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# THE FUNCTIONAL APPROACH IN GERMAN LINGUISTICS

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***Abstract:*** *The last years have seen declining interest in the content-oriented approach, although the semantics revival in the early seventies has brought content-oriented concepts such as the word field back into focus. The German linguistic theories which are the subject of this paper have all gained ground at the expense of content-oriented linguistics, especially amongst students. The strong linguistic tradition and the place of the linguist in society may explain some of the characteristics of the theories developed but it is the structure and the function of the German language which are the prime factors in this context. For this reason we have, in this paper, examined the problem of German functional grammar not so much as an aim in itself, but mainly as a further illustration of this approach.*

***Key words:*** *functional grammar, form-meaning relation, structural linguistics, communication, communicative-effect, macro-functions, micro-functions.*

## 1. General remarks on functional grammar

### 1.1. *Karl Bühler's use of the term function*

In this paper, we shall present a linguistic theory which views language in a quite different way from *inhaltbezogene Grammatik*. This becomes apparent if one considers how these linguists approach language. Within a functional model, a sentence like

[1] *Würdest du bitte das Buch aufschlagen?*

would be analyzed in the light of the fact that it is the speaker's aim to direct the action of the interlocutor. If we take vocatives, such as Berta, it is considered important that they are used to address somebody. Functional grammar looks at sentences in respect of their main purpose, or function, and our example could be said to function as appeals to somebody else. This is, of course, necessary if any communication is to take place.

But if sentence [1] expressed only this appeal, communication could hardly be successful as the hearer would not be able to tell what was expected of him, unless the utterance was accompanied by certain paralinguistic features. If

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somebody said Berta and made some gestures, she might also know that she is supposed to open the book. And indeed, the utterance goes further than addressing the interlocutor, it contains a number of references to the real world, *das Buch*, for example, referring to a book in the room the speakers are in, *aufschlagen* to a process etc. It follows from this that another important function of language is to name things and describe processes in the outer world, and also to express certain concepts or ideas present in the speaker's mind. This function is particularly prominent in certain types of statements, especially descriptions and definitions:

[2] *In den Alpen gibt es viele hohe Felsen.*

[3] *Unter einem Morphem versteht man die kleinste bedeutungstragende Einheit der Sprache.*

A third function of language will have to be introduced if we compare the following sentences:

[1] *Würdest du bitte das Buch aufschlagen?*

[4] *Würde es Ihnen etwas ausmachen, das Buch zu öffnen?*

[5] *Schlag' doch endlich das Buch auf!*

There is no essential difference in the basic meaning, or purpose, of these sentences-in each case somebody wants a book to be opened-but [1] is a polite request, which (because of the *du*) reflects some kind of familiarity between speaker and hearer, whereas [4] could be regarded as being extremely formal; [5], on the other hand, reveals a rather impatient and demanding attitude on the part of the speaker.

Stylistic variations like these reveal some aspects of the situation in which the utterance is made and tell us something about the relationship between speaker and hearer, but they also convey the mood of the speaker and his attitude towards what he is saying. Language also reveals something of the social status of the speaker. The expression of the speaker's state of mind could be regarded as a further function of utterances.

Similar consideration led K. Bühler (1965:25-33) to distinguish three basic functions of linguistic signs (*Sprachzeichen*): In this view, they fulfil

(i) A representational function (*Darstellungs- oder Symbolfunktion*) in that they refer to objects and facts of the real world

(ii) A conative function (*Appell- oder Signalfunktion*) in that they appeal to the hearer and determine his behaviour

(iii) An expressive function (*Ausdrucks - oder Symptomfunktion*) in that they express the inner state of the speaker.

Halliday (1970:141) himself has suggested a model with a large number of functions, which are subsumed under the heading of ideational, interpersonal and textual functions.

It is obvious that these functions never appear alone in an utterance although one function can be more prominent than the other, as is the case with the conative function in vocatives like *Berta* or with the representational function in examples [2] and [3]. But even there the other functions are also present: the three functions usually appear in combination with each other but one of them is found to be predominant.

This view of the three functions of the linguistic sign enabled Bühler (1965:28) to draw the following diagram which he called *Organonmodell*, to show its relation to thee non-linguistic components, namely the speaker and the hearer as well as objects and facts of the real world.

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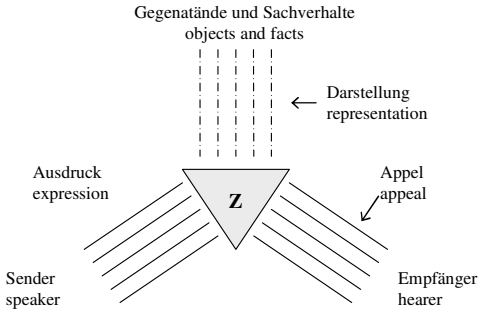


1.2. *Further developments since Bühler*

These ideas were developed by Bühler in his *Sprachtheorie* of 1934, but it was not until the late fifties that attempts were made to consider language mainly in terms of its functions. This revival of interest in the functional approach in Germany can perhaps be ascribed to a widespread belief at that time that the study of grammar was in a state of crisis. The two schools of linguistics which had set out to overcome the well-known inadequacies of traditional grammar, namely the purely structuralist school and the followers of the early *inhaltbezogene Grammatik*, were not considered to have provided generally satisfying results. The main points of criticism were: with respect to structural linguistics that it did not take account of meaning and with respect to the *inhaltsbezogene Grammatik* that language is a means of communication, not an autonomous force. The need for new developments in linguistics became particularly apparent in teaching of grammar, where pre-war grammar books, reintroduced after 1960, were still being used.

Whilst some linguists, especially content-oriented grammarians, tried to elaborate the models they were using, others saw the necessity of taking a completely different view of language. Making function the central issue of a grammar, so they hoped, would help scholars to see linguistic phenomena in a light and lead to a theory which could also provide the basis for new methods in German mother-tongue teaching.

In East Germany, one of these theories, the model of functional grammar developed by W. Schmidt, has since achieved considerable importance: W. Schmidt's *Grundfragen der deutschen Grammatik* (1965) has been given the status of an official school book in the former German Democratic Republic. For this reason, we will concentrate on Schmidt's work and related approaches in this section. It is obvious, however, that the term function has not only been used by those linguists whose work we shall discuss as being representative of functional grammar. The West German linguist Hamann presented his view of functional grammar. In his model the linguistic form is seen as a function of the content. This approach is not to be confused with the American type of functional grammar, whose aim is language teaching for practical purposes, based on the view that language has certain functions in everyday life. We also wish to point out that in Germany this term is often used to characterize a school of linguistics which treats function in the mathematical or logical sense and that their work will also be excluded from the following discussion.

## 2. Macro-functions of language and micro-functions of linguistic elements

### 2.1. Communicative effect

One of the basic questions functional grammarians were concerned with in the early sixties was how the process of communication could be described. If a speaker wants to achieve a certain purpose, for example if he wants to

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direct somebody's behaviour, he has to use a certain *medium* (code), a medium in which in the case of language is the spoken (or written) *form* (form) of an utterance ,such as

[1] *Würdest du bitte das Buch aufschlagen?*

or

[6] *Wären Sie so nett, mit dem Rauchen aufzuhören?*

Communication could be considered successful if the person addressed acted accordingly, i.e. opened the book or stopped smoking. Maas (1972) has coined the term *kommunikativer Effekt* (communicative effect) for this, a term which is intended to designate any response a form could produce, such as arousing certain emotions, suggesting thoughts or concepts, provoking verbal or non-verbal actions. Maas then introduces *Funktion* (function) and defines it as '*die beabsichtigte (aus Erfahrung zu erwartende) und normalerweise ezielte kommunikative Leistung (Effekt)*', i.e. the communicative effect to be achieved by a certain form. Maas's *kommunikativer Effekt* seems to subsume Austin's effect (1962) and consequence, referring, respectively, to illocutionary and perlocutionary acts. By effect Austin understands communicating the intended sense of an utterance to an interlocutor; what the interlocutor then does as a result of this, Austin (1962:115-119) terms "consequence".

## 2.2. The distinction between meaning and function

So far, we have said that if a speaker wants to achieve a certain communicative effect, he has to use a linguistic form. But communication still could not take place if the speaker and the hearer did not associate the same ideas with that particular form, i.e. if the form did not have a common meaning. We have not yet considered meaning, but it now becomes necessary to draw a clearer distinction between meaning and function.

The two can easily be distinguished from each other by regarding form and meaning as essential components of the linguistic sign, whereas function is not a linguistic but an extra linguistic value. This is the way in which Schmidt introduces these terms in his 1969 model, where he adopts de Saussure's 'classic' dichotomy of *FORM* (*signifiant*) and *MEANING* (*signifié*) to characterize the linguistic sign: the term form embraces all linguistic phenomena which serve to produce communicative effects and meaning is an abstracted property closely connected to the form in the consciousness of all members of the speech community.

Schmidt (1969:142) illustrates this point: "*Wir verstehen unter Bedeutung die abstrahierende, die invarianten Bestandteile des Erkenntnisprozesses umfassende Widerspiegelung eines Gegenstandes, einer Erscheinung oder einer Beziehung der objektiven Realität im Bewusstsein der Angehörigen einer Sprachgemeinschaft, die traditionell mit der Form zu der strukturellen Einheit des sprachlichen Zeichens verbunden ist*."

Function, the intended (and in most cases achieved) response by the hearer-the communicative effect-presupposes the meaning of linguistic elements, and is an extra linguistic phenomenon in so far it is not regarded as part of the linguistic sign; it is a property of the fixed combination of form and meaning.

Taking our example [1], we can use this terminology and distinguish between the form of the utterance, which is the

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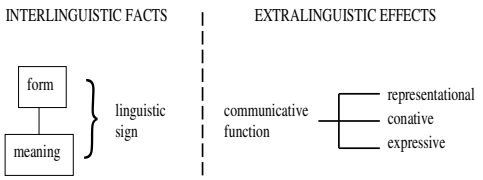
phonetic representation of *Würdest du bitte das Buch aufmachen*? and the meaning of this utterance, which can be understood by all speakers of German. In a certain situation, the function of an utterance like [1] would be that the speaker makes the hearer understand that he wants the book to be opened, i.e. that he transfers this meaning to him.

This is not much more than saying that the function of the utterance is communication and indeed W. Schmidt (1969:149) talks of a *kommunikative Funktion* (communicative function) of the system of language as a whole, which he characterizes as follows: '*Die Funktion des sprachlichen Systems ist es, der Gesellschaft als Mittel der Verständigung und des Gedankenaustausches zu dienen*.' (The function of the language system is to serve society as a means of communication and for the exchange of ideas.)

This communicative function is determined by linguistic and extra linguistic factors, namely, on the one hand, by the meaning of the linguistic signs (semantische Bedingtheit) and the different structural relations holding between them (strukturelle Bedingtheit) and, on the other hand, by the sociological and psychological aspects of the relation between the linguistic signs and the members of the speech community (*pragmatische Bedingtheit*). Schmidt (1969:143) rejects the introduction of a cognitive function as this is already covered by the definition of the linguistic sign as a unit of form and meaning and justifies his view.

The general function of language-to serve communication-can be divided into several sub-functions of linguistic signs (*sprachliche Zeichen*), namely the representational, the conative and expressive. These, too, are extra linguistic functions and, as in Bühler's model of communication, they only appear in combination with each other. It is important to note that in W. Schmidt's 1969 version function is used to refer to a clearly extra linguistic value, namely the communicative effect, whereas form and meaning are intra-linguistic properties.

This we can illustrate in the following way:




Form and meaning here have to be read as form structure (or phonetic structure) and meaning structure, as with utterances etc the communicative function is fulfilled by a chain of linguistic elements.

### 2.3. Extension of the term function

Communicative function has been defined as extralinguistic effect to be achieved by a linguistic sign. The question to be considered in this section is whether all linguistic signs are able to carry function. The communicative function of our example

[1] *Würdest du bitte das Buch aufschlagen?*

is beyond doubt, but would a word like Buch alone also fulfill this function? Certainly not, as if somebody just said Buch his interlocutor would hardly be able to tell what the speaker's intention was; in other words, no communicative effect would be achieved. In W. Schmidt's (1969:522) opinion, communicative functions cannot be

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attributed to linguistic signs below the level of sentence: '*Sie allein lösen noch keinen Verständigungseffekt im Sinne der gesellschaftlichen Normen aus*.' (They do not, on their own, produce a communicative effect in the sense of social norms.)

On the other hand, it might be argued that in this particular sentence, *Buch* has a function in that it expresses a certain meaning and so helps to create the meaning of the complete sentence, which again, is necessary for the communicative effect of the utterance. This is quite a different sort of function. In order to avoid any terminological confusion, we introduce our own distinction between *micro-function*, to refer to the function of a linguistic element in the creation of more complex linguistic units, and *macro-function*, used to characterize Schmidt's communicative function (and its three subfunctions), because these are functions of utterances in an extra linguistic sense. Whereas Schmidt uses (*kommunikative*) *Funktion* only to refer to macro-functions, the use of the term of the function to refer to both types of functions we have distinguished can be found in *Der deutsche Sprachbau* by W. Admoni (1970:4-7).

2.4. *Micro-functions*

Micro-functions are fulfilled by words and morphemes, and indeed both by lexical and grammar morphemes, a distinction which Admoni adopts from traditional grammar. The function of lexical morpheme is to express meaning, whereas grammatical morphemes can have different functions, as the following examples may illustrate:

[7] *Berta hat, obwohl es ihr selbst schon fast zu langweilig war, dem Linguisten zuliebe doch das Buch aufgemacht*.

According to Admoni (1970:4) grammatical morphemes fulfil two functions:

(i) A semantic function in that they express a generalized meaning content (*abstrahierten Bedeutungsgehalt*): for example the notion of 'beneficiary' is expressed by the dative (*dem Linguisten*) and the time relation is made clear by the tense.
(ii) A structural function: the discontinuous morpheme of the present perfect tense (*hat* + participle *aufgemacht*) holds the whole sentence together.

## 3. The tasks of a function grammar

Our outline of the theories of Schmidt and Admoni has shown that the term function can be used either in the sense of what we have called micro-functions, namely the function of a linguistic element within a structure, or to denote macro-functions, i.e. the extra linguistic functions of the language system as a whole. The use of function in the first sense is quite common in linguistics and investigation of both micro- and macro-functions has not only been undertaken by W. Schmidt and Admoni, indeed it was the Prague School which gave considerable impetus to the functional approach towards language.

When discussing 'the achievements and merits of the Early Prague School', J. Vackek (1972: 12-14) refers to 'the most essential of all (which is) … the emphasis put on the function performed by the language in the given speech community …. This approach visualizes language as a tool performing a number of essential functions or tasks in the

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community using it. This most outstanding (and most obvious) among these tasks is obviously the communicative function, serving the needs and wants of the mutual understanding of individual members of the given language community.'

Function is here used in a sense similar to that used by W. Schmidt and the early Prague linguists also certainly represented an attitude to linguistics quite different from the rigorously distributional approach of Bloomfielddian structuralism. This understanding of linguistics as a science within the orbit of the social sciences is still strong among the younger generation of Czech linguists and in the more recent work of Halliday and his co-workers. Like the early Prague linguists, Halliday has used Bühler's model as a basis for the differentiation of the functions (macro-functions) of speech utterances. This link with the social sciences is revealed by Halliday's (1973: 23) fundamental concern: 'is the social functioning of language reflected in linguistic structure- that is, in the internal organization of language as a system?'

Following up Halliday's question means applying the knowledge of the macro-functions of language to the analyses of linguistic structure with respect to the context of situation. This indeed seems to be the most important task of functional grammar, but it must be said that the work of W. Schmidt and Admoni have contributed very little to the discussion. Schmidt's theoretical considerations in his *Grundfragen der deutschen Grammatik* stand quite apart from his actual treatment of grammatical problem, which is not fundamentally different from the work done by other grammarians, for example Brinkmann or Admoni.

Admoni who demands a polydimensional approach to language, is aware of the necessity of considering extra linguistic factors in the description of linguistic structure. '*Die kommunikative Funktion der Rede verlangt, dass Klarheit und Gliederung des Satzaufbaus sich mit Biegsamkeit und beträchtlicher Beweglichkeit verbinden*.' ('The communicative function of discourse requires that the clarity and the structuring of the sentence be contrived with flexibility and considerable mobility.') At various points in his grammar, Admoni attempts to integrate the influence of these extra linguistic factors without having demonstrated in what way the structure of an utterance is determined by its discourse function.

## 4. Concluding remarks

It must be admitted that so far no grammar has been written which was consistently applied the principles of the functional approach to the description of a language. Nevertheless, the theoretical ground for such a grammar has been prepared: its task would be to show the function of an utterance and the context of situation in which it is used determine the structure of that utterance, in other words, to explain why people say what they say in the form in which they say it. The work of W. Schmidt and Admoni, and perhaps even more so, the work of Halliday, have made it clear that such a functional theory of language falls within the scope both of a theory of meaning and of a theory of sociolinguistics.

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