

Toward a Balanced Formal/Functional Grammatical Description

Thomas E. Payne
University of Oregon and SIL
International

What is a grammatical description?

- A grammatical description is an act of communication.
 - It takes place in a context.
 - It is simultaneously underspecified (“impoverished”) and redundant (“exuberant”).
 - It makes assumptions about the audience, and attempts to engage them “where they are.”
- A grammatical description is a work of non-fiction literature.
 - It should be generously illustrated with examples.
 - It should start with simple, clear topics, and gradually introduce complexity and irregularity.
 - Most of the exposition should be in clear prose, rather than complex diagrams, charts and formulas.

Some “tensions” that grammar writers face

- Inclusiveness vs. usefulness (publishability)
- Technical accuracy vs. understandability
- Universality vs. specificity
- Form-driven vs. function-driven
- The descriptive linguist must balance all of these tensions (and more!) in an esthetically pleasing package.

What is a “form-driven” description?

- Nouns
 - Noun prefixes
 - Noun suffixes
- Verbs
 - Verb prefixes
 - Verb suffixes
- Noun phrases
 - Elements occurring before the head
 - Elements occurring after the head
- etc.

What is a “function-driven” description?

- Participant reference
 - Introduction of new referents
 - Re-mention of established referents
 - . . .
- Actions, states and processes
 - The expression of temporal reference
 - The expression of modality
 - . . .
- Grammatical relations and semantic roles
 - Voice and valence

Advantages of a form-driven approach

- Relatively easy to outline – lots of precedents
- Relatively easy to write – just “march through” the outline.
- Consistent with the way many students and teachers view “grammar” – a list of structural facts expressed as rules.
- Can be very clear. It is relatively easy to identify structures – identifying functions is more challenging.

Disadvantages of a form-driven approach

- Boring!
- Can misrepresent or fail to represent “functional systems” that span more than one word class or level of structure (see the next slides).
- Emphasizes idiosyncratic facts of the individual language, making it more difficult to relate the language to typologically very different languages.

Disadvantages of a form-driven approach

- Languages involve “functional systems” that transcend traditional word classes and levels of structure.

You mock my pain!	Present	zero
You mocked my pain!	Past	morphological
You will mock my pain!	Future	analytic
- Western Austronesian “Focus” systems
For many years linguists were blind to the focus *system* simply because they viewed the verb marking apart from the noun marking (cont.).

Disadvantages of a form-driven approach

- Cebuano “Focus” and “Topic” marking:

Gi-basa ni	babae	ang	libro	kang	bata
GF-read	NT.ACT	woman	TOP	book	DAT child

 ‘The woman reads the book to the child.’

Gi-basah-an ni	babae	ug	libro	ang	bata
RF-read-RF	NT.ACT	woman	NT.INDEF	book	TOP child

 ‘The woman reads the child a book.’

Mi-basa ang	babae	ug	libro	kang	bata
AF-read	TOP	woman	NT.INDEF	book	DAT child

 ‘The woman reads a book to the child.’

Disadvantages of a form-driven approach

- The same or similar functions are accomplished at different “levels” in different languages.

French: <i>marchait</i>	Past imperfective =
	morphological
English: was walking	Past imperfective =
	analytic+morphological

Disadvantages of a form-driven approach

- The boundary between morphology and syntax is quite arbitrary, and need not have any implications for linguistic description.

Sa-suutá-ra	míjay.
3SG-wash-INAN	mosquito.net

 ‘He/she is washing the mosquito net.’

Sa-súúta	waturá-ra	míjay.
3SG-wash	childless.woman-INAN	mosquito.net

 ‘The woman is washing the mosquito net.’

Structural facts as analogous to propositional content

The propositional content of ordinary communication is analogous to the structural “facts” of a language. The structures are important, but their *use* is often (always?) more important and more *interesting* than the facts themselves. Whether a particular construction is *possible* or not is often not as interesting or important as *when* it is used, how *frequently* it is used, *who* uses it and what *range of purposes* it tends to fulfill.

Advantages of a function-driven approach

- Acknowledges the common sense fact that language serves a purpose – namely communication.
- Brings together different structural pieces that conspire to accomplish ranges of communicative functions (“functional systems”).
- Makes comparison among typologically distinct languages more possible.

Disadvantages of a function-driven approach

- Hard to outline.
- “Open ended” in that almost anything can serve almost any function, given enough context.
- Unconstrained. Functions tend to be “scalar” whereas forms are much more categorical.
- Tends to make typologically distinct languages seem more similar to each other.

Disadvantages of a function-driven approach

- “Functional” Definition of passive voice
- *A passive is a construction that downplays the topicality of an AGENT and/or upgrades the topicality of a PATIENT.*

Then, what about the following . . .

Disadvantages of a function-driven approach

The glass broke. (Downplaying the AGENT who broke the glass.)
Some guy broke the most beautiful vase in the world.
These jeans wear easily.
John underwent surgery.
I was amazed by their stupidity.
Melvin sustained a blow to the head.

Disadvantages of a function-driven approach

- Hard to constrain functions apart from reference to forms. Example: “Deixis” is a (very broad) functional system:
 - Time deixis
 - Place deixis
 - Person deixis
- Place deixis may be expressed via:
 - Demonstratives/demonstrative pronouns
 - Verb affixes
 - Adverbial elements (including gestures)

The solution: A balanced formal-functional approach

- The controlled, systematic and rule-dominated parts of language are often best approached with an emphasis on structure. These would include:

The solution: A balanced formal-functional approach

- Phonology (excluding intonation).
- Morphophonemics
- Inventory of derivational morphology (which derivational categories apply to which roots, etc.)
- Inflectional inventory (determining the range of inflectional possibilities for person and number "agreement" and case marking)
- Pronoun inventory (isolating the entire set of free pronouns or pronominal clitics)
- Lexical inventory (acquiring the words for a large number of culturally significant things and activities)

The solution: A balanced formal-functional approach

- The more pragmatic, semantic and nuanced parts of language are best approached from a "function first" perspective, via a large body of naturally occurring text. These would include:

The solution: A balanced formal-functional approach

- Intonation.
- Constituent order.
- Inflectional morphology (determining the precise functions, principally tense/aspect/mode).
- Voice (alignment of grammatical relations and semantic roles of verbal arguments) . . .
- Sentence level particles (evidentials, validationals and pragmatic highlighting particles). (cont.)

The solution: A balanced formal-functional approach

- Clause combining (including relativization, complementation, adverbial clauses and clause chaining)
- Lexical semantics (determining the nuances associated with various lexical choices, including derivational morphology).
- Pragmatically marked structures, such as clefts, questions, etc.

Conclusion

- The grammar of a language consists of structures that serve communicational functions.
- To a large extent, the structures are motivated by the functions.
- Therefore, in order to *understand* grammatical structures, one must understand their functions.

Conclusion

- However, function disembodied of structure is vague and unconstrained.
- Structure uninspired by function is dry and insignificant.
- For these reasons, a grammatical description should strike a balance between form and function.
- Some areas of grammar are best approached from a form-first perspective, while others from a function-first perspective.

Toward a Balanced Formal / Functional Grammatical Description

Thomas E. Payne, November 2009

Items followed by an asterisk (*) are considered essential. Other items may or may not appear in the grammar outline, depending on a) the intended use of the grammar, b) the special experience and interests of the author and c) the individual characteristics of the language. Of course any particular grammar may also include more headings than what are found here.

Front matter

Acknowledgements (*)

Introduction (Including theoretical assumptions and purpose of the grammar.)

List of abbreviations (*)

1. Part I: The Cultural, Ecological and Sociolinguistic Context of the Language
 - 1.1. The name of the language (*)
 - 1.2. Previous research (*)
 - 1.3. Demography (*)
 - 1.3.1. Map(s)
 - 1.3.2. History/migrations
 - 1.4. Ecology
 - 1.5. Ethnography (material culture, cosmology) (*)
 - 1.6. Genetic and areal affiliations (*)
 - 1.7. Literary traditions
 - 1.8. Dialects (including classical/written varieties if applicable) (*)
 - 1.9. Sociolinguistic situation (*)
 - 1.9.1. Multilingualism and language attitudes
 - 1.9.2. Contexts of use and language choice (*)
 - 1.9.3. Viability (*)
 - 1.9.4. Loan words
 - 1.10. The corpus (*)
 - 1.10.1. The nature of the research (affiliation, location, duration) (*)
 - 1.10.2. Consultants and other sources (*)
 - 1.10.3. Presentation of data (*)
2. Part II: Structural Overview (form driven approach)
 - 2.1. Typological Sketch
 - 2.2. Phonological inventory and orthography (*)

- 2.2.1. Consonants (*)
- 2.2.2. Vowels (*)
- 2.2.3. Tone / stress (*)
- 2.3. Phonetics (*)
- 2.4. Syllable structure
- 2.5. Word structure
- 2.6. Major phonological and morphophonemic processes (*)
 - 2.6.1. Process 1 (*)
 - 2.6.2. Process 2 (*)
 - 2.6.3. Process 3
 - 2.6.4. Process 4
- 2.7. Relaxed speech rules and contractions
- 2.8. Word Classes (*)
 - 2.8.1. Nouns (*)
 - 2.8.1.1. The structure of the noun word
 - 2.8.1.2. Derivational processes
 - 2.8.1.3. Inflectional processes
 - 2.8.1.4. Count vs. mass nouns
 - 2.8.1.5. Proper names
 - 2.8.1.6. Other grammatically distinct subclasses of nouns
 - 2.8.2. Pronouns and/or anaphoric clitics (*)
 - 2.8.2.1. Personal pronouns (*)
 - 2.8.2.2. Demonstrative pronouns (*)
 - 2.8.2.3. Other (relative pronouns and question words may be more efficiently treated in the sections on relative clauses and questions.)
 - 2.8.3. Verbs (*)
 - 2.8.3.1. Verb structure (a diagram of a verb and its morphology) (*)
 - 2.8.3.2. Derivational (stem-forming) processes
 - 2.8.3.3. Inflectional processes
 - 2.8.3.4. Grammatically distinct verb subclass 1
 - 2.8.3.5. Grammatically distinct verb subclass 2
 - 2.8.3.6. Grammatically distinct verb subclass 3
 - 2.8.3.7. Grammatically distinct verb subclass 4
 - 2.8.4. Modifiers
 - 2.8.4.1. Descriptive adjectives
 - 2.8.4.2. Non-numeral quantifiers
 - 2.8.4.3. Numerals
 - 2.8.5. Adverbs
 - 2.8.6. Auxiliaries
 - 2.8.7. Ad-positions (prepositions or post-positions)
 - 2.8.8. Particles or other minor word classes
- 2.9. Constituent Order Typology

- 2.9.1. Constituent order in main clauses
- 2.9.2. Constituent order in verb phrases
- 2.9.3. Constituent order in noun phrases
- 2.9.4. Adpositional phrases (prepositions or post-positions)
- 2.9.5. Comparatives
- 2.9.6. Question particles and question words
- 2.9.7. Summary
- 2.10. The structure of the noun phrase (*)
- 2.11. The structure of the verb phrase (*)
- 2.12. Predicate nominals and related constructions (*)
 - 2.12.1. Predicate nominals (*)
 - 2.12.2. Predicate adjectives
 - 2.12.3. Predicate locatives
 - 2.12.4. Existentials (*)
 - 2.12.5. Possessive clauses (*)
- 2.13. Intransitive clauses (*)
- 2.14. Transitive clauses (*)
- 2.15. Ditransitive clauses (*)
- 2.16. Dependent clause types (*)
 - 2.16.1. Non-finite
 - 2.16.2. Semi-finite
 - 2.16.3. Fully finite
- 3. Part III: Functional Systems (function driven approach)
 - 3.1. Grammatical relations (*)
 - 3.2. Voice and valence related constructions (*)
 - 3.2.1. Causatives
 - 3.2.2. Applicatives
 - 3.2.3. Dative shift
 - 3.2.4. Dative of interest
 - 3.2.5. 'Possessor raising' or external possession
 - 3.2.6. Reflexives and reciprocals
 - 3.2.7. Passives
 - 3.2.8. Inverses
 - 3.2.9. Middle constructions
 - 3.2.10. Antipassives
 - 3.2.11. Object demotion and/or omission

- 3.2.12. Object incorporation
- 3.3. Nominalization
 - 3.3.1. Action nominalization
 - 3.3.2. Participant nominalizations
 - 3.3.2.1. Agent nominalizations
 - 3.3.2.2. Patient nominalizations
 - 3.3.2.3. Instrument nominalizations
 - 3.3.2.4. Location nominalization
 - 3.3.2.5. Product nominalizations
 - 3.3.2.6. Manner nominalizations
 - 3.3.3. Clausal nominalization
- 3.4. Tense/aspect/modality (*)
 - 3.4.1. Tense
 - 3.4.2. Aspect
 - 3.4.3. Modality
 - 3.4.4. Location/direction
 - 3.4.5. Evidentiality, validationality and mirativity
 - 3.4.6. Miscellaneous
- 3.5. Pragmatically marked structures (*)
 - 3.5.1. Constituent order variation
 - 3.5.2. Contrastive/emphatic particles
 - 3.5.3. Contrastive/emphatic intonation patterns
 - 3.5.4. Cleft constructions
 - 3.5.5. Negation (*)
 - 3.5.6. Questions (*)
 - 3.5.6.1. Yes/No Questions (*)
 - 3.5.6.2. Question word (information, content) questions (*)
 - 3.5.7. Imperatives (*) (including subtypes)
- 3.6. Clause Combinations (*)
 - 3.6.1. Serial verbs
 - 3.6.2. Complement clauses (*)
 - 3.6.3. Adverbial clauses (*)
 - 3.6.4. Clause chaining, medial clauses and switch reference
 - 3.6.5. Relative clauses (*)
 - 3.6.6. Coordination
- 3.7. The Language in use

- 3.7.1. Lexical Typology
 - 3.7.1.1. Space, direction and motion
 - 3.7.1.2. Causation
 - 3.7.1.3. Valence
 - 3.7.1.4. Salience of semantic features
- 3.7.2. Continuity (cohesion) and discontinuity
 - 3.7.2.1. Topic (referential) continuity
 - 3.7.2.2. Thematic continuity
 - 3.7.2.3. Action continuity
- 3.7.3. Episodic prominence
 - 3.7.3.1. Climax/peak
 - 3.7.3.2. Intensification
- 3.7.4. Genres
 - 3.7.4.1. Conversation
 - 3.7.4.2. Narrative
 - 3.7.4.2.1. Personal experience
 - 3.7.4.2.2. Historical
 - 3.7.4.2.3. Folk stories
 - 3.7.4.2.4. Mythology
 - 3.7.4.3. Hortatory
 - 3.7.4.4. Procedural
 - 3.7.4.5. Expository
 - 3.7.4.6. Descriptive
 - 3.7.4.7. Ritual speech
- 3.7.5. Miscellaneous and conclusions
 - 3.7.5.1. Idiomatic expressions / proverbs
 - 3.7.5.2. Sound symbolism
 - 3.7.5.3. Summary of typological findings

End matter:

Text with interlinear translation

Glossary

References cited (*)

Index (*)