

SYSTEMIC FUNCTIONAL GRAMMAR IN NIGERIAN MULTILINGUAL CONTEXTS: MEANING-MAKING AND SOCIOCULTURAL COMMUNICATION IN NIGERIAN ENGLISH AND INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES

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Abstract

This study investigates the universality of Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG) within Nigerian multilingual contexts, analyzing its capacity to account for meaning-making in Nigerian English (NigE) and indigenous languages. Grounded in Halliday's SFG framework and the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis, the research employs a tripartite analysis of 45 linguistic expressions (15 NigE, 15 indigenous, 15 SFG interpretations) and interviews with 5 Nigerian linguists to evaluate SFG's three meta-functions—ideational (representation of experience), interpersonal (social negotiation), and textual (discourse coherence). Findings reveal that while SFG's interpersonal and textual dimensions seamlessly explain NigE's functional innovations (e.g., "abi?" for consensus) and indigenous discourse strategies (e.g., Yoruba "ó úe é ùùgbón" for thematic contrast), its ideational function struggles with culture-bound concepts (e.g., Igbo proverbs like "Egbe bere,

ugo bere"). This tension underscores the need to adapt SFG's universality claim by integrating cultural-semantic parameters for non-Western contexts. The study concludes that SFG's functional flexibility makes it a robust framework for analyzing multilingual communication, but its ideational meta-function requires culture-sensitive expansion to fully capture Nigeria's linguistic diversity. These insights advocate for a negotiated universality in SFG, balancing theoretical rigor with contextual responsiveness in postcolonial and indigenous language studies.

Keywords: Indigenous Languages, Meta-Functions (Ideational, Interpersonal, Textual), Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis, Sociocultural Communication, Systemic Functional Grammar.

Introduction

Language is not merely a system of rules but a dynamic tool for social interaction, shaped by cultural and contextual factors. While **Systemic** Functional Grammar (SFG) posits that language use is inherently functional and context-dependent, its universality remains debated, particularly in multilingual societies where linguistic structures intersect with diverse cultural worldviews. Nigeria with over 500 languages and a dominant Nigerian English (a localized variant) presents an ideal case to empirically test SFG's applicability.

This study aims to:

1. Examine how SFG's meta-functions (ideational, interpersonal, textual) operate in Nigerian English and Indigenous languages.
2. Assess whether SFG accommodates cultural-specific meaning-making in non-native English contexts.
3. Problematize the assumption of SFG's universality by analyzing linguistic deviations in Nigerian English.

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Literature Review

Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG) and Language Universality

Halliday's SFG posits that language is a social semiotic, structured to fulfill communicative functions in context (*Language as Social Semiotic* 45). The three meta-functions—ideational (representation of reality), interpersonal (social relations), and textual (discourse coherence)—are argued to be universal (Halliday and Matthiessen *Functional Grammar* 89). However, scholars like Blommaert (*Discourse*) question whether SFG fully accounts for postcolonial Englishes and indigenous languages where meaning is culturally negotiated (112).

Nigerian English as a Functional Variety

Nigerian English (NigE) is not a "deviant" form but a nativized variant with unique lexico-semantic and pragmatic features (Bamgbose *Language and the Nation* 34). For instance:

- i. Ideational: NigE idioms like "to put sand in someone's gari" (sabotage) encode local experiences.
- ii. Interpersonal: In Adegbite's view, the use of "abi?" (tag question) reflects communal consensus-building (56).
- iii. Textual: Olateju says code-switching between English and indigenous languages maintains cohesion in oral narratives (72).

Indigenous Languages and Cultural Worldviews

The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis is evident in Nigerian indigenous languages, where proverbs and idioms often lack direct English equivalents (212). For example:

- i. Yoruba: "*Òwè l'òúin òrò*" (Proverbs are the horses of words) reflects a cultural prioritization of indirect communication.
- ii. Hausa: "*Magana jari ce*" (Speech is an asset) underscores oral tradition's value. In Bamgbose's words, such expressions challenge SFG's universality when cultural concepts are untranslatable (89).

Gaps in Existing Research

While SFG has been applied to NigE (e.g., Udofot *Nigerian English Phonology*), few studies examine its interaction with indigenous languages. This study fills that gap by problematizing SFG's universality in a multilingual African context.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study is anchored in Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG), as propounded by M.A.K. Halliday. SFG is a functionalist approach to linguistics that prioritizes the social and communicative functions of language over its formal structures. The framework is built on three key meta-functional levels:

1. **Ideational Function:** This level deals with how language represents experiences and ideas. It is divided into the experiential meta-function, which organizes our understanding of the world, and the logical meta-function, which structures reasoning based on those experiences.
2. **Interpersonal Function:** This component focuses on the relationship between communicators, emphasizing how language expresses social roles, attitudes, and emotions. It includes the mood system (speaker's communicative intent) and modality (speaker's attitude toward the message).
3. **Textual Function:** This level ensures coherence and cohesion in communication. It involves the thematic structure of language, where the Theme (the starting point of a clause) and Rheme (the additional information) work together to create meaningful texts.

Additionally, the study incorporates the **Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis**, which posits that language influences thought and worldview. This hypothesis supports the argument that SFG's focus on meaning-making and contextuality aligns with the diverse ways languages conceptualize reality. By integrating these theories, the study demonstrates how SFG's functional and contextual

approach makes it adaptable to any linguistic context, thereby affirming its universality.

Theoretical Framework Application

This study applies **SFG** and **Sapir-Whorf** to analyze:

1. Ideational: How NigE and indigenous languages encode cultural experiences (e.g., NigE "*to blow your trumpet*" vs. Yoruba "*Òwè l'òúin òrò*").
2. Interpersonal: Social negotiation in NigE (e.g., "*make we go*" for solidarity) vs. indigenous language honorifics.
3. Textual: Cohesion strategies in NigE (e.g., discourse markers "*you see...*") vs. indigenous oral narratives.

What is Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG)?

It is a school of thought propounded by MAK Halliday in the 1960s. He refers to functional grammar as a natural grammar because according to him, everything in grammar can be explained by the way that grammar is used. In other words, language is attached to meaning and it is functional and not formal or based on grammatical rules.

Describing, interpreting and making meaning is the framework in which SFG is situated. Wignell asserts that we make meaning through our choice and use of words, and systemic study of language in use is how we make sense of our meanings (5). In Halliday's opinion, the primary function of language is communicating meanings in particular contexts. He further suggests that linguists should study the language activity in use, not in imaginary so-called language ideal structure.

For SFG, the focus is on the function that language plays not just the structure of the language itself like other grammatical models focus on. In other words, the focal point of SFG is not on abstract language constructions or prescriptive enumeration of rules governing language usage. Thus, perfectionism is not one of its major goals. As Lamidi puts it:

There is hardly any ideal native speaker who uses a language perfectly within the systemic grammar framework: Also, as Chomsky (1965) has noted, there is no completely homogenous community. Rather, language (or grammar) becomes meaningful in the context of use. It is not necessary for a structure to be completely grammatical, what speakers need is the exchange of ideas. Once this is achieved, others may not matter as such. (17)

Sometimes, the grammar of a language might not be correct but its function to communicate is achieved,

unlike structural linguistics e.g. the Chomskyan grammar which stipulate strict adherence to prescribed rules to determine how language is used. The Hallidayan approach places more emphasis on the function that language plays.

In comparing structuralist and functionalist approaches, Kirsten has this to say:

Halliday's theory of language is organized around two very basic and common sense observations which immediately set him apart from other truly great twentieth-century linguists,...that language is part of the social semiotic; and that people talk to each other. Halliday's theory of language is part of an overall theory of social interaction, and from such a perspective, it is obvious that a language must be seen as more than a set of sentences, as it is for Chomsky. Rather, the language will be seen as a text, or discourse – the exchange of meaning in interpretational contexts. The creativity of language is therefore a grammar of meaningful choices rather than of formal rules.

Systemic Grammar is also text and culture based. This means that meaning is derived through context. It also stipulates that language is naturalistic and socially manifested. However, this is not to say that systemic grammar permits ungrammaticality in sentences. The fact is that, emphasis is not on complete grammaticality, it is on the context of speaking acceptability rather than grammaticality. For example, in Lamidi's words, when one says, 'What's it or how's it?', it will be acceptable with the functionalists but for the structuralists, it will not be (17).

Applicability of SFG to Different Linguistics Contexts

Systemic Functional Grammar can virtually be applied to any language because there is no human language that does not involve human interaction where context and other issues come into focus. There are roles that language performs, for example, to direct, to explain, convince, describe or instruct, etc. in a society which Halliday itemized at different meta-functional levels. These are ideational, interpersonal and textual levels. These three levels are related to the study of the semantic content and functionality of language.

At the level of Ideation, the meta-functional meaning is concerned with words that are marks of the ideas within the speaker's mind and communication is achieved when the words excite the same ideas in the hearer as they mean in the speaker. The meaning of an

expression according to Lyons is the idea or concept associated with it in the mind of anyone who knows it (18). Ideational function exposes us to our experiences of the world around us. The level is divided into two – the experiential meta-function organizes our experience and understanding of the world while the logical meta-function organizes our reasoning based on our experiences.

The second level is the interpersonal meta-functional level. This component is concerned with expressing the relationship of sender and receiver in communication. It expresses the belief system that humans talk about things to and with others. This level is divided into two: mood and modality. Mood has to do with the speaker's choice during communication – directing the communication to take a particular direction, while the modality system is used by speakers to give their hearers an idea of their personal thoughts and attitudes regarding their messages. Speakers also use it to momentarily express their feelings.

Lastly, we have the textual level which is concerned with creation of texts. It functions as an aid to help us in composing coherent and cohesive texts. This is done in conjunction with ideational and interpersonal functions. It is also divided into two – the Theme and Rheme. The Theme according to Halliday is concerned with what the clause is about which he refers to as 'the point of departure' while the Rheme is what is said about the theme or the rest of the message and provides additional information to the theme which could be further developed.

SFG as a Universal Theory of Language

Looking critically at the work, in the light of the insight provided by the theory of language, and because its focus is on the language users, and the function language plays in different societies, logically speaking, every person uses a language for communication and there is no society in the world without language. Systemic Functional Grammars can serve universally. In systemic linguistics, language is considered to perform a function in the context where it is used.

In looking at the specific tenets of SFG, it can be posited that, we usually interpret the world through our languages whether we know it or not. This is what the ideational function is about. Halliday himself as quoted by Ventola asserts that, Functional Grammar is a natural grammar because according to him, “everything in grammar can be explained by the way that the grammar is used.” (73)

The argument for the acceptability of SFG in all human language contexts can be strengthened with a consideration of the concepts of linguistic Relativism

and Determinism in Saphir Whorf's hypothesis which talks about how we actually conceptualize the world by our linguistic orientation. We think in our languages, we view the world through the way our minds have been programmed through the languages that we speak and that is how we conceptualize the world. That is why for us who use the English Language as a second language, there are certain ideas that would be difficult for us to express directly in English because we think in our mother tongue. For example, we have idioms that are reflective of our local languages, the meanings of which are difficult to capture using English terms. This no doubt results in certain expressions in English which are considered 'un-English' or 'deviants' or even labeled 'Nigerian English' popularize through literature and popular culture.

For example, in Igala – *Ene kima mugwò ki kwòn, ya mugwò kiya lòn*

Meaning – He who does not know where he is from will also not know where he is going to.

This does not sound like a typical English expression because of the encapsulation of Igala worldview popularized through literature and popular culture.

Methodology

Data Collection for the study is a corpus of 15 NigE and indigenous language expressions (proverbs, idioms, discourse markers) from literature, media, and oral sources. Interviews: 5 Nigerian linguists/translators on meaning interpretation. The analysis employs a qualitative SFG meta-functional analysis and thematic coding for cultural-specific vs. universal features.

Data Analysis And Discussion

The research examines a tripartite level of analysis of 45 linguistic expressions (15 NigE, 15 indigenous, 15 SFG interpretations) and interviews with 5 Nigerian linguists to evaluate SFG's three meta-functions—ideational (representation of experience), interpersonal (social negotiation), and **textual** (discourse coherence).

A. Ideational Function : Cultural VS, Universal Encoding

<i>Nigerian English</i>	<i>Indigenous Languages</i>	<i>SFG Interpretation</i>
1. "To blow your trumpet" (Self-praise)	1. Yoruba: "Òwè l'òṣin òrò" (Proverbs are rhetorical tools)	Experiential/Logical: Cultural encoding of concepts.
2. "To put sand in someone's gari" (Sabotage)	2. Hausa: "Magana jari ce" (Speech is an asset)	Experiential: Localized experiences.
3. "Long leg" (Corruption)	3. Igbo: "Egbe bere, ugo bere" (Equity)	Logical: Moral reasoning.
4. "To shake body" (Dance)	4. Efik: "Ányá ñwèd ñkpò" (Observation leads action)	Experiential: Sensory engagement.
5. "To know the road" (Social connections)	5. Tiv: "A tree does not make a forest" (Collectivism)	Logical: Social interdependence.

B. Interpersonal Function: Social Negotiation

<i>Nigerian English</i>	<i>Indigenous Languages</i>	<i>SFG Interpretation</i>
1. "Abi?" (Consensus-seeking tag)	1. Yoruba: "ò kú àárò" (Greeting)	Mood: Social bonding.
2. "Make we go" (Solidarity)	2. Hausa: "Inā kwana?" (Care-check)	Modality: Emotional attunement.
3. "I beg" (Politeness)	3. Igbo: "Kedu?" (How-are-you?)	Mood: Relational maintenance.
4. "Na you sabi" (Deference)	4. Urhobo: "Mavò vwe?" (Connection-check)	Modality: Power dynamics.
5. "No vex" (Apology)	5. Kanuri: "Nyaa laa?" (Validation)	Modality: Conflict resolution.

C. Textual Function: Cohesion Strategies

<i>Nigerian English</i>	<i>Indigenous Languages</i>	<i>SFG Interpretation</i>
1. "You see..." (Discourse marker)	1. Yoruba: "Ó úe é ùùgbón..." (Contrastive opener)	Theme: Topic management.
2. "I'm telling you!" (Emphasis)	2. Hausa: "Tò, yanzu..." (Temporal shift)	Rheme: Information highlighting.
3. "Na so?" (Continuation prompt)	3. Igbo: "Maka na..." (Causal link)	Theme: Logical flow.
4. "Ehen?" (Back channeling)	4. Edo: "ọ khọ rọ..." (Topic shift)	Rheme: Listener engagement.
5. "As I was saying..." (Narrative resumption)	5. Ibibio: "Idem mme..." (Topic anchor)	Theme: Cohesion.

Interviews with 5 Nigerian Linguists/Translators

1. Prof. A. Bamgbose (Yoruba Linguist):
"NigE's 'to know the road' reflects a cultural logic of social navigation. SFG's ideational function captures this, but indigenous proverbs like 'Òwe l'ọ̀úin ọ̀rọ̀' demand deeper contextual frames."
2. Dr. I. Udofot (Phonologist):
"Make we go"* isn't grammatically 'incorrect'—it's a mood-system adaptation for group cohesion. SFG's universality hinges on accepting such innovations."*
3. Translator E. Eze (Igbo):
"Igbo's 'Egbe bere, ugo bere' has no English equivalent. SFG's logical meta-function struggles here unless we expand 'reasoning' to include proverbs."
4. Dr H. Mohammed (Hausa Scholar):
"Hausa's 'Magana jari ce' textualizes oral culture. SFG's 'textual' function must account for non-linear discourse in indigenous narratives."
5. Prof. M. Olateju (Discourse Analyst):
"NigE's 'you see' mirrors Yoruba's 'ó úe é ùùgbón' as thematic markers. SFG's universality is validated here, but cultural specificity modifies its parameters."

Discussion of Findings

SFG's Universality in Nigerian contexts: SFG accommodates NigE but struggles with indigenous untranslatables. I. Interpersonal and Textual Functions: Strong alignment. A) NigE's "abi?" and indigenous mood markers (e.g., Hausa "Inā kwana?") fit SFG's interpersonal meta-function. B) Discourse markers ("you see" in NigE; Yoruba "ó úe é ùùgbón") validate textual coherence. II. Ideational Function: Culturally constrained. NigE idioms ("long leg") are analyzable, but indigenous proverbs (e.g., Igbo "Egbe bere...") require SFG to incorporate cultural schemas.

Sapir-Whorf and Cultural Specificity Indigenous expressions (e.g., Efik "Ányá ñwéd ñkpò") reflect

worldviews untranslatable into NigE. SFG must integrate **linguistic relativism** to fully capture meaning.

Theoretical Implications SFG's Adaptability: Confirmed for NigE and indigenous languages' social functions. Limitations: Ideational analysis needs culture-sensitive parameters for proverbs.

Recommendations

- i. Expand SFG's logical meta-function to include proverbial reasoning.
- ii. Develop cross-cultural SFG frameworks for postcolonial multilingual contexts.

Conclusion

This study has critically examined the applicability of Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG) as a universal theory of language through the lens of Nigerian English (NigE) and indigenous languages. By analyzing fifteen (15) linguistic expressions across NigE and languages like Yoruba, Hausa, and Igbo, alongside interviews with five (5) linguists, the research demonstrates that while SFG's interpersonal and textual meta-functions are robustly applicable in multilingual Nigerian contexts, its ideational function requires cultural adaptation to fully account for indigenous meaning-making systems.

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