Encyclopedia Britannica

Functionalism, in linguistics, the approach to language study that is concerned with the functions performed by language, **primarily in terms of cognition (relating information), expression (indicating mood), and conation (exerting influence)**. Especially associated with the Prague school of linguists prominent since the 1930s, the approach centres on how elements in various languages accomplish these functions, both grammatically and phonologically. Some linguists have applied the findings to work on stylistics and literary criticism..

"Language does not function in isolation: it is an integrated part of a living human (psychological and social) reality"

Sample Functionalist Questions

• How does the natural language user work?
• How do speakers & addressees succeed in communicating with each other through the use of linguistic expressions?
• How can we build a model of the NLU (M.NLU) in such a way that M.NLU can do the same things that real NLUs can?

Basic tenets of Functionalism

Functionalism is an overarching term and includes many different frameworks / theories.

1. **Communication is the primary function of language and shapes its forms**
2. **External factors are attributed great importance in explaining linguistic phenomena**

➞ languages are shaped by external factors and therefore cannot be explained without them

➞ *language external motivating factors*: biological endowment of human beings & sociocultural contexts

3. **Syntax is not autonomous from semantics & pragmatics**

➞ morphosyntax is intimately bound up with the kinds of meaning that it serves to express

• attempt to account for the full range of linguistics phenomena rather than merely a 'core grammar'
• authentic linguistic productions as data
• attention to discourse and the sentence
• interested not only in individual languages but also in 'language' as a whole
• interested in similarities & differences between languages in functional terms

Functionalism vs Generativism

	Functionalism	Generativism
begin by analyzing language structures…	…in terms of function	…in terms of formal properties
concerned with the central question of what constitutes a possible human language & posit universal constraints		
abstract patterns from data…	…across languages	…within languages
explain universals in terms of universal human abilities…	…in terms of general cognitive & sociocultural abilities	…in terms of innate principles specific to language

➞ function vs formal properties
➞ across vs within languages
➞ universals in cognitive/sociocultural abilities vs universals in language specific innate abilities
➞ both concerned with what constitutes a possible human language & posit universal constraints

Functionalist Theory of Language Acquisition

• Children acquire language through communicative interactions between them and their environments
• do not necessarily deny innateness, but only regard them as a last resort
• believe in a set of general cognitive principles & predispositions to learn instead of UG

The five functions

Several human functions are involved in the communicative use of language other than the linguistic function:

1. **linguistic capacity**: NLU is able to correctly *produce & interpret linguistic expressions*

By **Soraya** (Soraya)
cheatography.com/soraya/
truantsblog.com

Published 12th October, 2014.
Last updated 11th May, 2016.

Sponsored by **CrosswordCheats.com**
Learn to solve cryptic crosswords!
http://crosswordcheats.com

The five functions (cont)

2. **epistemic capacity:** NLU is able to *build up, maintain & exploit an organized knowledge base* - derive, file, retrieve & utilize knowledge from linguistic expressions
3. **logical capacity:** ability to derive further pieces of knowledge, i.e., *the ability to reason*
4. **perceptual capacity:** ability *to perceive environment, derive knowledge from perceptions* & use this in producing expressions
5. **social capacity:** *what to say and how* in communicative situations

Mnemonic: S.P.E.L.L. ➞ social / perceptual / epistemic / logical / linguistic

Standards of adequacy

Descriptive adequacy: provide a complete account of the grammatical organization of connected discourse in a language
Pragmatic adequacy: language as instruments of interaction between S and A
Psychological adequacy: relate to psychology of humans: production model, interpretation model & store of elements
Typological adequacy: developed on basis of facts from a wide variety of languages

Functional paradigm

• language is an **instrument of social interaction** among human beings
• language is used with **the intention of establishing communicative relationships**
• attempts **to reveal the instrumentality of languages** with respect to what people do and achieve with it in social interaction
• language is an integrated part of the communicative competence of NLU
➞ social interactions & establishment of communicative relationships, reveal of instrumentality of language, part of NLU comm. competence

Principles of functional explanation:
• It should display rules & principles underlying the construction of linguistic expressions **to explain** rules & principles in terms of their functionality with respect to the ways in which these expressions are used
• divise a theory of linguistic expression so that it can most easily & realistically be incorporated into a wider pragmatic theory of verbal interaction.

Natural language understanding (NLU) concerns with process of comprehending and using languages once the words are recognized. The objective is to specify a computational model that matches with humans in linguistic tasks such as reading, writing, hearing, and speaking.

Structure of pragmatics

Pragmatic information: full body of knowledge, beliefs, assumptions, opinions and feelings available to an individual ➞ all information
• **General information:** long-term information concerning the world, natural & cultural features, and other possible or imaginary worlds ➞ deep-rooted information about the world and imaginary worlds
• **Situational information:** information derived from perception or experience in the situation of interaction ➞ information about what we see and experience
• **Contextual information:** information derived from linguistic expressions exchanged during verbal interaction ➞ information about what we hear and say

Constraints on FG

• Avoid transformations (deletion of specified elements, substitutions of one specified element, permutations of specified elements)
• Avoid filtering devices
• Avoid abstract semantic predicates

By **Soraya** (Soraya)
cheatography.com/soraya/
truantsblog.com

Published 12th October, 2014.
Last updated 11th May, 2016.

Sponsored by **CrosswordCheats.com**
Learn to solve cryptic crosswords!
http://crosswordcheats.com