainly, during recent years working in a South Auckland multicultural Secondary College, teaching English to unstreamed classes of thirty-six students who had eight or more different mother tongues and levels of motivation varying downward to zero, I noticed that researching linguists were not being seen in person, although they often seemed to give blanket advice from a distance about our programmes. Often linguists are ignorant of the teaching conditions we deal with every day in our schools of basics like the calibre of students, the constraints of the timetable, the physical conditions under which we work. Where recommendations are patently impractical, of course teachers are reluctant to adopt them.

I would like to see linguists and teachers working in partnership to conduct research with real students in real classrooms. I read with envy reports of useful collaboration between American University teachers and those working at the chalk-face. Without Marie Clay's carefully structured process of data collection and analytical evaluation in combination with teacher education, our Reading Recovery scheme would never have gained credence or widespread funding. And yet, unfortunately, a lot of the evaluations teachers are required to do in schools are cursory and there is little evidence that what data is obtained is used to inform any changes in programmes or teaching. (Woodward 193, 13).

Here in New Zealand we remain largely a monolingual society. Many teachers lack a feeling for what might be the difficulties involved in learning a second language. (Lack of knowledge about the grammar of English is also a problem!) One exercise I have found very effective in raising awareness about potential difficulties is to have teachers practise modifying texts for student use. Carefully examining print in this way and trying to look at it from the point of view of the learner can heighten teacher-awareness of morphology, and syntax as well as awareness of pragmatic and discoursal factors.

Blanche recommends that teachers 'become pragmatically' self conscious as teachers'. He says that one of the problems that learners encounter is that they do not 'totally understand a discourse even though they may understand all the words and sentences' (Blanche 1987, 81). According to Blanche, one possible approach to this problem is to help students 'identify the 'presuppositions' or shared information necessary for comprehension and then to teach them to recognise implicit presuppositional information as it is called forth in the discourse'. (1987, 82). Hurley writes of pragmalinguistic failure as 'the inability to understand – or encode appropriately – the illocutionary force of an utterance, due to unfamiliarity with the 'resources' of a target language. (Hurley 1992, 260). The development of pragmatic competence among children is 'both gradual and environmentally based (Blanche 1987, 85). Native speakers intuitively understand socially acquired rules and norms of conversational co-operation. While foreign language students often practice dialogues and role-plays, and engage in interactive activities, second language secondary students who often sit speechless in teacher-fronted, content area classrooms – where teachers have never espoused and are not about to espouse, co-operative learning techniques – interacting solely with same-language peers during breaks and with family members during out-of-school hours, are not so fortunate. Primary schools rely very much on a process approach which largely ignores the voices of children from different linguistic and conceptual backgrounds who are unlikely to 'pick up' adequate pragmatic skills.

Faith in 'buddy systems' can be misplaced where 25% or more of a school population may speak languages other than English and where the New Zealand 'buddies' (and parents) may regard the scheme as having nothing much to offer them scholastically. A euphemistic reliance on 'group-work' can be fraught with problems too, as Lisa Delpit's research shows: 'we [students in this class] can sit around in groups all day talking to each other, and we're never going to learn to write 'standard' English because nobody knows it' (Delpit 1991, 543). There has to be direct and explicit instruction in language conventions and strategies, along with appropriate demonstration (and opportunity for a great deal of practice) if students are ever to learn how to put text together, what signals to listen for and how to maintain a discourse. Since they are teaching in English, all teachers have to recognise and accept that they are teachers of English. More training is needed if teachers are to recognise that much more than awareness of functions is required.

In the 1970s, functional analysis sparked off a fundamental questioning of the linguistic content of language syllabuses. The debate continues to the present day. During the last two decades, the scientific study of language has expanded into various areas to take into account much more 'the social and environmental context of language users'. (Stern 1992, 155). As Stern observes, disciplines which reflect these changes in language study are semantics, discourse analysis, sociolinguistics, the ethnography of communication, functional analysis and pragmatics. However, just what these scientific studies mean for learners and why they are important and how they can be usefully applied in our classrooms remains to be seen. There has, as yet, been little impact from these studies in the New Zealand school system. The challenge to both researchers and teachers is to find ways to work together to represent the new linguistic disciplines in language programmes that will serve second language learners more effectively than previous approaches have done.

## NOTES

- 1 Austin postulated the notion that there are three ways in which saying something is doing something:
  - a) locutionary acts the act of saying something with propositional or contextual meaning,
  - b) illocutionary acts the act performed in saying something and connected with intent,
  - c) perlocutionary acts the effect that arises in a hearer as a result of the illocutionary act.
- 2 Widdowson (1984, 223) gives a delightful example of how one utterance can fulfil a number of functions:

'The door is open' can be an invitation, a complaint, a dismissal, or a request for action (and more).

A The door is open.  
B All right, all right, I'm leaving.

In the above exchange the receiver may have misread the situation. A continuation might be as follows:

- A The door is open.  
B All right, all right, I'm leaving.  
A No I don't want you to leave, you fool; close the door. We don't want this to be a public spectacle.
- 3 Where simplification does NOT mean destroying the language through rewriting the text in unlinked sentences of no more than six words and dispensing with all the interesting adjectives.

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