

Analysis of Two Texts Using Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics: The Impacts of Contexts on Genre and Register Variables

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Abstract: This paper presents the results of the systemic functional analysis of two texts, i.e., a donation request letter and a page from a textbook, both concerning the topic of endangered animals. The aims of the analysis were (a) to determine the relationships between each text and the cultural context; and (b) to unravel the impact of each text's situational context on its register variables (field, mode, tenor). Using Halliday's systemic functional linguistic approach, a textual analysis was employed to identify how various language choices have construed the social purposes of each text. Findings show that the two texts, despite having a similar topic, were heavily shaped by their cultural and situational contexts, resulting in the different way the topic is presented and treated by each text. Highly influential to the register variables of texts were the context of situations, in particular the key purpose and audience. Recommendations for how such findings could have some pedagogical implications in the English language teaching for EFL learners are provided. This includes, but not limited to, raising learners' awareness of the inextricable relationships between language use and contexts, which in turn could help them communicate in the English language more effectively.

Keywords: *English language, genre, register, systemic functional linguistics*

Abstrak: Makalah ini menyajikan hasil analisis linguistik sistemik fungsional terhadap dua teks, yaitu surat permintaan sumbangan dan buku teks. Keduanya membahas topik tentang hewan yang terancam punah. Tujuan analisis adalah (a) menentukan hubungan antara setiap teks dan konteks budaya yang melatarbelakanginya; dan (b) mengungkap dampak konteks situasional terhadap variabel register (field, mode, tenor) setiap teks. Dengan pendekatan linguistik sistemik fungsional oleh Halliday, analisis tekstual diaplikasikan untuk mengidentifikasi bagaimana berbagai pilihan bahasa ikut membentuk tujuan sosial dari kedua teks. Hasil analisis menunjukkan bahwa meskipun memiliki topik yang sama, kedua teks sangat dipengaruhi oleh konteks budaya dan situasionalnya, yang mengakibatkan perbedaan cara penyajian topik oleh setiap teks. Yang sangat berpengaruh terhadap variabel register teks adalah konteks situasi, khususnya tujuan utama dan target pembaca. Makalah ini juga menunjukkan bagaimana analisis seperti ini dapat berimplikasi pedagogis terhadap pengajaran bahasa Inggris. Antara lain, perlunya meningkatkan kesadaran pembelajar tentang hubungan yang tak terpisahkan antara penggunaan bahasa dan konteks, yang pada gilirannya diharapkan dapat membantu mereka menggunakan bahasa Inggris secara lebih efektif.

Kata kunci: *Bahasa Inggris, genre, register, linguistik fungsional sistemik*

1. INTRODUCTION

Language is a social practice that employs much more than the simple lexical or grammatical meaning encoded in text. Language, according to Halliday (1978), is a system with an ultimate function of making meaning and expression, which involves linguistic choices depending on contexts and situational setting. Unlike Chomskyan formal linguistics,

which sees language as cognitively motivated, functional approaches emphasizes on social and interpersonal aspects of the language. Schleppegrell (2004) states that “Rather than seeing language as a set of rules, the functional perspective sees the language system as a set of options available for construing different kinds of meanings” (p. 7).

Viewing language as a strategic meaning-making tool, Halliday (1978) develops systemic functional linguistics (SFL) as an analytical method to allow detailed and systematic descriptions of language patterns. Eggins (2004) defines SFL as “a functional-semantic approach to language which explores both how people use language in different contexts, and how language is structured for use as semiotic system” (p. 22-23). The theory is often applied to understand why a text means what it does and why it has the value it does. Language from the SFL perspective is “systemic” in that it is represented as resource with numerous system networks that allow language users to choose from a set of options to make meaning on multiple level of the language system. Language, according to Halliday et al. (2013), is a “complex semiotic system, having various levels, or strata” (p. 24). The strata include phonology, lexicogrammar, semantics, and context that form the multi-layered language system. Language is also “functional” since the general function of the language is to make meaning in context. The choice from meaning-making options is governed by the cultural, social, and contextual setting of the situation. As Halliday et al. (2013) put it, the linguistic system is embedded in context. In the SFL’s view, a text is subject to its context of culture and situation in which it is generated.

The purpose of this paper is to analyse two related texts, both concerning similar a topic of endangered animals, and the role of their situational and socio-cultural contexts in shaping the texts. The first text is a letter from *World Wide Fund* (WWF) Australia. The letter has been sent to particular audiences, although it is not possible to establish how each audience is selected – it might have been done randomly. The original letter comes in four pages. However, this paper only analyses the first part of the letter, which is deemed significant to the overall text. The second text is taken from a book intended for secondary school students entitled *Gollancz Endangered Animals Encyclopaedia For Children* by Roger Few, which was published in 1997. One coherent text consisting of two pages from the textbook will be analysed.

2. METHOD

A textual analysis was employed to unravel how various language choices have construed the social purposes of each text. The analysis of the texts is drawn on the Systemic Functional Linguistic (SFL) approach. The relationship between the texts and their cultural context is analysed by identifying their genre, while the impacts of their situational contexts are analysed in terms of their register variables, which include *field* (what the language is being used to talk about), *mode* (the role of the language is playing in the interaction; and *tenor* (the role relationships between the interactants) (Halliday (1978, in Eggins, 1994). The followings are the reproduction of the two texts. For the sake of the analysis, each sentence is numbered.

Text 1: a letter from World Wide Fund (WWF) Australia

1. *Dear Friend,*

2. *Almost 1 in 3 Australian mammals are extinct, endangered or vulnerable.*

3. *In the past 200 years, one-quarter of the animals lost to the world have been Australian.*

4. *Half of our forests and bush are gone forever. In some areas, 90 per cent of our native vegetation has been lost.*

5. *Our reefs and coastal areas are under threat, yet less than 5 per cent of our marine environment is protected.*

6. *I'd hate to think — and I'm sure you would too — that one day you and I would have to explain to our children or grandchildren why, knowing what we know, we let so many of our unique animals and plants die out and so much of our remarkable environment be destroyed, without doing anything about it.*

7. *We must act now. 8. In Australia and around the world some of our most loved creatures are, right now, on the verge of distinction:*

9. *Whales are still hunted on the high seas under the guise of "scientific" whaling, directly contravening the moratorium.*

10. *Some species, like the Blue Whale, have never recovered*

11. *Six of the world's seven species of marine turtle are found in our Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area. 12. Five of these species are classified as either vulnerable or endangered.*

13. *There are only 3 isolated populations of the mountain pygmy possum remaining in the whole of Australia. 14. Only about 50 Gilbert's potoroos still survive. 15. The eastern quoll is in danger of extinction. 16. Our bilby is under threat.*

17. *In Australia almost 9% of all mammals have already become extinct including the Tasmanian tiger (Thylacine).*

18. *Of the 24 species of albatross in the world, 22 are currently listed as threatened largely due to illegal, unregulated and unreported long line fishing.*

19. *Sadly, these are just a few examples amongst many.*

20. *That's why I'm writing to you today. 21. By choosing to support WWF Australia, you will help build the most powerful force for nature this country has ever seen.*

22. *For less than 50 cents a day with WWF, you can, without even leaving the comfort of your home, help save our vanishing species, our disappearing bush and our polluted beaches and waterways.*

Text 2: A page from a textbook intended for secondary students

1. *There is a common threat to the survival of the various endangered animals of Australia and New Zealand. 2. Too often, animals brought from overseas and let loose to roam the land have played a part in the downfall of native creatures. 3. The greater bilby, which was once common in Australia, suffered terribly because of hunting and cattle grazing.*

4. *But then more problems came from introduced animals. 5. Rabbits took over bilby burrows, foxes attacked it and the bilby is now exact in many areas. 6. In others it lives only in scattered pockets.*

7. *The ring-tailed rock wallaby feeds on the scant plant life in dry, rocky country. 8. It first come under threat from hunters who wanted its handsome fur. 9. Now its main enemies are goats that have invaded its habitat, using up its food supply.*

10. *Smaller animals have also suffered. 11. The numbat has retreated to the southwest comer of Australia. 12. There it uses its strong claws to break into termites' and ants' nests*

and its long snout to probe inside and eat the occupants. 13. Foxes and cats, as well as fires set to clear land, made life impossible for it in other regions. 14. Birds are also at risk. 15. The mallee fowl is famous for building mounds of rotting vegetation where it keeps its eggs warm. 16. Much of its scrubland home has been turned into cropland or its heavily grazed by sheep and rabbits.

17. Hochstetter's frog lives along forested mountain streams in New Zealand's North Island. 18. It has been wiped out in many areas by rats, and pigs and goats have turned much of the streamside vegetation. 19. Clearing of New Zealand's forest for fanning left little room for the kokako. 20. Only about 1,000 birds remain on North Island and the southern group was thought to be extinct until some were discovered recently on Stewart Island. 21. All the survivors, however, risk attack from rats and cats that raid nests.

22. Efforts are under way to help most of these animals. 23. One that has already benefited from conservation is the estuarine crocodile. 24. This giant animal is heavily hunted for its hide along the coasts of Asia, but because of a strict hunting ban far fewer are killed in northern Australia. 25. It is one of the few places in the world where crocodiles are actually rising in number.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Context of Culture

Text 1

We could immediately observe that the overall purpose of Text 1 is to persuade its readers to get involved in the efforts, being put by the organisation in preserving endangered animals in Australia, by supporting financially. This is indicated in the last sentence: *22. for less than 50 cents a day with WWF, you can, without even leaving the comfort of your home, help save our vanishing species, our disappearing bush and our polluted beaches and waterways.* To achieve this ultimate goal, the writer attempts to attain 'the implicated goals' (Eggins, 1994: 4) by presenting some supporting data and facts. The writer, for example, reports the general picture of the Australian endangered animals and their environments (sentences 1-5). Some examples of the critical situation, with detailed statistical accounts, are provided to support the explanation (sentences 9-18). The writer also warns its reader about a possible moral consequence if the critical situation is ignored (sentences 6).

In this text, these three features – explanation, example, reminder – are altogether employed to assist the writer in achieving the main goal (i.e., gaining financial support). In other words, those features are functional in that their presence is not merely to explain a situation, to give examples, or to remind of something. They are there to allow the writer justify why their appeal is important and worth fulfilling. If one explanation is taken out of the whole text and looked at in different contexts, its function might be different. For example, sentence *1. Almost 1 in 3 Australian mammals are extinct, endangered or vulnerable* would function differently if it is put in a newspaper (where it may function to inform its readers) or uttered by a teacher to their students (where it may function to raise some environmental awareness).

We can then say that "the general context that gave purpose and meaning" (Eggins, 1994: 30) to Text 1 is one which falls within a social activity of raising fund. We understand that the letter is not simply reporting a situation or providing information or revealing data and fact about endangered animals in some places. Rather, the text is aimed at raising fund. We can recognize this because fund-raising is "a recognizable social activity in our culture" (Eggins,

1994: 27). Text 1, we can suggest, belongs to *fund raising* genre.

As indicated earlier, this activity is oriented towards a particular social action (i.e., donation). To achieve this ultimate goal the activity goes through certain stages which are currently considered culturally appropriate. Thus, it can implied from the Text 1 that in this context of Australian culture, a social activity of raising fund is typically carried out in the following stages: (1) Explanation of current situation, both general and specific, where fund is needed; (2) Explanation of consequences if the situation is ignored; (3) Indication of the significance of the fund; (4) Technical information about what can be funded, how to fund, etc. It follows that any missing order might be unacceptable in this context. (Although there is often opportunity to vary these stages).

Text 2

We can quickly suggest that the purpose of Text 2 is to provide information about some endangered animals found in two countries, Australia and New Zealand. It focuses on the explanation why those animals are in danger. To achieve its main purpose, the text goes through certain stages. Firstly, it mentions factors that contribute to the critical situation. Then it explains how those factors operate, and finally it describes the current condition of the endangered animals. We can observe these stages, for example, in paragraph 1.

1. *The greater bilby, which was once common in Australia, suffered terribly because of hunting and cattle grazing. But then more problems came from introduced animals* (factors contributing to the situation).

2. *Rabbits took over bilby burrows, foxes attacked it* (how the factors operate) and *the bilby is now extinct in many areas*. 3. *In others, it lives only in scattered areas* (current situation as result of the factors).

The order is principally applicable to the explanation of other endangered animals mentioned in the text. Since the function of Text 2 is to provide information, we can then suggest that the cultural context of the text is one which is associated to a social activity of giving information through written form – thus, the genre of Text 2 is *presenting information*.

We can further deduce that its context of culture requires the activity to be done in the pattern indicated earlier. This is the way of presenting information, idea, or experience in written media, that is culturally acceptable at the time the text is written. This way may or may not be followed by people from other cultures.

Context of situation

Field

Field, in a simplest sense, refers to the topic of a text. In this respect, the field of Text 1 and Text 2 is similar, i.e., endangered animals. This topic is immediately recognisable from the content words used. Words such *extinct*, *endangered*, *vulnerable*, *threatened*, and word groups like *are gone forever*, *in danger*, and *are currently listed as threatened* are some of the clues from which the topic of Text 1 can be deduced. Text 2 contains such lexical items as *endangered animals*, *extinct*, *came under threat*, *at risk*.

The impact of the field on the two texts is relatively similar. The field influences the lexical choice. Both texts use several subject-specific terms such as *mammals*, *vegetation*, *species*, *whaling*, *moratorium*, and *long line fishing* (Text 1), *habitat*, *introduced animals*,

conservation, and *estuarine* (Text 2). These words are commonly used when talking about bio-ecological topics. The two texts also contain a lot of animal name: Text 1 has *Blue Whales*, *marine turtle*, *possum*, *potoroos*, *quoll*, *bilby*, *albatross*; Text 2 mentions *bilby*, *ring-tailed rock wallaby*, *numbat*, *mall fowl*, *kokako*, etc. All these animals are known, at least among (Australian and New Zealand) conservationists, as being in the brink of extinction.

Some features, however, make the two texts different. The first feature is related to the focus of information presented. Text 1 emphasises on the quantitative accuracy of the situation. It is statistically more detail in its report than Text 2. Text 1 employs figures, such as *1 in 3*, *one-quarter*, *90 per cent*, *24 species*. On the other hand, Text 2 does not provide exact figures. Rather, it gives more detail accounts of the factors contributing to the extinction of the animals in question. Compare the following two sentences taken from the first part of each text: Text 1: 2. *Almost 1 in 3 Australian mammals are extinct, endangered or vulnerable.*

Text 2: 2. *Too often, animals brought from overseas and let loose to roam the land have played a part in the downfall of native creatures.*

A second difference is apparent in the choice of animals being reported. While Text 1 refers to animals that its audience is most likely familiar with (*whale*, *turtle*, *possum*, *Tasmanian tiger*, *albatross*), Text 2 mainly discusses animals most probably unfamiliar to its general readers (*bilby*, *ring-tailed rock wallaby*, *numbat*, *mallee fowl*, *Hochstetter's frog*, *kokako*).

Thus, although both texts share the same topic, each one focuses on different aspect of the topic. Text 1 is more interested in the quantitative aspect, while Text 2 in the process of distinction. This difference can be related to the audience and key purpose the texts. Text 1 is written to general readers (who may or may not be interested in the environmental issues). The purpose of this text is to persuade its readers, after presenting them with exact data, to offer financial support. Given these two aspects of situation, Text 1 needs to provide the readers with short, direct information with greater sense of accuracy and validity. By doing so, the presentation is not only easier to understand but also more convincing, enhancing its possibility of success.

In contrast, the main audiences targeted by Text 2 are those who are advertently seeking information about endangered animals. Those readers are therefore most likely interested in this topic. In terms of goal, the text is written to enhance knowledge about animals in peril, and most likely to raise its readers' environmental awareness. An in-depth exploration of the topic is then functionally right.

Mode

The notion of mode is related to how the language is used in an interaction. The mode of Text 1 and Text 2 are the same and can be briefly described as written to be read. Mode, according to Martin (2001), can be further analysed in terms of distance. There are two types of distance: spatial/interpersonal and experiential distance. The first distance refers "to the possibilities of immediate feedback between two interactants", and the latter "to the distance between language and the social process occurring" (Eggins, 1994: 54-53). We shall look at how these types of mode operate in Text 1 and Text 2.

Regarding feedback, the two texts are slightly different. Text 1 is a letter; therefore, it has

high possibilities of feedback, which can be rapid or delayed. Text 2, in contrast, does not have such possibilities since this text is part of a textbook. Feedback from book readers is of course possible, but the possibilities are very slim. Even if there is feedback, it will not be as immediate as it is to a letter. In terms of experiential distance, however, both texts are similar in that they are not the accompaniment of any social action that is taking place at the time the language is being used.

The influence of the variation in mode on the language use is noticeable. Since the readers' feedback for Text 1 is highly possible (and is of the greatest importance), the language in the text sounds friendlier. Rather than using *Dear Sir/Madam* for salutation, the text writer chooses *Dear Friend*. The readers are also referred to by using *you*. Personal pronouns "We" (in *We must act now*) and the possessive pronouns "our" (e.g., *our native vegetation, our marine environment, our children and grandchildren*, etc.) are exploited to give the readers a stronger sense of belonging to the situation being described. This kind of friendliness and a sense of inclusiveness does not exist in Text 2. Personal pronouns are not used, to refer to either the readers or the writer.

Tenor

A third important aspect of situational context is tenor, or the social relationship between two interactants. Tenor is important because everyone can play different social roles at different times. Any language we use, or choose to use, is highly influenced by the social role we are playing at the time we are using the language. Regarding the notion of mode, Text 1 and Text 2 are dissimilar. Text 1's tenor can be described as the language from fund-raiser to prospective benefactors, while Text 2 is more likely to originate specialist to general audience.

In consequence, the relationship between interactants of Text 1 is rather different from interactants of Text 2. In the first text, the writer is in a position that situates them in a big hope for the readers' immediate response upon receiving the letter. The power relationship between the interactants is therefore unequal here. The writer's power is low because whether his text (letter) can function effectively to enact social action (i.e., donation) is dependant on the readers' responses (although it must also be acknowledged that in another sense, the writer has access to information that the reader supposedly does not – thereby granting them a bigger power).

In Text 2, the power relationship is the other way around. The writer is more powerful than the readers: the writer is in the position that supplies the information, and the readers are in the position that seeks them. It seems that the key purpose of the text influences the tenor of the text, which then shapes the power relationships.

The impact of tenor on each text is very strong. Text 1 contains language which creates intimacy (*Dear Friend*) and a feeling of collective ownership (*our reef, our children and grandchildren, our own Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area, We must act now*). These lexical items are employed to help the writer establish more personal relationship with the readers. The text also tries to raise the readers' sympathy through its focus on numbers (e.g., *14. Only about 50 Gilbert's potoroos still survive*) and suggests that there are the more cases than it can report now (*19. Sadly, these are just a few examples amongst many*).

Finally, it offers some kind of 'guarantee' that the readers' positive response will be extremely significant to the situation: *21. By choosing to support WWF-Australia, you will help build the most powerful force for nature that this country has ever seen.* (Note that the

writer uses medium modality "will", rather than low ones like "can" or "might", to give a stronger effect). All these moves – creating intimacy, providing convincing information, raising sympathy, and acknowledging – are commonly made by fund-raisers appealing supports from public.

Text 2 shows a different case. The social role being played by the writer (i.e., as an expert in the field) makes Text 1 sounds more "academic" than Text 1. The information provided is well-developed, more detail, more coherent, and more in-depth than that Text 1. For example, each text reports the situation of one of the endangered animals, bilby, very differently.

Text 1: 16. *Our bilby is under threat.*

Text 2: 3. *The greater bilby, which was once common in Australia, suffered terribly because of hunting and cattle grazing. But then more problems came from introduced animals. Rabbit took over bi/by burrows, foxes attacked it and the bilby is now extinct in many areas. In others it lives only in scattered pockets.*

Playing a social role as a specialist, the writer of Text 2 provides and organises the information in a more "academic" way than does the writer of Text 1. As a specialist, the writer of Text 2 is expected to do this by readers who deliberately seeks the information. It should be noted, however, that syntactically the language of Text 2 is not fully academic and formal. The sentences are mostly short, with less complex structure. This fact can be related to the intended audience of Text 2, i.e., young and juvenile readers).

4. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

This paper has demonstrated how Text 1 and Text 2 are shaped by their cultural and situational contexts. One impact of socio-cultural context on the texts can be observed through the genre that each text is using. Text 1 is a fund-raising activity, while Text 2 is an informational account. Although both texts are about the same topic, the different genre impacts the way the topic is presented and treated by each text. We have also demonstrated that each text is highly influenced by its context of situation. The register variables of the texts clearly have impacts on the lexical choice and syntactic structure. It should be noted, however, that two aspects of the context (i.e., key purpose and audience) have played the most significant role in shaping the texts. We suggest that language teachers utilize SFL method to analyse some comparable texts and demonstrate to their students how various language choices can construe the social purposes of texts.

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