

**Fundamental Concepts in Sociolinguistics**  
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**Lecture 16**  
**Systemic Function of Language**

Welcome to class. Today we are going to talk about Systemic Functions of Language. If you recall, we had a long discussion on Chomskyan linguistic competence which appeared in his work *Theories of Syntax* in 1965, a very famous work that changed the paradigm and generated a lot of debate and discussions on the nature and characteristics of language, its acquisition process and how we use it.

So a lot of response and reactions came to Chomskyan idea of linguistic competence where Chomsky refers to the grammatical and computational aspect of language in terms of syntactic structures as underlying representation in human mind, and he put major thrust on the competition aspect of it.

He imagines an ideal speaker and hearer situation in a homogeneous speech community. He says that competence is unaffected by irrelevant grammatical factors like shift of attention, interest concentration, and lack of memory. So these are the instances that he associates with the manifestation of these underlying structures like performance.

So this delinking of competence and performance, and the setting of the goal of linguistic theory primarily, will discuss and discover. Like these grammatical structures, we do not put him in a spot for a lot of criticism. One of the very effective and influential responses that he got was from Dell Haymes who merged these two levels as a composite one.


Another very important response was from M. A. K. Halliday. M. A. K. Halliday described himself as a generalist in opposition to Chomskyan generative linguistics, and systemic functional grammar became a very fitting response to Chomskyan idea of generative grammar.

The way Chomsky looks at language acquisition, he invokes nativism and innateness: the idea of language acquisition device, universal grammar, a set of universal principles and parameters. This response by M. A. K. Halliday on systemic functions of language is a reply to the


Chomskyan idea of grammatical competence where he talks about a child acquiring these structures and rules without any instruction and conscious effort.

So he does not talk about the performance or use of it, but he talks about the acquisition of these underlying grammatical structures which we call as universal grammar. It is at the disposal of the child, and then later on setting of the parameters. So to this proposal by Chomsky, we have a fitting reply from M. A. K. Halliday. Today we are going to talk about systemic functions of language.

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- In his volume on *Language in society*, Halliday underlines the primary function of language to be the "acts of meaning".
- Halliday argues for a deep connection between language and social structure.
- Halliday argues that language does not exist merely to reflect social structure.




The work of M. A. K. Halliday has been compiled in 10 volumes and the last volume, the 10th volume is called *Language in Society*. In that volume Halliday underlines the primary function of language to be acts of meaning. So he talks about language as a semiotic process, but not in terms of science, but in terms of discovering meaning. So Halliday argues for a deep connection between language and social structure. He considers language to be a social reality and he draws a parallel between language structure and social structure. They are interdependent.

Halliday argues that language does not exist merely to reflect social structure, but it is social structures embedded in language. So what we see is the departure from the Chomskyan position here. Chomsky talks about an idealised speaker here, a situation in a homogeneous speech community where the tacit knowledge about language and underlying grammatical structures are available to all the speakers and users of language without any variation.

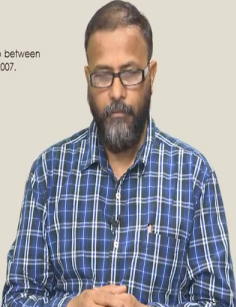
And he talks about linguistic competence, which refers to the computational aspect of language. But here what you see, Halliday argues that language does not exist merely to reflect and represent social structures, but they are interdependent and embedded to each other. So that is a departure he is making.

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° "... if we say that linguistic structure "reflects" social structure, we are really assigning to language a role that is too passive ... Rather we should say that linguistic structure is the realization of social structure, actively symbolizing it in a process of mutual creativity. Because it stands as a metaphor for society, language has the property of not only transmitting the social order but also maintaining and potentially modifying it. (This is undoubtedly the explanation of the violent attitudes that under certain social conditions come to be held by one group towards the speech of others.)"


Halliday, M.A.K. 1978. "An Interpretation of the functional relationship between language and social structure", 3-42, Vol. 10 of the Collected Works, 2007.



And if I may quote Halliday “If you say that linguistic structures reflect social structure, we are really assigning to language a role that is too passive, rather we should say that linguistic structure is the realisation of social structure actively symbolising it in a process of mutual creativity. Because it stands as a metaphor for society. Language has the property of not only transmitting the social order, but also maintaining and potentially modifying it. This is undoubtedly the explanation of the violent attitudes that under certain social conditions come to be held by one group toward the speech of others.”


So he is looking at language structures as the realisation of and representation of social structure. So language structures are not delinked from social structure. So we do not merely acquire structures, but we also acquire the context and the socio-cultural setting and the ability to derive meaning out of it. So it is all about meaning making. It is not about a static form of language which is acquired in terms of grammatical rules and structures as Chomsky proposes, but an act of deriving meaning and creating meaning out of it. So this is the position of Halliday.

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- On children's language development, Halliday evaluates the term "acquisition", in which language is considered to be a static product which the child acquires when sufficient exposure to natural language enables "parameter setting".
- Halliday argues that the child develops a "meaning potential".
- Learning language is *Learning how to mean*.

◦ Halliday, M.A.K. 1975. *Learning How to Mean*. London: Edward Arnold.



So on children's language development, Halliday evaluates the term acquisition in which language is considered to be a static product that the child acquires when sufficient exposure to natural language enables parameter setting. Now look at the background of this response. If you recall the first language acquisition by a human child in the Chomskyan proposal that we call generative grammar, we see that Chomsky proposes language to be tacitly, knowledge of language to be tacitly present at the time of birth of a child.

So a child is born with a device called language acquisition device. This is what Chomskyan position is. So this language acquisition device is an inbuilt mechanism, apparatus, which allows a human child to learn any language. And this language acquisition device contains universal grammar, a set of universal principles of language, and this is triggered by primary linguistic data available to the child in the environment.

Chomsky argues that data is fuzzy and incomplete. Still the learning of a child is perfectly fine and the child acquires perfectly fine grammar and develops a linguistic system. The exposure to the data or the input the data input to the child allows the child to set parameters. So basically child is not learning new rules where child is setting, child is labelling the linguistic units, this is what Chomsky says, and this aesthetic word in Halliday's proposal refers to that idea.

So what does he say about children's language development? Halliday evaluated the term acquisition: how does a child acquire language? What do we mean by this idea called acquisition


of language in which language is considered to be a static product which the child acquires when sufficient exposure to natural language enables parameter setting.

So he examines this idea of acquisition and refutes the claim of Chomskyan proposal of language being a static grammatical structure, an underlying grammatical structure present at that, and an abstract level and it needs to trigger from the environment as an input. However, not even the input is sufficient, once it is triggered, learning takes place automatically.


The language acquisition takes place automatically and the child becomes an autonomous learner, and the environment and exposure to data allows the child to set the parameters. Halliday argues that the child develops a meaning potential. A child develops some meaning potential. So it is not merely a structure and set of rules that the child formulates in his or her acquisition process.

The child actually develops a meaning potential, the ability and the act of creating meaning. So learning a language is not merely learning structures. Learning a language means learning how to mean, how to derive meaning. So form and the function, both are must as a composite unit. And a child learns not merely a structure but also the ability to make sense out of it. This is what is systemic functional grammar, and Halliday refers to it as functions of language.

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- Halliday (1975) identifies seven functions of language for children in their early formative years.
- Children are motivated to develop language because it serves certain purposes or functions for them.
- The first four functions help the child to satisfy physical, emotional and social needs. Halliday calls them instrumental, regulatory, interactional, and personal functions.
- The next three functions are heuristic, imaginative, and representational, all helping the child to come to terms with his or her environment.



So in 1975, Halliday identified seven functions of language for children in their early formative years. We will go to all these seven functions in a short while. So as a response to the

Chomskyan acquisition, he evaluates his acquisition. The term acquisition tries to unravel the layers of this process by saying that a child not merely acquires his structure, but also the act of meaning, the ability to derive meaning and make sense out of it.

So he identifies seven functions a child acquires in early childhood. When we say acquisition, the seven functions of language are acquired by the child. Children are motivated to develop language because it serves certain purposes or functions for them. The first four functions that Halliday talks about is to satisfy physical, emotional, and social needs.

So learning is not in that abstraction that Chomsky refers to in terms of structure, but also the motive and the need. So this learning or acquisition is need driven, driven by the motive, social needs and motives. So Halliday calls them instrumental, regularity, interactional, and personal functions.

So out of seven, the first four are to satisfy physical, emotional, and social needs. And that is why these four functions that he names and discusses are instrumental, regularity, interactional, and personal. Then the next three functions are heuristic, imaginative, and representational, all helping the child to come to terms with his or her environment. So the total seven functions that the child acquires are physical, emotional and social needs, and the last three functions like heuristic, imaginative and representational allow the child to relate to the external environment.

So unless the child has a certain motive and the child makes some meaning out of this entire learning and acquisition process, language is not learned merely in terms of abstract grammatical structure that Chomsky talks about. So instead of delinking these two levels, linguistic competence and linguistic performance, Halliday's proposal merges the two levels and treats acquisition of language as a converging point of these two levels where you have grammatical structure, a structure and function. So a child acquires language in terms of acquiring both converging and emerging as a composite system called language. This is what Halliday's proposal is.

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Instrumental

Regulatory

Interactional

Personal Functions

Heuristic

Imaginative


Representational

Halliday, M.A.K. 1975. *Learning How to Mean*. London: Edward Arnold.

So Halliday has seven functions of language. He talks about instrumental, regulatory, interactional, personal, heuristic, imaginative, and representational functions. So out of the seven; first four, instrumental, regularity, interactional and personal functions, they represent the child's emotional, physical, and social needs.

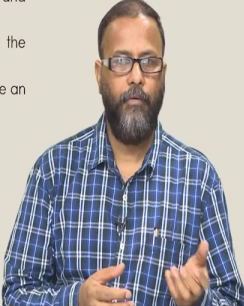
And the last three; heuristic, imaginative and representational allows the child to relate to the environment. So together with these seven functions, a child acquires a language. And these seven functions allow a child to make sense of what he or she is acquiring and relating to the environment. So this is the departure that he makes from Chomsky, where the acquisition combines the grammatical structures and the seven functions.

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## Learning How to Mean

- **Instrumental:** This is when the child uses language to express their needs.
- **Regulatory:** This is where language is used to tell others what to do.
- **Interactional:** Here language is used to make contact with others and form relationships.
- **Personal:** This is the use of language to express feelings, opinions, and individual identity.
- **Heuristic:** This is when language is used to gain knowledge about the environment.
- **Imaginative:** Here language is used to tell stories and jokes, and to create an imaginary environment.
- **Representational:** The use of language to convey facts and information.



Let us go to each of these functions. What do they mean? So learning how to mean, a child learns structure and also learns how to mean. What do you mean by that? Structure, what is the relevance of that structure, significance of that structure, how to use that structure in an appropriate socio-cultural context?

So instrumental this is when a child uses language to express needs. Maybe a child is hungry, and the child needs something. So the basic function of the language is for a child to demand needs, get the needs fulfilled. All kinds of needs; emotional needs, social needs, personal needs. This is where a child starts instructing and regulating things around him or her. Go there, come here, sit down. So these kinds of things.

Then interactional, where the child interacts and develops interpersonal relationships with people around. So here language is used to make contact with others and form relationships with mother, father, and with other family members. So a child starts relating to people and interacting. Then personal, and what is that? This is the use of language to express feelings, opinions, and individual identity.

So a child expresses emotions, anger, happiness and the child starts developing self-understanding. It helps children develop their identity; who I am, who am I. So the child starts identifying and expressing opinion, feelings, emotions, and sharing. That is personal. Then you restrict when the child starts getting information about the environment around. Children



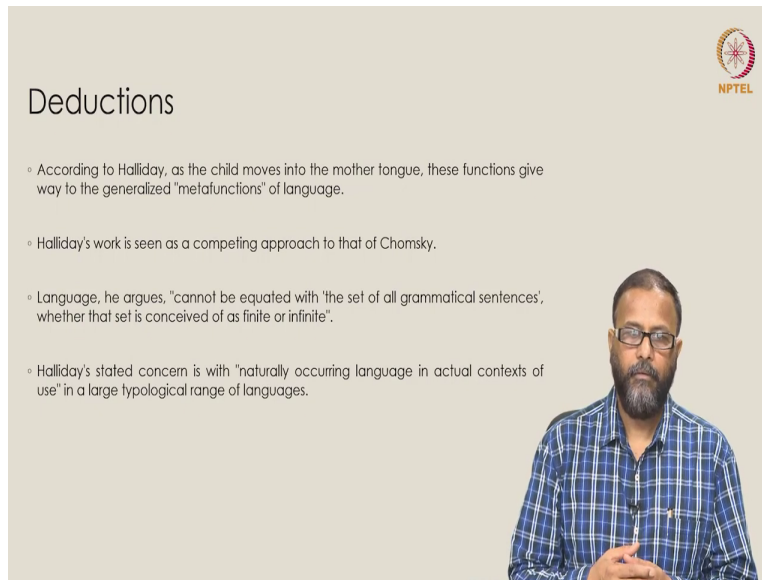
detect items, identifying things relating to the environment. Imaginative is where the child starts creating things, creating stories, understanding stories, creating experiences, and understanding experiences, sharing, jokes, and all sorts of extended usage of language.

And finally, the presentation. What does it mean? The use of language to convey facts and information. So the child understands how language expresses the objective reality around him or her. So if you look at these seven functions, the first four are child-centric where a child expresses physical, emotional and social needs.

It starts with the most basic function, that is, instrumentality of language in expressing the fundamental basic needs of a child. Then extending it to irregularity where a child starts instructing and sharing with people around and using deictic elements and other things to express his or her emotion; interactional where interpersonal connections are made and children start sharing with people around making meaning out of it. Then personal, where the child starts thinking about certain things around him or her forming opinion and the individuality, sense of individuality, preferences, liking or disliking.

So all these develop and the child starts expressing all these. The fourth function of language is heuristic that allows a child to relate to the external environment around him. He starts exploring information, getting information and imagination, where the child starts creativity in language, jokes, stories, and other things. Other experiences the child shares with the people around him or her, and the very extended function called representational where the child uses the language to convey facts and information a child seeks and gets from the environment. So this is how Halliday expresses and argues for seven crucial functions. A child learns along with grammatical structures, while acquiring language.

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The slide is titled "Deductions" and features the NPTEL logo in the top right corner. It contains a list of four bullet points. In the bottom right corner, there is a video inset showing a man with a beard and glasses, wearing a blue and white checkered shirt, speaking.

## Deductions

- According to Halliday, as the child moves into the mother tongue, these functions give way to the generalized "metafunctions" of language.
- Halliday's work is seen as a competing approach to that of Chomsky.
- Language, he argues, "cannot be equated with 'the set of all grammatical sentences', whether that set is conceived of as finite or infinite".
- Halliday's stated concern is with "naturally occurring language in actual contexts of use" in a large typological range of languages.

So what can we deduct out of it? So according to Halliday, as the child moves into the mother tongue, these functions give way to generalise Meta functions of language. Halliday's work is seen as a competing approach to that of Chomsky. Chomsky's genetic proposal, language, he argues, cannot be equated with the set of all grammatical sentences, whether that set is conceived as finite or non-finite or infinite, refer to the Chomsky proposal.

Halliday has stated concerns with naturally occurring language in actual contexts of use in the last typological range of languages. So what we see after looking at systemic functions of language as proposed by Halliday is the proposal in generative linguistics and specifically the Chomskyan enterprise where competence and performance are delinked and Chomsky says that the primary goal of linguistic theories is to explain this underlying abstract structure.

And he places thrust on computational aspect of mind and this is what he means by knowledge of language which assumes an ideal speaker in a homogeneous speech community where competence is unaffected by observable and perceptible restrictions like lack of memory, like shifting an attention, and interest like occupied mind and fatigue.

So all other factors are external to this variety of language that Chomsky is talking about. So he is talking about the I language or internalised language which is unaffected by these grammatical constraints or linguistic concerns. So he delinks competence from performance, but here in this proposal in systemic functions of language, Halliday argues that the child not only acquires these

grammatical structures, but also the functions associated with them. And the child learns and acquires all these rules and grammatical structures as an instrument for making meaning in socio cultural settings and contexts.

So Halliday's work, the systemic functional grammar is seen as a response to Chomskyan generative grammar. And the terms like competence, linguistic competence, the terms like acquisition, the terms like finite or non-finite set of rules, all these terms are evaluated, examined, and responded in Halliday systemic functional grammar.

So he draws a parallel and opposition to the Chomskyan proposal. Halliday's seven functions of language complements the Chomskyan idea of acquisition and Halliday rejects the delinking of competence and performance. He looks at it as a composite act of meaning. So a child learns not only structures, a child learns the ability to make sense of what he learns and what structures he learns. So this is it for now. In the next section, we will come back with a very effective and far-fetching consequential response to the Chomskyan proposal by Dell Hymes. Thank you very much for now.