



Systemic Functional Linguistics as Approach to Translation

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Abstract

The significance of linguistics to translation is inevitable, since translation activity involves language, and since linguistics is the scientific study of language (Manfredi, 2008, p. 31). In a wider sense, the linguistic paradigms with which the translation process is performed refer to "those branches of linguistics" that take into consideration the social aspects of language use and deal with source text and target text in their cultural contexts (Bell, 1991, p. 13), putting a premium on the centrality of meaning as a principal component of language since the issue of meaning is the major concern in translation. In view of this perception, Systemic Functional Linguistics (henceforth SFL) might be the most appropriate approach to translation and translation analysis for the reason that it works towards an aim when it considers language as a meaning potential and puts much focus on texts in their situational and cultural contexts.

This paper attempts to illustrate the importance of SFL to translation. It provides a brief historical account of the emergence of Hallidayan linguistics, and it goes through his major contributions to the discipline of Translation Studies. It also discusses the arguments and grounds for postulating the applicability and usefulness of the SFL theoretical approach as a linguistic framework for translation theory and practice.

Keywords: Systemic Functional Linguistics, Systemic Functional Grammar, Hallidayan linguistics, Systemic linguistics, Translation, Translation Studies

1. INTRODUCTION

The 20th century saw a move away from traditional grammar which had already been dominant, and the emergence and flourishing of the scientific approach to language. Extensive linguistic studies were undertaken in that century, in the second half in particular, being either form-oriented or function-oriented (Yan, 2014). On the one hand, Chomsky is seen as the key figure of the form-oriented linguists, developing generative grammar as a linguistic theory that describes grammar as a system of rules. On the other hand, Halliday is considered as the main representative of function-oriented scholars, formulating SFL that will be given a central focus in the present research.

Regarding falling under someone's influence, Halliday drew on the work of a number of linguists and scholars from different countries around the world who were figures of considerable influence in his theory, such as Saussure (1916/1974), the Prague school and the American anthropological linguists such as Boas, Sapir and Whorf (Halliday, 1985/2002).

Prior to introducing SFL, Halliday carried out extensive research into a number of central features of language use and related areas, for instance, *how children develop their first language* (Halliday, 1975) and *cohesion* (Halliday and Hasan, 1976). Later in his book entitled *Language as social semiotic* (1978), he raises several questions that do "seem to need answering", such as *how do individuals interpret their utterances? How do they make a*



connection between context of the situation and the linguistic system? How do they build the situational contexts in which meaning is conveyed? (1978, p. 108). In an attempt to respond to the questions, by 1985, the time of the first edition of his book *An introduction to functional grammar*, he developed SFL approach as a linguistic theory.

Systemic functional linguistics, known as *SFL*, *Systemic Functional Grammar* (henceforth *SFG*), *Hallidayan linguistics*, and *systemic linguistics*, is a holistic theoretical model to the study of language (Capra, 1996), which was developed and introduced by a British-born Australian linguist M. A. K. Halliday. SFL perceives language as a social semiotic system (Halliday, 1978), and it assumes that language is utilized to "make sense our experience, and to carry out our interactions with other people" (Halliday, 2004, p. 24). Thus, from the perspective of SFL, the language within specific social contexts, written or spoken, is employed to communicate and express intended meanings in communicative events. Halliday's work uses the term systemic to refer to the view of language as "a network of systems, or interconnected sets of choices for constructing meaning", and the term functional to describe his opinion that language is as it is due to what it has evolved to do (Halliday, 1994, p. 15). Concerning the concept of system, he borrowed it from his teacher, J.R. Firth (Halliday, 1961).

Although the SFL theoretical model has been proposed to the linguistic discipline, its exploitation is open for various fields that take advantages from its application in conducting research, such as stylistic studies (e.g. Hasan, 1985; Birch and O'Toole, 1988; Butt and Lukin, 2009), educational studies (e.g. Halliday and Martin 1993; Christie and Unsworth, 2005), corpus studies and computational linguistics (e.g. Munday, 1998; Taylor, 1998; Teich, 2009; Wu, 2009), semantic studies (e.g. Williams, 2005; Hasan, Cloran, Williams and Lukin, 2007), contextual research (e.g. Steiner, 1998, 2004; Hasan, 2009), multilingual generation (e.g. Steiner and Yallop, 2001), multimodality (e.g. Bowcher, 2007), interpreting studies (Gallina, 1992; Tebble, 1996, 1997, 1999, 2008; Consorte, 1999; Wang, 2008; Guo, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2013), and Translation Studies (henceforth TS) (e.g. Newmark, 1987; Katan, 1999; Munday, 1997, 2001). It can be argued persuasively that these scholarly efforts provide much food for thought to the scholars and proponents of several fields to consider SFL as a valid approach for conducting research.

There is no doubt that TS has, according to the relevant literature, become one of the predominant disciplines of research and studies with application of Hallidayan linguistics. Since the development of this theory, various translation theorists and researchers have investigated TS from the standpoint of SFL and have yielded a fruitful result on the adoption of this theoretical model to study translation, for instance, Catford (1965), House (1977, 1997), Newmark (1987, 1989), Bell (1991), Munday (1997, 1998, 2000, 2001, 2002, 2008, 2009, 2012), Mathiessen (2001), Teich (2003), Steiner (2004), Huang (2006), and Wang (2004). As a consequence, regardless of different points of view, those systemically oriented TS works have made valuable contributions to TS discipline through proposing a number of translation models and approaches. Thus, the SFL approach is currently in that position to serve the discipline as the translation scholars postulate for based on some powerful arguments and grounds that will be discussed in this paper.

2. HALLIDAY'S CONTRIBUTIONS TO TRANSLATION STUDIES

Central to his SFL/SFG theory, Halliday describes himself as a grammarian. Even though he is a linguist and considered as one of the major figures of modern linguistics, his main concern on translation emphasizes certain linguistic aspects "which relate closely to the theory and practice of translation" (1992, p. 15). As known, he is not a translation theorist, he expounds his views on translation through three articles published in three different times, namely "Linguistics and machine translation" (1960), "Language theory



and translation practice" (1992) and "Towards a theory of a good translation" (2001). His main contributions will be discussed here.

In his "Linguistics and machine translation", he developed an approach to computer-assisted translation. Later, to the best of his knowledge, the model had never been employed (Halliday, 2001, p. 16). Nevertheless, in terms of translation, he describes the concept of equivalence in translation with reference to the notion of 'rank' (*ibid.*). In this study, belief in taking advantage of linguistics to develop an analytical paradigm for the translation process is quite clear as he states that:

It might be of interest to set up a linguistic model of the translation process, starting not from any preconceived notions from outside the field of language study, but on the basis of linguistic concepts such as are relevant to the description of languages as modes of activity in their own right (Halliday, 1966, p. 137).

In this key defining article, grammatical hierarchies, rank-based correspondences, were under a remarkable discussion with reference to Russian and Chinese languages to take examples. He proposed certain equivalents within the rank scale: morpheme, word, group, phrase and clause. For him, the context of the higher element is the criteria to modify the choice in lower level, for instance, word is the context of morpheme in which it appears, and word in group, and so on (Manfredi, 2008, p. 75).

In his theoretical model for machine translation which is mainly concerned with lexicogrammar, Halliday states that there are three 'stages' which have to be taken prior to the translation process (1966, p. 144). The 'most probable translation equivalent' is selected for each unit at each rank. Then, in view of lexicogrammar aspects of entity above, the choice of translation equivalent is reconsidered. Finally, it is reconsidered in the light of the target language lexicogrammar aspects. It is worth to note that taking the three proposed steps successively is not necessary, but they might be useful abstractions to realize the process of translation (*ibid.*).

Halliday's second seminal article "Language theory and translation practice" (1992), published in the translation journal, *Rivista Internazionale di tecnica della traduzione* of Trieste University, provides several remarkable insights into the translation phenomenon. His plausible excuse for choosing this title is that he aims at putting forth a linguistic theory that may be applicable for translation practice. In this attempt, advancing a theoretical model is intended to show what exactly transpire in translating texts. His theoretical perspective argues for a functional grammar model which succeeds in this major objective, not a formal grammar model. The assumption underlying his belief relates to the concept of 'choice', including what could mean and what is more probably to be meant (1992, p. 15).

In Halliday's view, **meaning** is conceived as a central feature of translation as a process, to put it another way, "translation is a meaning-making activity" (*ibid.*). In view of this, any activity is not considered as translation if there is not the creation of meaning (*ibid.*). Although producing a meaningful text is the objective of both translation and discourse activities, translation is rather a "guided creation of meaning, not only the production of meaning" (*ibid.*).

Since translation is concerned with meaning, a linguistic theory which is employed in translation process must be "[...] a theory of meaning as choice", and it has to include a **functional semantics**, specifically '**metafunction**' (*ibid.*). Thus, a linguistic model for translation should be relevant to functional semantics (*ibid.*, p. 16). However, he shows his interest in formal model but through functional semantics. To this end, FG which postulates a strong relation between wording and meaning is the most pertinent approach. Additionally, he mentions that 'semantic equivalence' is contingent between texts and languages with reference to the function of an element in context (*ibid.*).



Consequently, Halliday forms his opinion on the notion of equivalence in relation to the three abovementioned concepts of 'meaning, function' and 'context' as he points out that "[i]f meaning is function in context", then meaning equivalence is functional equivalence in context (*ibid.*). In doing this, the relevant context is the touchstone to establish functional equivalence in translation activity (*ibid.*). More to the point, a source langue element has different equivalents in the target language which are not free but context bound. Choosing only one equivalent is not compulsory since there are choices. Choices are mutually exclusive; using one instead of another, the meaning of the choice will vary based on the context. Therefore, the relevant context determines which choice is the most appropriate one.

Halliday makes clear that what linguistics offers is a model of context, not translation equivalence (*ibid.*, p. 17). His statement, the translation of a personal diary is different from the translation of a scientific article (*ibid.*, p. 20), makes translators go beyond the level of discourse meaning. This leads them out of the text completely to deal with the 'context of situation' and context of culture (*ibid.*, pp. 21-23). The context of situation is central to guide the production of the target text, and this supports his hypothesis that translation is a 'guided creation of meaning' (Manfredi, 2008, p. 62). Halliday concludes this paper with a summary on what to be the essential process of translation as follows. In every translation, some specific items are emphasized, "asking why it is as it is, how it might have been different", and what impact might have made by other choices (Halliday, 1992, p. 25).

"Towards a theory of a good translation" (2001) is Halliday's third influential article on translation, in which he stresses the notion of equivalence as the fundamental organizing notion of translation (Halliday, 2001, p. 15). He borrows his SFL theoretical concepts to differentiate three types of equivalence relations: *Stratification*, *Metafunction* and *Rank* (*ibid.*). In his description, 'Stratification' pertains to the stratal organization of language; 'Metafunction' concerns with the stratal organization of the content, lexicogrammar and metafunctional components, and 'Rank' tackles "[...] the organization of the formal strata" phonology and lexicogrammar in hierarchical configuration (*ibid.*).

In terms of stratification, the values of equivalence vary from one stratum to another (*ibid.*). The higher stratum the more value is granted to equivalence, for instance, semantic equivalence is given more value than lexicogrammar, and so on (*ibid.*). However, the translation task should be taken into account, since the values vary from specific task to another. Similarly, the values of equivalence will vary within the levels of the rank scale; the higher formal level is granted the highest value (*ibid.*). As far as the metafunction is concerned, since the three metafunctional components are not organized in a hierachal way the case is different in the language system. Concerning translation, the ideational metafunction is considered to be given the highest value, since translation equivalence is usually described with reference to ideational terms, that is to say if a target text does not ideationally correspond to the source text, it is not regarded as a translation (*ibid.*).

Halliday concludes his article by proposing what a good translation is in his standpoint. "A good translation is a text which equivalent" as regards those linguistic aspects "which are most valued in the given translation context" (*ibid.*).

3. RATIONALE FOR SFL TO TRANSLATION

A generation of translation theorists follows Halliday's SFL approach to the theory and practice of translation. More specifically, they investigate the translation problems with reference to SFL, employing it as a yard stick to analyze source text and produce target text. To support their perception, there are certain grounds and arguments that the translation



researchers and theoreticians are convinced of to consider SFL as an applicable and useful theoretical model to translation. This section therefore explores these basic arguments and reasonable grounds.

3.1. Argument one

Although the issue of vocabularies and expressions is considered as the most considerable difficulties while translating, translation is wider than just a matter of knowing vocabularies: grammar has a clear and central role (Manfredi, 2008). On the basis of this premise, Halliday's SFL model can prove itself as an applicable approach as it favors lexicogrammar, which turns its attention to both grammar and lexis (Halliday, 1978, p. 39). For more support on this perception, Taylor Torsello proclaims that grammar has to be taught in the translation education programmes, particularly the SFL theory, since it emphasizes the role of grammar and language in texts along with lexicon in carrying "out specific functions" and grasping particular kinds of meaning (1996, p. 88).

Thus, considering grammar and vocabulary as two interrelated important parts in translation sets out, to some extent, a plausible reason for adopting Halliday's SFL approach to translation.

3.2. Argument Two

The notion of text is central to translators, that is to say translating texts, at which communication is established, is the principal target of translators. Realizing language in texts is crucial and of interest for translation. This perception can be linked in translational thinking with the work of Halliday's SFG/SFL (1985) and his emphasis on language in use, text and their contexts (Halliday, 1985/2004).

Text is viewed as a "unit of language in use" (Halliday, 1976, p. 1), and it is seen as a part of the culture that creates it (Miller, 1993 cited in Miller, 2005). Most notably these two definitions give priority to an approach which perceives language as a social semiotic and language as effective communication (Halliday, 1987), rather than a theoretical model that studies language statically and prescriptively. To this end, it is obvious that the main focus of SFL is on the way language works, how it is expressed, and the social functions it provides (Manfredi, 2008). With reference to this important role of SFL, Halliday has this to say:

It is functional in the sense that it is designed to account for how the language is **used**. Every text [...] unfolds in some context of use [...]. A functional grammar is essentially a 'natural' grammar in the sense that everything in it can be explained, ultimately, by reference to how language is used (Halliday, 1985/1994, p. xiii, *emphasis in the original*).

To put it in a nutshell, Halliday's functional grammar moves away from linguistic theory as a static type of language towards a view of language embedded in context. Thus, it can attest itself to be a workable approach to translation since it concerns with translating texts, the major focus of a translator.

3.3. Argument Three

Translation scholars centre upon the study of meaning transfer in TS (Catford, 1965; Fawcett, 1997; Hatim and Mason, 1990; Matthiessen, 2001). The issue of meaning always causes the full complexity and difficulty of translation (Manfredi, 2011), and translators mainly attempt to convey the meaning through language (Taylor, 1993). From this standpoint, an activity like translation needs to interrelate with a language theory which is predominantly concerned with meaning. To this end, since SFG/SFL is an approach to



grammar that perceives "language essentially as a system of meaning potential" (Halliday, 1978, p. 39), in consequence it is also fit to be employed to achieve the actual goal of translation activity, conveying meaning.

Another convincing argument for SFL to TS is that Halliday defines translation as "meaning making activity" and any activity would not be perceived to be translation if it does not lead to meaning making (1992, p. 15). From his point of view, a linguistic theory which is concerned with translation must be "a theory of meaning as choice" (*ibid.*). Accordingly, as SFL views language as a "resource for meaning making" (Halliday and Matthiessen, 2004, p. 23), it can be extremely relevant to translation and translation analysis.

On the basis of the discussion above, after putting forward three convincing arguments for adopting SFL theoretical approach to the study of translation, it is obvious that SFL can prove and illustrate its applicability and usefulness as a linguistic framework for the translation theory and practice.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Since translation is much broader than it would be seen as only a pure linguistic activity or a cultural practice, adopting Hallidian linguistics as an approach to translation shifts markedly from the study of translation as merely linguistic analysis to an investigation of translation linguistically and culturally. In this regard, it gives an equal prominence to both linguistic and cultural aspects through bringing together relevant key ideas and concepts from both perspectives that are crucial for translation and translation analysis. Thus, the SFL model might be the most appropriate approach for translation and translation analysis for the reason that it sees translation as a cross-linguistic and cross-cultural activity when it tackles language in use and puts much focus on texts in their situational and cultural contexts.

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تیۆرى زمانهوانى ئەركى سىستىمى وەك پىڭايەك بۆ وەرگىران

يوسف على عمر وريا عزالدين على

بەشى زمانى ئىنگلېزى، كۆلىزى زمان، زانکۆ سەلاحەددىن-ھەولىرى، هەرپىمى كوردىستانى عىراق

پوخخە

گۈنگ بوارى زمانهوانى بۆ وەرگىران شىيىكى حەتمىيە، لەسەر بىنەمای ئەوهەى كارى وەرگىران زمان لەخۇدەگىرىت و زمانهوانىش بىرىت يە لە لىكۆلىنىەوهى زانستى زمان (مانفريىدى، 2008، ل. 31) . بەشىوھىكى فراواتىر، ئەم مۆدىل و تیۆرانە بوارى زمانهوانى كە كارى وەرگىرانىان تىادا ئەنجام دەرىتت بىرىتىن لەم لقانەي زمانهوانى كە لايەنە كۆمەلەيەتىكى زمان بەھەند وەردەگەن و لە تىكىستى سەرجاوه و تىكىستى بەرامبەر لە چوارچىوهى سياقە كەلتورەكائىان دەكۆنلەوە (بىل، 1991، ل. 13)، كە جەخت لەسەر گۈنگ مانا دەكتەوە وەك پىكەتەيەكى سەركى زمان لەبەرئەوهى مانا بابەتى سەرەكى كارى وەرگىرانە. لەم ۋانگەيەوه، تیۆرى زمانهوانى ئەركى سىستەمەي پەنگە گونجاوتىن تیۆر بىت بۆ كارى وەرگىران و شىكىدەوه وەرگىران، بەھۆي ئەوهى ئەم مۆدىلە بەرەو تامانجىك كاردهكەت كە تىادى زمان وەك مانا لەقەلەم دەدات، وە جەختىكى زۆريش لەسەر تىكىست دەكتەوە لە چوارچىوهى هەردوو سياقى كاتى و كەلتورى.

ئەم توپۇزىنەوە ھەولۇدەت گۈنگ تیۆرى زمانهوانى ئەركى سىستەمەي لە بوارى وەرگىران رۇون بکاتەوە. تىادى تىشك دەختە سەر كورتەيەك لە مىئۇووى دەركەوتى تیۆرى زمانهوانى ھالىدەي، وە ئەم ئىزافانە ئەم زمانهوانە خستۇيەتى سەر خەرمانى زانستى بوارى وەرگىران. هەرەوەها تاوتۇنى ئەم بەنگە و تارگومىتىنە دەكتە كە بانگەشەي توانىي جىيەجىكىن و گونجاوى تیۆرى زمانهوانى ئەركى سىستەمەي دەكەن وەك چواچىوهىكى زمانهوانى بۆ بوارى وەرگىران لە رووى تیۆرى و پراكىكى.

وشه سەرەكىيەكان: زمانهوانى ئەركى سىستەمەي، پىزمانى ئەركى سىستەمەي، زمانهوانى ھالىدەي، زمانهوانى سىستىمى، وەرگىران، دىراساتى وەرگىران.

نظريه علم اللغة الوظيفي كنهج لترجمة

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ملخص

أَنْ أهمية علم اللغة بالنسبة للترجمة أمرٌ لا مناص منه، على اعتبار الترجمة نشاطاً يتعلق باللغات وكذلك اعتبار علم اللغة دراسةً علمية للغة. تشير النماذج اللغوية بشكل أوسع والتي يتم إنجاز عملية الترجمة بها إلى "فروع اللغة"، تلك التي تأخذ بنظر الاعتبار الجوانب الاجتماعية من استخدام اللغة وتناول مع النص المصدر والمستهدف ضمن سياقاتهما الثقافية، مع التركيز على أهمية المعنى كمكون أساسى للغة باعتبار أن موضعية المعنى هو الهدف الأساس في الترجمة. من هذا المنظور، يمكن اعتبار علم اللغة الوظيفي (SFL) الطريقة الأنسوب في التعامل مع الترجمة وتحليل الترجمة بسبب أنها تعمل باتجاه هدف وهو اعتبار اللغة كمعنى كامن وكذلك تركز على النصوص في سياقاتها الثقافية والظرفية.

يحاول هذا البحث أن يوضح أهمية علم اللغة الوظيفي في مجال الترجمة. كما يقدم سرداً تاريخياً موجزاً لظهورها، ويتناول المساهمات الكبيرة لهذا النظام اللغوي في مجال الترجمة. كذلك ويناقش البحث الحاجة والأسس التي يمكن أن يستند إليها فرضية تطبيق وفائدة النهج النظري لعلم اللغة الوظيفي كأطار لغوي للترجمة نظريةً وتطبيقاً.

الكلمات المفتاحية: علم اللغة الوظيفي، قواعد الوظيفي، علم اللغة ھالىدەي، علم اللغة النظامي، الترجمة، دىراسات الترجمة.