

FORM and FUNCTION: *An Example of Spoken Discourse Analysis*

by

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Module 4: Spoken Discourse Analysis

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Introduction

Emperor Pu Yi: Why are words important for a gentleman, Mr. Johnston?

Mr. (Reginald) Johnston: Words are important for a gentleman, for if you cannot say what you mean, you will never mean what you say.

(Bertolucci & Peploe: *The Last Emperor*)

Mr. Johnston's reply to Emperor Pu Yi contains one truism and one fallacy with regards to spoken discourse. The truism is that all utterances have a meaning, that is a purpose or intention, nothing is said without a reason for saying it. In discourse analysis these reasons are called *functions*. The fallacy is that the words in an utterance, that is, the utterance's linguistic *form*, determines its function.

The first part of this paper examines how function is often neither predictable nor determined from form alone. Specifically how an utterance's function often can only be understood by reference to any or all of the following: *situation, discourse structure, and intonation*, with an utterance's linguistic form often being the least helpful in this regard. The second part of the paper will analyze a transcript of spoken discourse to provide an extended illustration of just how limited a tool form is for determining function.

Part 1.

1.0 Form and Function

Form is concerned with syntactic structure up to the sentence level, i.e. the arrangement of morphemes and words into the larger units of group, clause, and finally, sentence. Form is also concerned with the syntagmatic relationship between words within clauses and sentences. For example, "I'm taller than you" is different from "You're taller than I am". Inverting "I" and 'you' around the comparative adjective changes the propositional meaning of the sentence. *Function* however, is concerned with the utterance's purpose, i.e. what the utterance is meant to achieve. For example:

Father: Get the tools down off the shelf

Son: **You're taller than I am!**

(original example)¹

¹ All "original examples" have been concocted for illustrative purposes.

The son uttered “You’re taller than I am” for the purpose of refusing to comply with a command. This is a very different function of than that of:

- A: Which of us is taller?
B: **You’re taller than I am**
(original example)

...where, “You’re taller than I am”, functions to provide information to a question. Nothing about the form, that is the syntactic structure of the utterance itself, or the syntagmatic relation between the words within it, allowed us to predict its function.

2.0 Form, Function and Discourse Classifications².

However, form is not *wholly* divorced from function. Hymes (1972) observes that ‘*how* something is said is part of *what* is said’ (in Coulthard 1985:50). For example:

I.		shut the door
II.	Can you	shut the door

The above clauses have the form-classifications of, (I.) imperative and (II) interrogative, but both could be assigned the functional classification of ‘**directive**’. The ‘directive’ function of the above stem from the verb ‘shut’ and whatever follows (‘the door’, ‘the window’ ‘your mouth’ etc.). While example II above looks like an **inquire** that could be paraphrased as “Are you willing to shut the door?”, this *Can you* equals *Are you willing* paraphrase is faulty (Haegeman, 1983:83). For example, “Can you be quiet” does not equal “Are you willing to be quiet”. Yet, in the case of II, the grammatical items (forms) preceding ‘shut’ do have a purpose, namely, a ‘politeness function’. This is what Searle (1975) calls an *indirect speech act* (Coulthard, 1985: 27). That is, an utterance with an underlying base function performed *indirectly* by the performing of what, on the surface, could be another speech act (function) form. In the case of II, a **directive** function is indirectly performed by an interrogative form, which are often used for **inquires** (‘questions’), rather than directly by an imperative.

While considerations such as ‘politeness’ may change the *semantic* label given the utterance, from say ‘command’ to ‘request’, *discourse* labels are concerned with base functions. Discourse-function labels like **directive** subsume semantic ones such as

² All **discourse function labels** are taken from Francis & Hunston, 1992: pp. 128-133.

‘request’, ‘order’, ‘command’ etc. The above shows that when assigning discourse function classifications, there are no form-equals-function maxims, such as “an imperative *always* equals a **directive**”, or, “an interrogative *always* equals an **inquire**”.

3.0 Function is interpreted

Garfinkel (1967) states it is never possible to say what one means “in so many words” (in Coulthard, 1985: 30). Listeners work to interpret what a speaker functionally means or implies. According to Grice (1975), for an utterance in form to be unambiguous requires that the speaker fulfil four maxims:

1. Relation be relevant
2. Quality
 - a) do not say what you believe to be false
 - b) do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence
3. Quantity
 - a) make your contribution as informative as is required
 - b) do not make your contribution more informative than required
4. Manner
 - a) avoid obscurity of expression
 - b) avoid ambiguity
 - c) be brief
 - d) be orderly

(In Coulthard, 1985:31)

Many utterances do not conform to these maxims, but retroactive application of these maxims by the listener onto the utterance, allows him or her to interpret the function of the speaker’s (potentially) ambiguous utterance. For example, if one roommate says to another: “The music is a bit loud”, rather than focus solely on the utterance’s declarative form, which seems like a mere statement of fact, the listener mentally rephrases the utterance as if the speaker had fulfilled Grice’s maxims. The listener is able to interpret the utterance’s declarative form as a **directive**, the speaker likely means: “Turn down the music”. The utterance’s function is now understood, despite the speaker having violated maxims of both “Quantity” and “Manner”. This constant effort to interpret each other’s utterances is what Grice (1975) calls the “Co-operative Principle” (*ibid.*).

4.0 Situation as a function determiner

Applying Grice’s maxims to correctly interpret an utterance requires reference to the situation in which it was said. As Sadock (1974) observes:

...the Co-operative Principle has been believably invoked, e.g. by Searle (1975), to account for the fact that an utterance of ‘it’s cold in here’ can convey a request to close the door. But it can also convey a request to open a door or to bring a blanket or to pay a gas bill. In fact it is difficult to think of a request that the utterance could NOT convey in the right context.

(in Coulthard, 1985:32).

Consideration of situation is often vital for determining function. Sinclair *et al.* (1972) lay out constative (i.e. what constitutes) rules for commands. For example, one rule is:

Rule An interrogative clause is interpreted as a *command to do* if it fulfils all the following conditions:

- a) it contains one of the modals can, could, will, would, (and sometimes going to)³;
- b) if the subject of the clause is also the addressee;
- c) the predicate describes an action which is physically possible at the time of the utterance

(in Coulthard, 1985: 131)

According to ‘c’), in a classroom ‘Can you drive?’ would be interpreted as an elicitation of information, but if two people were driving cross-country, ‘Can you drive?’ would likely be a **directive** for the passenger to take over the wheel from the driver. This shows that the function of a form often depends of the *situation* where it is uttered.

5.0 Discourse Structure as a Function determiner

However, looking at how discourse *itself* is syntagmatically structured also tells us a great deal about the relationship between form and function, without necessarily having to refer to situation (Sinclair & Coulthard, 1992: 9). As Sinclair and Coulthard (1975) note:

It is the place in the structure of the discourse which determines ultimately which act a particular grammatical item is interpreted as realising, though classification can only be made of items already tagged with features from grammar and situation.

(in Coulthard, 1985:129)

6.0 Exchange Structure

Sinclair & Coulthard (1975) created a rank scale for discourse, modeled on Halliday’s (1961) rank scale for forms, comprised of, in ascending order, the *act*, *move*, *exchange*, and *transaction*⁴(Brazil, 1995: 23). Spoken discourse, by definition, must consist of at

³ Note that ‘a)’ however is a purely form consideration.

⁴ A Rank scale is taxonomy from the smallest unit(s) to the largest. In grammar (form) these are the *morpheme*, *word*, *group*, *clause*, and *sentence* (see Brazil, 1995:29). Smaller units comprise the larger ones.

least two turns involving at least two people. According to Sinclair and Coulthard, the exchange structure has at least two elements, ***Initiation*** and ***Response***. For example:

I: Are you busy?

R: Yes

(original example)

However, the same exchange could go:

I: Are you busy?

?: Why?

?: I'm going for a drink.

R: Can't, I've got exams to mark.

?: That's too bad.

(original example)

The ‘why’ above is not really a response, in that it does not answer the **Initiation** (question) above. The “why” is labeled by Sinclair and Coulthard as **R/I** (an element that may be a 2nd initiation, or a response to the 2nd initiation, following an **I**), and is an optional element (indicated by brackets). The exchange above can now be labeled: **I (R/I)(R/I) R** (Coulthard, 1985:136).

Nothing about the above **R:** “Can't, I've got exams to mark” *required* the other participant to say “That's too bad”. “That's too bad” is an option labeled as **Follow-up (F)**. A **Response** does not predict or require a **Follow-up** *unlike* an **I** or **R/I**, which *predict* and require a **Response**. The structure of exchanges can then be described as **I (R/I) R (F)** (ibid.).

7.0 Moves

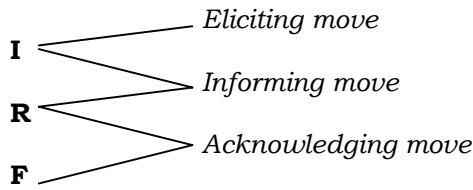
A switch between an element (**I**, **R/I**, **R** or **F**) requires a move. In section **6.0**, the **Initiation** was made using an eliciting move, but in the following:

I: I'm tired

R: Me too.

(original example)

... **I** is an informing move, as is the **Response**. However, an *acknowledging* move for **R**, such as ‘Oh’ could also have occurred. Each exchange structure element, with the exception of **Follow-ups**, can be realized by two different moves, shown below.



(Coulthard & Montgomery, 1981; in Francis & Hunston, 1992:124)

There are also two types of eliciting moves and two types of informing moves:

- e1: eliciting moves seeking *major information*
- e2: eliciting moves seeking *polarity information* (i.e. yes or no)
- i1: informing moves asserting *major information*
- i2: informing moves asserting *polarity information*

(Coulthard & Brazil, 1992:74)

Each type of move can only occur once in an exchange and in only one, therefore predictable, order: e1, i1 or e2, i2 (ibid: 75). This idea of one type of element or move predicting the subsequent move explains how discourse structure *itself*, allows people discern a single function from the variety of forms that can realize it.

For example:

- | | |
|--|--|
| I: “Can you come for dinner tonight?” | R: I’ve got a test. |
| | R: My mother is sick |
| | R: Tomorrow I have an interview |

(original example)

An e2 **Initiation** predicts a polar (Y/N) response, yet the responses in *form* appear to be irrelevant to the elicitation, i.e., none of the responses contain ‘yes’ or ‘no’. However, the discourse constraints demand a yes no answer, so the ‘initiator’ *knows* that a Y/N polarity assertion is being made by the ‘respondent’ regardless of the form realizing it. Employing Grice’s maxims, the ‘initiator’ will attempt to interpret how the ‘respondent’s’ response has realized a ‘Yes’ or ‘No’ (all **R**esponses above would be ‘no’).

8.0 Intonation as a function determiner

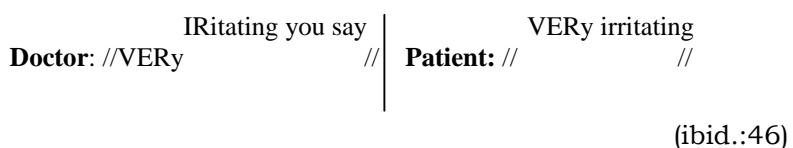
Brazil (in Coulthard 1992: 37) points out that intonation provides moment-to-moment functional and emotional value to utterances. Due to space constraints, this section will only show two examples of how intonation can act as a function determiner.

Prominent Syllables: Making syllables or words in a tone unit prominent can change the function of the same form. //CAN you SWIM a LENGTH john// is a question because CAN is prominent. Whereas //can you SWIM a LENGTH john// is more likely a command because “...‘can’ is non-prominent and non-performing; it would make no difference if “would”, “could” or “will” were substituted into what is essentially a politeness formula.” (Coulthard, 1985: 131) (see also section **2.0**).

Pitch-Key Sequence: Utterances are rarely said in monotone, rather the tone and pitch within or between utterances often changes, and these changes in pitch convey the utterance’s intended function. A pitch difference, called the key, can be labeled *high*, *mid*, or *low* relative to the pitch preceding it (Coulthard, 1992:42). Pitch can set up constraints/expectations of what should follow in response to an utterance. Take *key-tone termination*, the function value of the key of the last prominent syllable in a tone unit.

A *high* termination is used to elicit a yes/no or agree/disagree response:

Fig.1



The doctor’s utterance was declarative in form, but due to the intonation was correctly interpreted by the patient as a polarity elicitation, with the response “very irritating” serving as a ‘yes’ (ibid.).

A *mid*-termination is used to elicit expected confirmation, and therefore is not a polarity elicitation (Coulthard, 1992: 46).

Fig.2

Doctor: //	Its DRY skin//	Isn't it//	Patient: //mmm//
(Coulthard, 1992: 46.)			

The patient only needs to, and is only expected to, confirm the doctor's elicitation. Note also that the key of the patient's response concords with the doctor's elicitation. This is because a high key is used as a contrastive, so the high tone (**Fig.1**) "very irritating" means 'yes' not 'no'. Whereas the mid-key (**Fig.2**) "mmm" is neutral and additive, meaning "That's correct" (Ibid.).

Interestingly, a *low* termination does not constrain a response on the listener, unlike high or mid-termination, and is similar to follow-ups (see section **6.0**) in this regard. Utterances that do not require responses are often *boundary exchange markers* (indicated by //), marking the end of one mini-topic and the shift to another (Coulthard, 1992:49). For example:

Doctor: //very	DRY skin	///	OK/ /could you TAKE off your....
(adapted from: ibid.)			

By using a low-termination the doctor is saying, "enough about your skin for now, lets move on...". The patient knew from the low-termination that the doctor was not initiating or eliciting a response, and therefore does not contribute one, despite the fact that the form of the doctor's utterance ("very dry skin") could easily have been an elicit given a different intonation.

9.0 Summary of Part 1

Very often a form seems to have the potential to realize a number of different functions, for this reason form, in itself, is not a reliable predictor of function. While the choice of one form over another to realize a given function may be made for reasons of

'appropriateness' or 'politeness' -- changing nuance and semantic classification--these type of form choices do not alter an utterance's underlying function. Yet the same form uttered in a different situational context, position within discourse, or with different intonation give the form different functional values, making these considerations much more reliable determiners of function than considerations of form.

PART 2.

10.0 Christmas 2001 Transcript

During a recent Christmas visit back to my family in Canada, I (video) recorded a number of conversations. The following is a transcript of my Father (F), Mother (M) and my two younger sisters, labeled as older sister (OS) and younger sister (YS) -- relative to each other-- which took place at the breakfast table.⁵

1YS: It's not fair. Sarah got a new bike when she was fourteen.

2F: Do you keep a running tally of everything we buy for Sarah?

3YS: Well, yeah

4M: Alexis, we can't afford that—oh, a Christmas card from *Geordy*?

5F: So?

6M: Well I finally took them off the list! We haven't laid eyes on them since we had Alexis.

7F: Jill, it's a card not a dead fish.

8M: I know, but if I send them a card now, it's going to look like we're only sending them because they sent *us* one.

9YS: Sarah got new boots?

10M: Stop keeping score.

11F: Those are nice, they must be warm

(older sister enters kitchen, sits down to eat)

12YS: It's alive, It's alive!

13OS: How come we never go to church for Christmas anymore?

14YS: (inaudible)

15F: Well, you know, in the last few years—you girls, um—haven't, ah—shown much enthusiasm.

⁵ Although the following is an excerpt of a longer stretch of dialogue, for clarity and reader convenience, the lines have been numbered 1-22.

16OS: So do you guys believe?

17M: In God?

18OS: (nods)

19F: Your mother was raised Catholic, and I—um—wasn’t so we...

20M: You know, you don’t have to attend church—not going doesn’t mean that um...

21F: Exactly, I mean you don’t have to go to believe in God

22YS: Do we really have to talk about religion? It’s Christmas.

11.0 Examples of Function predictable from Form.

A form can only be said to be a reliable predictor of its function if there is only one function the form could ever have, regardless of the discourse in which it is found. If we can imagine a different function a form could have had in a different discourse, we must have labeled the function by making reference to situation, intonation or the form’s location in the discourse. Form was a reliable predictor of function only in lines **2, 6, 15, 16, 19, and 20**, or 6 lines out of 22. Even this is generous, because these lines are being interpreted in their entirety, with discourse organizing acts such as **markers** and **starters** excluded in this counting

- Line **2**, being interrogative in form and because the interrogative begins with “Do you”, we can see from the form it is a **neutral proposal**, seeking a yes/no response without indicating the polarity of the expected answer.
- Line **6** includes two declaratives, and it is hard to imagine how the same forms could be anything other than **informative** in function.
- Line **15**, the declarative clause, along with the **marker** “Well” and the **starter** “You know”, combine to make this line clearly an **informative**.
- Line **16**, is an interrogative in form, and would be an **inquire** in any discourse.
- Line **19**, “Your mother was raised Catholic” by itself, if given a high termination could be an **inquire**, however, while incomplete and interrupted, the continuation “and I um- wasn’t so we...” would make the entire line an **informative** in any discourse.
- Line **20**, again incomplete and interrupted, has two declarative clauses, which together

would make an **informative** in any discourse (however, note that here “You know” acts as a **starter**).

12.0 Examples of Function not predictable from Form

The remaining 17 lines all have forms whose functions in this discourse could only be determined by reference to situation, intonation or discourse structure.

- Line **1**, has two declarative forms which look like an **observation** and an **informative**. However, “It’s not fair” ends in a high termination, which gives it the function of “an invitation to adjudicate” (see: Cauldwell & Allen, 1999:47). “Sarah and ‘she’ are given prominence in “SARah got a new bike when SHE was eleven”, making the (perceived) contrast between the parents’ generosity towards the OS and the lack of generosity towards the YS salient. The entire line is indirectly an **inquire**, which could be paraphrased as “Why can’t I have a bicycle too?”. The (M)other begins to reply to this **inquire** in line **4**.
- Line **3**, the “Well” is a **marker**, because it is its own tone unit. “Yeah” is an **informative** due to it being an answer to the **neutral proposal** of line **2**, however, in a different discourse “Yeah” could have perhaps been a **confirm** or a **concur** or **engage**.
- In line **4**, the first half is an **informative** response to line **1**. The second half, “oh, a Christmas card from GEORDy” is more of an **inquire** than an **informative**. We know this from situation (i.e. Geordy is rather *persona non grata* with my Mother), which is why she placed both prominence and a ‘contrastive’ high key on “Geordy”. (M)other is really asking “Why has Geordy send us a card?”.
- In line **5**, (F)ather does not see the problem so does not understand the relevance of the question. “So” therefore is an **inquire**, meaning: “What’s the problem?”. We know this only from the relation of ‘so’ to line **4**.
- Line **7** is an **observation**, whose phatic function is to calm (M)other down. It also seems to perhaps be acting as a **protest**, criticizing the appropriateness of such a vehement response on receiving the card. This can only be understood by reference to both tone and what has been uttered before, in declarative form alone, line **7** looks like nothing more than a rather obvious **informative**.

- Line **8** begins with “I know”, and therefore seems to be an acknowledging move, discernable only in its’ relation to line **7**. This is different from:

A: Do you know where to meet?
 B: I know.

...with “I know” being an **informative**. The “but” goes on to indicate a (counter) **protest**, again this is only discernable in relation to previous line.

- Line **9** is declarative in form, and as YS has just watched my mother wrap the boots, line **9** on the surface looks like an **observation**. However, due to the “questioning” (high termination) intonation it seems to be an **inquire**. Given knowledge of the sibling rivalry situation, line **9** is really asking “Why does OS get new boots (and not me)?”.
- Line **10** is imperative in form and would be a **directive** in many discourses. Yet this **directive function** is most clearly indicated by intonation and discourse position. While in this case the line was uttered with a low-termination, given a high termination and if found in an exchange like the following:

A: The coach said to stop keeping score
 B: Stop keeping score ?!

“Stop keeping score” could be a **return**.

- Line **11** ends in mid-termination, so was intended to elicit confirmation and seems to function as an **observation**, however nobody took up the elicit. Given a different situational context, this utterance could have been anything from a veiled request to borrow to a suggestion to purchase.
- Line **12** is a joke version of a **greeting** (i.e. Good morning). This can only be understood by reference to situation. Namely, it is late in the morning, OS being a teenager sleeps in whenever possible, and line **12** was delivered in mock imitation of the line from the original *Frankenstein* film, said by Dr. Frankenstein when he re-animated the dead and dormant monster. Only those with knowledge of the situation and cultural (film) reference can understand line **12** as a somewhat disparaging **greeting**.

- While line **13** is both interrogative in form and an **inquire** in function, OS did not respond to YS's **greeting**, and chose instead to direct an new (**I**nitation at the parents instead. Line **13** therefore implicitly functions as a **reject** as well. By deliberately not responding to the greeting, OS was telling YS to (being polite here) "Get lost"
- Line **14**, was inaudible.
- Line **17** is a **return** and is a R/I eliciting move of a clarification exchange, the line's position relative to lines **15** and **16**, indicates it is a **return**.
- Line **18**, while non-verbal, can only be understood as an **informative** in relation to line **17**. A nod in a following a different utterance could be a **confirm**, **concur**, **engage**, **react**, or **prompt**.
- In line **21**, we know the "Exactly" functions as a **react**, because "Exactly" is its own tone unit. The remainder of line **21** is a **reformulate**, because it paraphrases (and completes) line **20**. In a different position this line would have been an **informative**.
- Line **22** in its interrogative form, looks like an **inquire**. However, because the "REALLY" was prominent (rather than "DO") it seems to function as a kind of **protest**. YS is criticizing the "appropriateness" of the entire exchange from lines **13** to **21** and this line could also be seen as a type of implicit **directive** to drop the subject. "Do we REALLY have to talk about religion" ends in a low termination, so YS is attempting to effect a boundary exchange. "It's Christmas" is an **observation** said for humorous effect and to lighten the mood.

13.0 Conclusion to Part 2.

Even if another discourse analyst were to dispute the function labels assigned in section **12.0**, the fact remains that the functions will need to be determined by reference to considerations other than form. If Garfinkel, Grice and Searle [see sections **3.0** & **4.0**] are correct in that function, while intended, is really never said but only

interpreted, perhaps such disputes are inevitable. Even if one were to disagree that the functions of the utterances in section **11.0** were indicated by their forms, as suggested in this paper—and this may only be a reflection of this writer's lack of imagination-- this would only increase the already great preponderance of functions not predictable from form found in the transcript. If nothing else, the transcript in section **10.0** shows that, in informal conversations at least, more often than not, function *is not* predictable from form. There is no reason to believe that this transcript is in any way unique in this regard.

14.0 Some Implications for ESL and Final Conclusion

This has many implications for English teaching, three of which are mentioned here.

Firstly, as noted by Sharwood Smith (1994):

“...the language learner in the early stages of development is very conservative and has little tolerance for what normally obtains in fully developed systems, namely a single expression covering many functions and a single function expressed in many forms. A form of this principle is evident even into advanced stages of learning..."(p. 167)

However, if students are to become competent, avoid sounding stilted and not develop what could be called “fossilized comprehension”, students need to be weaned from this ‘linguistic conservatism’.

Secondly, if students are to be exposed to the different functions a form can realize (and vise versa), it is important that these are taught in the order that provides students the greatest “surrender value” (see Willis, 1990: 42). That is, the functions that a form most frequently realizes need to be taught first. This may not be the function(s) presented by traditional (i.e. pre-corpus linguistics) grammars.

Thirdly, this also has implications for the type of dialogues to be included into textbooks. Most textbook dialogues usually are chosen (or scripted) either to illustrate a specific grammar point via repetition (e.g. a dialogue of endless ‘tag-questions’), or are (or resemble) formal one-on-one interviews following a Q&A, Q&A pattern, with direct questions being given direct answers. Perhaps textbook writers should consider including more dialogues like that in section **10.0** of this paper, especially since “interview” type dialogues (and in class activities) represent a rather specialized and limited type of discourse. It may also not be enough having a form’s many functions individually illustrated in separate dialogues. Perhaps more dialogues, in which a single form is performing two (or more) functions (or where a single function is realized by

more than one form) would be more effective in increasing learner tolerance of the inconstant relationship between form and function.

A final tentative conclusion is: since there are very few, arguably no, one-to-one form/function relationships, this inconstant relationship between form and function suggests that perhaps forms can never be comprehensively presented and explained, as attempted in various pedagogical grammars. It seems more likely that forms will only be fully learnt, in all their various function-manifestations, by experiencing them in context and in use.

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