Language analysis has reflected, through decades of study and application, the changing views and perspectives on the nature of language and the optimal methods of perceiving and understanding it. Decontextualized approaches to language include theoretical linguistics that perceive language as a set of rules with a view to prescribing the correct combinations. Historical linguistics focuses on the diachronic development of language and analyses textual components in relation to the historical evolution of syntactic traditions. Structural linguistics views language as a self contained system that can indicate the value and meaning of its components through structural positioning.

Ferdinand de Saussure’s groundbreaking principles provided new perspectives in language studies. Synchronic linguistics was introduced as a result of dissatisfaction with diachronic studies and their inability to account for language description and categories. A view on language as a signifying system was introduced and a division of structural relations in the language system was identified (Saussure, 1966). The division grouped horizontal relations characterizing syntactic ordering under the syntagmatic category and vertical substitutive relations within the same word class under the paradigmatic category (ibid). This last principle paved the way for the later explorations of the notion of selectivity where from the range of alternatives in the vertical axis a choice is made to fulfill appropriate or effective meanings. As for the horizontal syntagmatic category, prescriptive methods underlined the importance of abiding by the correct structural rules, including loyalty to fixivity, in ensuring that “correct” applications of language constrains the structure and allow for no deviation.

Noam Chomsky (1957) championed a trend that focused on the formal description of the set of rules that define all the possible grammatical sentences of a language. The Standard Theory, also known as the Aspects Model in Transformational Generative Grammar (Chomsky, 1965), prescribed four basic components in language analysis. The base component of syntactic structures, also known as the deep aspect, the transformational component reflected in the sentence or surface structures, the phonological component defining the phonetic representation of pronunciation, and the semantic component allowing for interpretive semantics and dealing with the meaning of the sentences. The theta theory (Chomsky, 1980) dealing with semantic relationships prescribes that the lexical entry of a verb constrains the semantic or thematic roles associated with it in agent and patient positions. Government and binding theory identifies levels of abstract sentence categories that operate according to set rules of structures. D-structures deal with semantic constraints. S-structures deal with syntactic and grammatical constraints.

Studies conducted on graduates in an English Language and Literature programme (Al-Khatib, 2007) reveal the ability of students in their third and senior years to identify the linguistic performance of English learners with reference to categories of correct grammar (Sysoyev, 2001; Zoughoul and Hussein, 1985). Two-thirds of the informants (Al-Khatib, 2007), who were tutored from a theoretical perspective, were not able to go beyond instructing idealized standardized forms and correct structural and phonologic rules of the language application. There was no aspect in their performance that delved into the interpretive semantic dimension to comment on optimal choices of structure and lexis. There was also no critical analysis of the deeper fluctuations that bring about the language forms. The performance of these students was characterized by maximum adherence to the set standardized forms in syntax and phonology. The remaining third took another perspective. These students had been challenged in their third and senior years through unabstracted models of language and applied linguistics courses that look at language in context. Their approach to language was more analytical and semantic-based (Al-Khatib, 2007).

Studies from anthropological linguistics and real life contexts emphasized the context bound language aspect in a reflective approach where the construction of language in use is bound to the properties of its context, in addition to its formal characteristics (Arnold, 2006). The works of William Labov (1997) on social class and the pronunciation of pre-vocalic @ in New York underlines the need to consider language practices as part of the social fabric that brings about distinctive linguistic features under specific social circumstance.

John Gumperz’s studies (1997) brought to the fore the role of contextual influences of the speaker, interlocutor and situation on the language structures used. Issues on gender styles, adolescent styles and in-group styles are added testimonials to the sociolinguistic influence in language selection. Dell Hymes (1997) extended earlier categorization on language proficiency to include not only what is

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The abstracted models focus on language and the binding connections within its components in an implicit belief in the fixivity of these relations. Linguistic analysis from this perspective leads at best to the identification of the micro categories that combine to produce a sentence, adhering to the idealized forms in language production. Prescriptivism ends with the reproduction of standardized models of language structures. There is no room for deeper probing into the purposive manipulation of language and no interest in the consideration of instances of marked deviation from the set rules.

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grammatically correct but also what is sociolinguistically appropriate.

Language analysis frameworks resulting from the unabstracted macro models of anthropological linguistics and sociolinguistics established the direct relations between the contextual influences and the selected grammar categories in corpus texts. Applied linguistics firmly situated language studies within the social perspective with a view to context as a determining factor that is reflected in the selected language categories.

Proponents of functional linguistics depart from the determinist perspective of macro-sociolinguistics in viewing language as fulfilling more dynamic roles than only reflecting the set macro context categories. Functionalism probes at language units with a focus on their role in the dynamic context of the discourse. Language in context is analysed as the complex mechanism through which the individual furthers his goals, negotiates his reality and constructs his situation. Language items are not seen as static products of a given reality where the role of the language user is limited to abiding by and reflecting contextual constraints. Functional linguistics underlines the purposive paradigmatic selection and syntagmatic arrangement of the language units beyond structural organization.

The analysis of language as the dynamic tool that is manipulated for optimal effect is the ultimate probing where the analyst develops sensitivity to ways of interpreting texts when language talks. Selections made within the field of the utterance functions to construct the ideological interpretation of the language units and the alignment of the language user. Categories included in the tenor of the text functions to position the interlocutors both hypotactically and paratactically. The selection of the mode underlines the perceived optimal channel of communication that could best transmit the intended message with maximum effectiveness.

Informants whose programme of study included the functional perspective developed sensitivity to evaluating the ways through which language is used to transmit specific messages, the ways through which language talks (Al-Khatib, 2007). They were able to critically assess the language choices as promoting implicit realities ad ideologies. Informants identified how texts are worked to position characters within the discourse and the readers and interlocutors using it. The critical awareness developed by these informants was also evident of their ability to identify ways in which the wider social and cultural context influence the interpretation of specific meanings and language use as a whole.

Functional linguistics invites linguists to intrepid new ways of dealing with language through the application of functional analysis to decode the myriad of the signifying processes of language and linguistic forms.

Functional analysis opens up endless enquiry into the why and how of every structure in a critical approach.

Attempting to account for the ways through which language talks denotes a trend in language analysis that aims to decode and understand levels of language and ways of juxtaposing the units, phonologic, syntactic and pragmatic as well as the underlying rules that bring about all the metamorphosis. It is the new generation Functional analysis that takes language interpretation beyond what is said by mere words to how contexts are constructed through the complex analysis of the meaning of the discourses both spoken and written. It departs from the multiple predetermined conditions of the macro contexts to the functions of the negotiated meaning, displayed through the paradigmatic and syntagmatic choices to challenge the unspoken and expolote the unlimited potential of language.

References


