Research Article

Positive Perspectives on the Functionalism Theory

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Abstract

In any field of knowledge, theories facilitate the investigation of phenomena. In this regard, the applicability and reliability of a theory depends on its instrumentality in the elucidation of the phenomena under investigation. Usually, no theory is completely viod of weaknesses. In this study, we examine only the positive aspects of the Functionalism Theory. Functionalism aligns with the central reason for the emergence of pragmatics – a field of language study. "Pragmatics" evolved from the Greek word pragma which means "deed" or "action". Within the perspective of Functiolnalism, linguistic structure is explained using its extralinguistic underpinning. The study concludes that the Functionalism Theory is a potent framework for the analysis of language-related phenomena in spoken, written, literary and non-literary texts. This is because it has adequate coverage in terms of the linguistic (normative) and extralinguistic (pragmatic) components.

Keywords: The Functionalism Theory, language, pragmatics, meaning, speech act, communication.

1. INTRODUCTION

Language use is a representation of its situational functions as evident in written and spoken communication. To explain the situational fuctions of language, linguists rely heavily on theoretical postulations, one of which is the Functionalism Theory. In human communication, conveying meaning is crucial. Meaning can be conveyed with the use of sentential and extra-sentential elements of communication. The Functionalism Theory views meaning as the reason for organizing elements of communication. To reveal the positive aspects of the theory, this study draws insights from related fields of language study: pragmatics, semantics, discourse analysis and sociolinguistics.

2. The Concept of Meaning

The term "meaning" can be understood from different definitions of semantics. According to Charles Ogbulogo (2005), "the term 'semantics' was first used by Breal in 1987 and it does not suggest that there had never been speculations about the nature of meaning." Simply put, "meaning" is "sense". The sense invoked by an expression is what the expression means to language users. Charles W. Kreidler (1998, p. 3) submits that "semantics is the systematic study of meaning, and linguistic semantics is the study of how languages organize and express meanings." William O' Grady and Archibald (2004, p. 174) posit that "the four major topics in semantics are: (i) the nature of meaning; (ii) some of the properties of the conceptual system underlying meaning; (iii) the computation of syntactic structure to the interpretation of sentences; and (iv) the role of non-grammatical factors in the understanding of utterances." Practically, "meaning" is the referent of an expression in any language. Language functions in terms of the references that it picks from the universe of discourse. Charles Ogbulogu (ibid.) submits that "reference relates to things, people and events in the world. It is the object or entity to which a linguistic expression relates[1]. Speaker-based language use (special meaning) Labov (1972, p. 297), "no use of language can be divorced from its social context since special meaning is parasitic upon language."

3. Language

The Latin expression *lingua* which means "tongue" is linked to the origin of the word "language". Linguists evolve discrete features of language:

- language is a system;
- language involves the use of symbols;
- language is arbitrary; language is a vocal phenomenon;
- language is dynamic;
- language is a vehicle of culture;
- language is a social phenomenon;
- language is living; and
- language is a symbol of individual and collective identity.

Dada (2000) is instructive on the definition of language. Language can be studied in terms of its phonetics and phonology (sound systems), morphology (word structure), syntax (groups, clauses and sentences), semantics (meaning) and pragmatics (context of use).

4. The Functionalism Theory

Adewole Adigun Alagbe (2017) presents the Functionalism Theory extensively:

> Functionalism deals with meaning and interpretation than the language itself. The linguistic Theory of Functionalism also centres on the relationship between a meaning and the wording by reference to what it means. The major proponents of this linguistic theory are Andre Martinet and M. A. K. Halliday. According to Martinet … function of language is translated simply as meaning. In this view, grammar of language is functional in three different senses:
>
> It aims at accounting for how language is used; and postulates that this is what shapes the system itself.
>
> It seeks to understand the role of language in bringing out the meaning. It studies each linguistic element in terms of the function in the whole. This means that the function of a word is determined within the sentence … linguistic phenomenon permits the dissolution of the tension between thought and speech. He also says language may in fact be seen as a means of or for thinking and acting ... Functionalism deals with how meaning functions in a sentence. Hence, there is a clear line between semantics and grammar, and a functional grammar is one that is pushed in the direction of semantics. Akwanya … sees Functionalism as a theory that is very productive in Discourse Analysis … It focuses on language structure …

5. The Functionalism Theory in Positive Perspectives

In this section of the paper, we examine positive aspects of the Functionalism Theory.

5.1 Language as Action

Early scholars of pragmatics realized and contend that acts (actions) of various kinds are performed when sentences are used in human communication. To understand this claim, see speech act taxonomies: Austin (1962), Searle (1969) and Bach and Harnish (1979). As action words, speech act verbs address societal phenomena. While Allan (1986) calls this world-spoken-of, Sperber and Wilson call (1986) refer to it as "topic relevance". The Functionalism Theory depicts speech act verbs as having social acts relevance. The meanings (semantics) of speech act verbs facilitate their categorization (taxonomy). Such verbs are deployed in communication because of their social-acts (actions) potentials. Acheoah (2018) is illuminating in this regard. The social relevance of speech act categories shows the link between pragmatics and semantics. Searle (1976) lists acts (actions) that one can perform in speaking, by means of the following five types of utterances:

> (i) Representatives, which commit the speaker to the truth of the expressed proposition (paradigm cases: asserting, concluding, etc.);
>
> (ii) Directives, which are attempts by the speaker to get the addressee to do something (paradigm cases: requesting, questioning);
>
> (iii) Commissives, which commit the speaker to some future course of action (paradigm cases: promising, threatening, offering);
>
> (iv) Expressives, which express a psychological state (paradigm cases: thanking, apologizing, welcoming, congratulating);
>
> (v) Declarations, which effect immediate changes in the institutional state of affairs and which tend to rely on elaborate extra-linguistic institutions (paradigm cases: excommunicating, declaring war, christening, firing from employment).

To capture action perspective of language, Austin (ibid.) hinges on the term "illocutionary act" which according to him, is "performing an act IN saying something". The sense perspective of language use accentuates the position of the Functionalism Theory in terms of the emphasis on language as action in contexts. For example, in the sentence He is a

married bachelor, the denotative meaning of the word "bachelor" makes it clear that a bachelor is not a married man. However, from the perspective of "sense" (that is, if the man flirts around with ladies or other women), he can be "pragmatically" referred to as a "married bachelor". This is a deviation from standard meaning to speaker-meaning. Standard meanings of expressions operate at grammar and vocabulary levels and they are useful inputs in demystifying meanings to convey actions (speech act of condemning, mocking, ascribing, etc.) in linguistic stretches.

5.2. Nexus between Linguistic Conventions and Extralinguistic Nuances

Human communication is so vast, dynamic and complex that it can only be explained through language theoretical frameworks that are speaker-hearer and writer-reader based. Such theoretical frameworks must be rooted in the norms and values of society. This view corroborates the stance of the Ethnomethodologists who contend that as far as conversational structure is concerned, "there is culture conventions in turn taking." The fact that the Functionalism Theory is immersed in linguistics means it is linked with meaning-laden grammar components of language: verbs, adverbials, modal auxiliaries and pronouns. Pragmatic studies of mood and implicatures reveal the interaction between linguistics and extralinguistics in the production of textual meanings. What this means is that there is intertextual communion between grammar and non-grammar components of communication, and the Functionalism Theory can accout for this fact. Implicatures are immersed in cognition and the value-systems of society that participants of discourse invoke in processing the "topic relevance" of utterances. Chilton (2005a, pp. 19-52) rightly notes that "cognitive pragmatics is defined as a study of mental states of the interlocutors, their beliefs, desires, goals, and intentions … produced and interpreted by human individuals interacting with one another … If language use (discourse) is, as the tenets of CDA assert, connected to the construction of knowledge about social objects, identities, processes, etc., then that construction can only be taking place in the minds of (interacting) individuals."

The functional perspective of language can be understood from different perspectives:
- from the persective of discrete face acts that language performs;
- from the perspective of cross-cultural pragmatics; and
- from the perspective of language varieties.

In the performance of face acts, speakers can deploy explanation, commendation, refusal, apology, direct attack, etc. depending on whether the speakers want to save (FSA) or threaten the face (FTA) of their interlocutors.

Cross-cultural pragmatics is very fascinating in th use of language to perform actions. Acheoah (2011) evolves the term "Geoimplicature" to refer to expressions that have restricted meaning and use in Nigeria. The meaning of an expression in a given region is inseparable from the acts it performs in communication.

The literature of sociolinguistics is replete with language varieties: sociolect, idiolect, mesolect, register, Pidgin, Creole, etc. Language varieties are used by speakers according to communication needs. For example, a casual language such as Nigerian Pidgin (NP) is suitable in certain adverts because it potently performs the speech acts purposed by the advertiser: persuading, informing, ascribing, etc. Indeed, the Functionalism Theory gives insights into the boundary between linguistic convention and extralinguistic principle (of language use) by elucidating the pragma-lexico-semantic constraints involved in the encoding and decoding of utterances. Brumfit and Johnson (1979, p. 118) posit that "the ability to compose sentences is not the ability we need to communicate. Communication only takes place when we make use of sentences to perform a variety of different acts of an essentially social nature. Thus we do not communicate by composing sentences, but by using sentences to make statements of different kinds … to record, to classify, and so on, or to ask questions, make requests, give orders, etc. Knowing what is involved in putting sentences together correctly is only one part of what we mean by knowing a language, and it has very little value on its own. It has to be supplemented by knowledge of what sentences contain as in their normal use as a means of communication."

5.3 Language Use as Organized Thought

The notions in the Functionalism Theory (meaning as word-location in stretches, language structure, language as thinking and acting) reveal that within and beyond the sentence, language use is not arbitrary. It involves logical arrangement of ideas in terms of the semantics and pragmatics of communication. Thus, the concept of meaning is understood within and beyond the sentence. The Functionalism Theory is immersed in the idea that meaning can be conveyed through the arrangement of linguistic units in stretches; language is a means of thinking, organizing and deploying elements of communication. Using language to make references is logic-based because expressions have to be well formed (constructed) before they can refer even in context. Putting language units together for pragmatic communication is essentially the selection and sequencing of speech acts; the social relevance of speech acts makes this process inevitable. The Functionalism Theory holds the view that utterances (or speech acts) are better understood by interpreting not just their physical properties, but also the pragmatic constraints (shared knowledge, beliefs and intentions) that realize such utterances. Speech act theory, according to Pratt (1977), "provides a way of talking about utterances not only in terms of their surface grammatical properties but also in terms of the context in which they are

made, the intentions, attitudes, and expectations of the participants, the relationships existing between participants … rules and conventions that are understood to be in play when an utterance is made and received."

5.4 Accommodating Literal and Non-literal Propositions

If meaning is viewd beyond the sentence, indirect speech acts and several non-literal propositions can be explained by relying heavily on extralinguistic parameters. This explains the instrumentality of the Functionalism Theory in the interpretation of indirect speech acts and figurative language in literary texts. In literary texts, indirect speech acts refer to utterances in which a textual character says one thing and means another, or says one thing and means what he says and also means a different thing. Adegbija (1999) notes that indirect speech acts help literary writers communicate difficult themes with appreciable ease. Therefore, a speech act approach to the study of literary texts is very productive. Being sensitive to the global and historical contexts of such texts, a speech act approach would combine both synchronic and diachronic perspectives to provide richer insights into literary texts2. Such access to diachronic contexts is particularly relevant for a full elucidation of indirect speech acts – cf. Adegbija (ibid.). Diachronic contexts typically form central aspects of the mutually shared beliefs that are important for the understanding of the full illocutionary force of an indirect speech act. Language use is not always literal. Speech act theorists hold this view. For this reason, there are underlying meanings beyond language. Noting that there is meaning beyond language, the thrust of the Functionalism Theory is to account for the pragmatic nuances that link linguistic and extralinguistic features of a message. Implicature theories reveal language as being rich in the resources for literal and non-literal propositions.

6. CONCLUSION

This study integratively examines the positive aspects of the Functionalism Theory, with a view to appraise its suitability in textual analysis within language and linguistics. The theory is discourse-based. This makes it applicable in revealing "things people do with words", the motivations behind such things and the fuctions of speech act selection and sequencing in doing such things. Speaker-meaning is the core of the Functionalism Theory, and this accentuates its strong link with pragmatics3. Viewed from positive perspectives as in this study, the Functionalism Theory shows that for effective communication, speakers and writers combine knowledge of linguistic conventions and principles of communication (pragmatics). While the former is "linguistic competence", the latter is "communicative competence". Conclusively, the Functionalism Theory is a good theoretical framework for the analysis of spoken and written communication. Its suitability is informed by its linguistic and extralinguistic coverage of the dynamics of human communication.

Notes

1. This view corroborates Searle's (1969) notion of direction-of-fit. Speech acts are focused acts, directed at states-of-affairs, persons, things. Thus, the meaning of an expression in a given context is its pragmatic constraints.
2. Adegbija (ibid.) contends that "while a synchronic perspective would be primarily concerned with the text per se, its present life, context and present meaning, a diachronic perspective would introduce dimensions of meaning relating to the historical, global context enclosing a text."
3. James R. Hurford, Brendan Heasley and Michael B. Smith (2007) submit that "SPEAKER MEANING is what a speaker means (i.e. what he intends to convey) when he uses a piece of language. SENTENCE MEANING (or WORD MEANING) is what a sentence (or word) means, i.e. what it counts as the equivalent of in the language concerned. When meaning is viewd beyond the sentence, language is essentially implemented thinking, and this is effective communication." This submission corroborates Akinnaso (2011).

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