

HOW DO PEOPLE USE LANGUAGE?

As soon as we ask functional questions such as "how do people use language?" (i.e. "what do people *do* with language?"), we realize we have to look at real examples of language in use. Intuition does not provide a sufficiently reliable source of data for doing functional linguistics. Thus, system-icists are interested in the authentic speech and writing of people interacting in naturally occurring social contexts. We are interested, for example, in language events such as the following.

Text 1.1

1. A baby who won't stop crying can drive anyone to despair. 2. You feed him, you change him, you nurse him, you try to settle him, but the minute you put him down he starts to howl. 3. Why?

4. The most common reason baby cries is hunger. 5. Even if he was just recently fed he might still be adapting to the pattern of sucking until his tummy is full and feeling satisfied until it empties again. 6. When he was in the womb nourishment came automatically and constantly. 7. Offer food first; if he turns away from the nipple or teat you can assume it's something else. 8. It happens that babies go through grumpy, miserable stages when they just want to tell everyone how unhappy they feel. 9. Perhaps his digestion feels uncomfortable or his limbs are twitching.

10. If you can't find any specific source of discomfort such as a wet nappy or strong light in his eyes, he could just be having a grizzle. 11. Perhaps he's just lonely. 12. During the day, a baby sling helps you to deal with your chores and keep baby happy. 13. At night when you want to sleep you will need to take action to relax and settle him. 14. Rocking helps, but if your baby is in the mood to cry you will probably find he'll start up again when you put him back in the cot. 15. Wrapping baby up snugly helps to make him feel secure and stops him from jerking about which can unsettle him. 16. Outside stimulation is cut down and he will lose tension. 17. Gentle noise might soothe him off to sleep – a radio played softly, a recording of a heartbeat, traffic noise – even the noise of the washing machine is effective!

18. Some parents use dummies – it's up to you – and you might find your baby settles sucking a dummy. 19. 'Sucky' babies might be able to find their thumbs and fists to have a good suck. 20. Remember that babies get bored so when he is having a real grizzle this could be the reason. 21. Is his cot an interesting place to be? 22. Coloured posters and mobiles give him something to watch. 23. You could maybe tire him out by taking him for a walk ... or a ride in the car – not always practical in the middle of the night. 24. A change of scene and some fresh air will often work wonders – even a walk around the garden may be enough. 25. As baby gets older he will be more able to communicate his feelings and you will be better at judging the problem. 26. Although you might be at your wit's end, remember that crying is communication with you, his parents. 27. And you are the most important people in your baby's life.

THE TEXT HAS A PURPOSE

↳ 26 sentences

↳ A COMPLETE LINGUISTIC INTERACTION

SINGLE SENTENCES DO NOT DESCRIBE COMMUNICATIVE BEHAVIOUR

Text 1.2

1. The compelling sound of an infant's cry makes it an effective distress signal and appropriate to the human infant's prolonged dependence on a caregiver. 2. However, cries are discomfoting and may be alarming to parents, many of whom find it very difficult to listen to their infant's crying for even short periods of time. 3. Many reasons for crying are obvious, like hunger and discomfort due to heat, cold, illness, and lying position. 4. These reasons, however, account for a relatively small percentage of infant crying and are usually recognised quickly and alleviated. 5. In the absence of a discernible reason for the behaviour, crying often stops when the infant is held. 6. In most infants, there are frequent episodes of crying with no apparent cause, and holding or other soothing techniques seem ineffective. 7. Infants cry and fuss for a mean of $1\frac{3}{4}$ hr/day at age 2 wk, $2\frac{3}{4}$ hr/day at age 6 wk, and 1 hr/day at 12 wk.

8. Counselling about normal crying may relieve guilt and diminish concerns, but for some the distress caused by the crying cannot be suppressed by logical reasoning. 9. For these parents, respite from exposure to the crying may be necessary to allow them to cope appropriately with their own distress. 10. Without relief, fatigue and tension may result in inappropriate parental responses such as leaving the infant in the house alone or abusing the infant.

As you read this text through, you will no doubt have realized that in some ways it is very like Text 1.1, and yet in other ways it is very different. The two texts share a focus on crying babies and what can be done about them, and yet each approaches the topic in ways that indicate that they are intended for different audiences, and would be found in different places. In comparing those two texts with Text 1.3, once again about crying babies, you might try to suggest the likely sources of each text, and consider what aspects of the texts are providing you with clues.

Text 1.3

(the symbol == indicates overlap; ... indicates pause; words in capitals show emphasis)

- S 1. Did your kids used to cry a lot? 2. When they were little?
C 3. Yea
S 4. Well == what did you do?
C 5. == still do
S 6. Yea? [laughs]
C 7. Oh pretty tedious at times yea. 8. There were all sorts of techniques == Leonard Cohen
S 9. == Like what [laughs] 10. Yea I used to use ... 11. What's that American guy that did "Georgia on your mind"?
C 12. Oh yea
S 13. == Jim - James Taylor
C 14. == James Taylor
S 15. Yea yea. 16. He was pretty good
C 17. Yea. 18. No Leonard Cohen's good cause its just so monotonous
S [laughs]
C 19. And there's only four chords. 20. And ah we used to have holidays when we only had one kid on a house boat. 21. And that was fantastic just the rocking motion of the houseboat
S 22. Mmm
C 23. Mmm
S 24. Were there ever times ... 25. Like I remember times when I couldn't work out what the hell it was. 26. There just didn't seem to be anything == you could do
C 27. == No reason or ... 28. Yea
S 29. Yea every night between six and ten
C 30. Yea yea. 31. Luckily I didn't have that with the second baby but the first one was was that typical colicky sort of stuff from about five o'clock.
S 32. Hmm
C 33. I remember one day going for a um walk along the harbour - one of those you know harbour routes that had been opened up. 34. And um he started kicking up from about five o'clock and we we were getting panic stricken. 35. I had him in one of those um front strap things you know sling things ah cause that use to work wonders from time to time but it wasn't working this time. 36. And as we sat on the foreshore of of this Vaucluse area these two women came down and they'd both been working as um governesses or something like that - very very classy ladies. 37. And they said "Oh what's wrong with the baby? 38. He's got colic?" 39. You know, they really wanted to take over
S 40. Yea
C 41. And so I just handed the baby to them
S [laughs]
C 42. And LUCKILY he kept on crying - they couldn't stop him
S [laughs]
C 43. So I was really delighted. 44. They handed back this hideous little red wreck of a thing
[laughter]

1.1 Magazine article (My Baby)
pretty + addressed to "you", but written

1.2 Textbook (Essentials of Pediatrics)
formal, heavy, academic

1.3 Casual conversation
turn-taking, everyday vocabulary, slang, interruptions

MALINOWSKI

Although confining his argument to so-called "primitive" (i.e. non-literate) cultures, Malinowski developed an account of language that is both functional (makes reference to why people use language) and semantic (deals with how language means). In the following extended quotation, you will see Malinowski making an important association, between the fact that language only makes sense (only has meaning) when interpreted within its context, AND the claim that language is a functional resource (i.e. language use is purposeful):

it should be clear at once that the conception of meaning as contained in an utterance is false and futile. A statement, spoken in real life, is never detached from the situation in which it has been uttered. For each verbal statement by a human being has the aim and function of expressing some thought or feeling actual at that moment and in that situation, and necessary for some reason or other to be made known to another person or persons – in order either to serve purposes of common action, or to establish ties of purely social communion, or else to deliver the speaker of violent feelings or passions ... utterance and situation are bound up inextricably with each other and the context of situation is indispensable for the understanding of the words ... a word without linguistic context is a mere figment and stands for nothing by itself, so in reality of a spoken living tongue, the utterance has no meaning except in the context of situation (1946: 307).

Malinowski thus considered that, at least in primitive cultures, language was always being used to do something. Language functioned as "a mode of action" (1946: 312). In developing an account of the different functions to which language could be put, Malinowski differentiated between the pragmatic function (when language is being used to achieve concrete goals, as well as to retell experience) and the magical (the non-pragmatic functions). Even what appeared to be "free, aimless social intercourse" (1946: 315) he considered to be a highly functional use of language. Labelling it "phatic communion", he described such conversational uses of language as: 'a type of speech in which ties of union are created by a mere exchange of words' (1946: 315).

While Malinowski made an enormous contribution in identifying the fundamental semantic role of the **context of situation** and the **context of culture**, and in developing a functional account of language, he did not go on to formulate more precisely the nature of these two contexts, nor their relation to the functional organization of language. In addition, Malinowski restricted his observations by drawing an artificial distinction between "primitive" and "civilized" languages. Later theorists have argued that context is critical to meaning in *any* linguistic event in *any* language.

FIRTH

Firth pointed out that given a description of a context we can predict what language will be used. His rather quaint but exact formulation of this was to claim that learning to use language is very much a process of:

learning to say what the other fellow expects us to say under the given circumstances ... Once someone speaks to you, you are in a relatively determined context and you are not free just to say what you please (1935/57: 28).

Predictability also works in the other direction: given an example of language use (what we would now call text), we can make predictions about what was going on at the time that it was produced.

In trying to determine what were the significant variables in the context of situation that allowed us to make such predictions, Firth suggested the following dimensions of situations:

- A. The relevant features of participants: persons, personalities.
 - (i) The verbal action of the participants.
 - (ii) The non-verbal action of the participants.
 - B. The relevant objects.
 - C. The effect of the verbal action.
- (1950/57: 182)

HALLIDAY

REGISTER THEORY

Following in the functional-semantic tradition pursued by Firth, Halliday also asked which aspects of context are important, i.e. what aspects of context make a difference to how we use language? He has suggested (e.g. Halliday 1978, 1985b) that there are three aspects in any situation that have linguistic consequences: **field**, **mode**, and **tenor**. As we saw in Chapter 2, these can be briefly glossed as

- **field**: what the language is being used to talk about;
- **mode**: the role language is playing in the interaction; and
- **tenor**: the role relationships between the interactants.

These three variables are called the **register variables**, and a description of the values for each of these variables at a given time of language use is a **register description** of a text. A very brief register description of the three Crying Baby texts from Chapter 1 would be as follows:

Text 1.1

Field: childcare

Mode: written to be read

Tenor: specialists to general audience

Text 1.2

Field: childcare

Mode: written to be read

Tenor: specialist to trainee-specialists

Text 1.3

Field: childcare

Mode: interactive face-to-face

Tenor: friends

From this very limited register description we can suggest that the three texts are alike in field, but different in mode and tenor. (We will return to these observations in Chapter 10.)

In setting these three variables up, Halliday is making the claim that, of all the things going on in a situation at a time of language use, only these three have a direct and significant impact on the type of language that will be produced.

In order to test out his claim, we need to consider each register variable more closely, asking what exactly field, mode and tenor refer to (here we will be more specific about the dimensions of each register variable); and in what ways each variable impacts on language use (here we will illustrate briefly how each register variable makes a difference in text).

In asking why Halliday argues for these three register variables and not any others, we will review the systematic relationship set up in the systemic model between these contextual categories and the structure of language itself.

A PC which won't stop crashing can drive anyone to despair. You boot it, you format your disks, you create a file, you try to protect your edits, but the minute you try to save your file the PC crashes. Why? The most common reason computers crash is faulty disks. Even if the disk is brand new, it might still have a faulty track and so the disk won't accept any messages from the CPU. When the disks are packed, they pass through often lengthy transportation, and may be damaged in the process. Try another disk first; if the PC still crashes you can assume it's something else. It happens that PCs sometimes crash for inexplicable reasons -perhaps they are just overloaded. Perhaps you have inadvertently entered an unacceptable control code, or have accidentally pressed too many keys at once. Perhaps the CPU is faulty ...etc.

FIELD changes