SYSTEMIC FUNCTIONAL LINGUISTICS AND COPY WRITING

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ABSTRACT: *This article describes the process of an ongoing work in Denmark to use systemic functional linguistics as a background for copy writing – i.e. for text production in an organizational context. The article examines and walks the developmental path from the theory itself to a method for doing copy writing. Since 2000, a fair number of different registers – or genres – used in organizational contexts in Denmark have been analyzed using the systemic functional model; this work is now being 'distilled' into a text book/educational material for doing copy writing. In the distillation process, various findings are cut away, and others are organized into clusters from their meaning. The article will describe how this is done. With its aim, the article discusses how systemic functional linguistics can be a powerful tool in education and in business.*

KEY-WORDS: *copy writing, business communication, register analysis, Danish.*

1. Motivation

When I started working with copy writing in an academic context – i.e. doing research in the field, and teaching students at university level how to become a skilled copy writer – it bothered me that there is done very little academic work in the field. A few reports here and there from various scholars exist, but primarily the field of copy writing is been left to practitioners to explore. The consequence is that most literature on the subject is not scientifically grounded; it is merely giving practical advices based on the author's own professional experience. As a result, teaching copy writing tends to become a somewhat impressionistic endeavour, where critique is based on a combination of practical findings and the teacher's own taste and hence expressed in terms like *I think…, I believe…, I find…, I mean…*etc.

With the purpose of being able to do copy writing on a scientifically (linguistically) sound basis, I have – with the occasional help from colleagues and students – for the last 5-6 years worked on a project (not exclusively but still continuously) trying to frame copy writing in systemic functional linguistics.

My research in copy writing has been done in connection to my work at the centre for International Business Communication at University of Southern Denmark. At this centre, our focus is language and language use. Thus, in our practice of business communication, language and language use are interrelated core dimensions surrounded by dimensions (fields) such as branding, organization, cultural understanding, communication planning, etc.

What I will do in this paper is to present some of my findings. Some of it is work in progress, which means that a few of my points are preliminary. Still, my method for using the insights of systemic functional linguistics/the systemic functional description of Danish as the basis for doing copy writing is solid. I therefore hope that this paper will provide some inspiration on how to ground copy writing scientifically.

2. The first step: organizing different elements of language according to the signals they send when used in a text

In order to get useful results when working with the practice of copy writing in the frame of the systemic functional theory/description, we have to take the notion of social semiotics (cf. Halliday 1978) seriously. This notion is essential since it provides us with an idea of meaning as something that is at the same time intersubjectively negotiated and semiotically given through its connections to other meanings in a system. When emphasizing the social part of 'social semiotics', communication can be regarded as a dialogical act (cf. Smedegaard 2003) involving a speaker/writer and a hearer/reader; when emphasizing the semiotic part of 'social semiotics', a meaning is given through its place in a system. The consequence of the social semiotic idea is that we can look at the various systems of language, and organize them according to their effects when used as text in context. In other words, we can look at the signals conveyed to a hearer/reader by the systemic choices made in a specific text. Doing this, our starting point is the choices made from the linguistic systems, e.g. MOOD, TRANSITIVITY and THEMA, which we then semanticize and contextualize. We can also employ the opposite perspective and ask "How is this or that effect obtained? When I in a given context want my text to function in a certain way – that is to send certain signals – which parts of the linguistic system am I to use?"

It is the latter perspective I am employing, thus setting out from contextual considerations and working towards (discourse) semantics and lexicogrammar (stratificationally speaking).[i]

When organizing language use according to the signals conveyed by it, dichotomies such as the following give reason (cf. Andersen, in prep.):

- Dynamic vs. static language use.

- Personal vs. impersonal language use.

- Concrete vs. abstract language use.

In the following subsection, I will exemplify one of the dichotomies, namely the one where dynamic language use is opposed to static language use.

2.1. Dynamic language use vs. static language use

Language embodies resources whereby it is possible to adjust the dynamics of a text. Dynamic texts are direct, explicit and personal while static texts are characterized by hidden meanings, they are implicit and impersonal.

The dynamics of a text is dependent on the verbs in the text. It is with the verbs we linguistically act and do something – e.g. *writes, reads, kicks, eats*, etc. With the nouns, we name those things that we with the verbal processes do something with – e.g. *a poem* (as in *writes a poem*), *a novel* (as in *reads a novel*), *his sister* (as in *kicks his sister*), and *the cake* (as in *eats the cake*). As Lyons put it,

> "…'noun' or 'verb' (…) are "designating persons, places, things, states, or qualities" and "(…) express action or state", respectively…" (Lyons 1997: 441).

This, the different parts of language divide the work of reflecting and construing the real world between them. In the clause, the real world is reflected and construed by

> "…(1) the process (…), (2) certain entities that participate in the process and (3) various circumstantial elements that are associated with it; these are construed in form of grammatical *classes*, the verbal, the nominal, and some more or less distinct third type." (Halliday 1996: 187; original

emphasis).

The last "less distinct third type" in the quotation above covers prepositional phrases and adverbial groups (cf. Halliday 1995: 6 and Andersen & Smedegaard 2005).

Since it is through the verbs we linguistically act, it is in the verbs we find the dynamic aspects of language. Therefore, the dynamics depends on what we do with the verbs. The following examples illustrate this point:

1. *The tissue absorbs the water.*

2. *The water is absorbed.*

3. *The absorbing tissue.*

4. *The absorption (of water).*

The clause in example 1 differs from the clause in example 2 in respect of voice: in example 1 the process 'to absorb' is realized by the verb *absorbs* in present tense and in active voice, while this process in example 2 is realized by a passive construction via the verbal group *is absorbed*. The clause in example 1 is more dynamic than the clause in example 2, partly because the verb in clause 1 is in active voice, not in passive voice as in clause 2, partly because the verb in clause 1 forms a process that is related to the Agent *tissue*, whereby the example explicitly states the doer of the process. In the clause in example 2, the Agent is implicit.

The first two examples differ from examples 3 and 4. In the last two examples, the process 'to absorb' is no longer realized by a verb/verbal group but by a nominalization: in the nominal group in example 3 we find the adjectival nominalization *absorbing*, and in the nominal group in example 4 we find the substantive nominalization *absorption*.

When we realize the process 'to absorb' as a nominalization, we tone down the linguistic dynamics. We transform a verb which realizes some kind of process to a noun, and we are therefore left with a grammatical class that designates "persons, places, things, states, or qualities" instead of "action" (cf. the quotation by Lyons).

In example 3 the process 'to absorb' has changed to a quality (*absorbing*), and in example 4 the process has become a thing (*absorption*). A

thing is a completely static element that only comes in motion as part of a process. A quality is also a static element but it is slightly more dynamic than a thing – a quality as *absorbing* is namely a quality to the *tissue* because the *tissue* performs the process 'to absorb'.
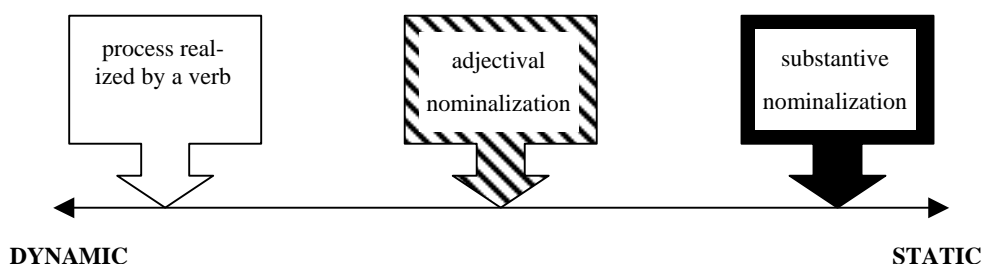
The four examples exist on two different clines, namely a cline for voice and a cline for degrees of nominalization. Both clines have dynamic language at one end and static language at the other. The cline of voice is given as Figure 1 below.

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┌─────────────┐                              ┌─────────────┐
│  verbs in   │                              │ verbs in    │
│   active    │                              │   pas-      │
│    voice    │                              │ sive voice  │
└──────┬──────┘                              └──────┬──────┘
       ▼                                            ▼
◄──────────────────────────────────────────────────────────►
DYNAMIC                                              STATIC
```

Figure 1: A cline illustrating voice in relation to linguistic dynamics

At the cline above, we find the clause in example 1 at the dynamic end, and the clause in example 2 at the static end.

The cline for degrees of nominalization is given as Figure 2 below.

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┌─────────────┐      ┌─────────────┐      ┌─────────────┐
│ process     │      │             │      │ substantive │
│ realized by │      │ adjectival  │      │ nominaliza- │
│ a verb      │      │nominalization│     │ tion        │
└──────┬──────┘      └──────┬──────┘      └──────┬──────┘
       ▼                    ▼                    ▼
◄──────────────────────────────────────────────────────────►
DYNAMIC                                              STATIC
```
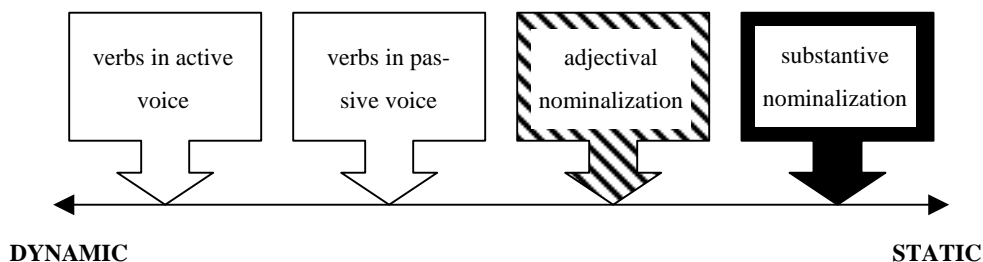
Figure 2: A cline illustrating nominalization in relation to linguistic dynamics

At the cline above, we find the clauses in the two examples 1 and 2 at

the dynamic end, the substantive nominalization in example 4 at the static end, and the adjectival nominalization in example 3 in between.
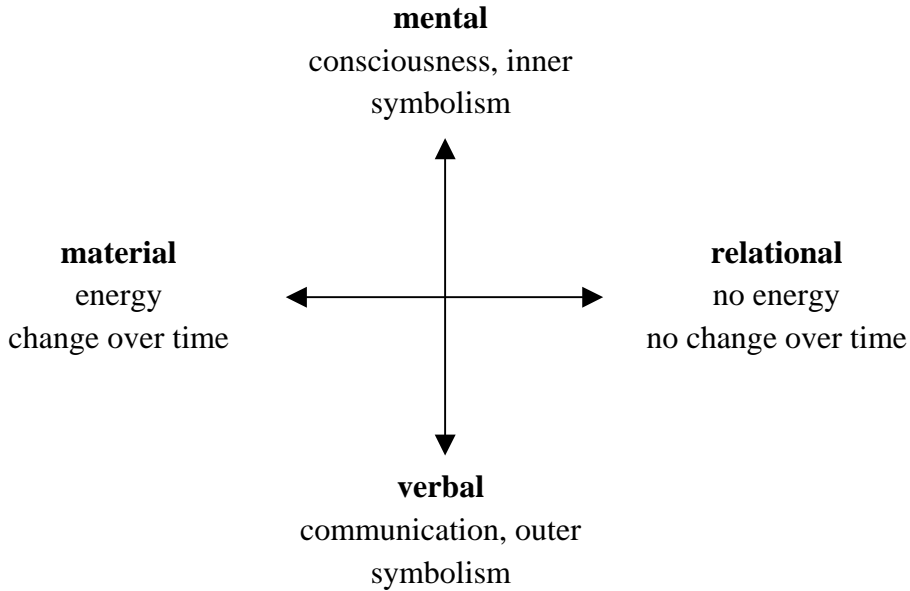
It is possible to couple the two clines to one, thereby illustrating the degree of dynamics in each of the four constructions – i.e. a clause with a verb in active voice, a clause with a verb in passive voice, an adjectival nominalization and a substantive nominalization. This is done in Figure 3 below.

| verbs in active voice | verbs in passive voice | adjectival nominalization | substantive nominalization |

DYNAMIC   STATIC

Figure 3: A cline illustrating dynamic vs. static language use

Until now, dynamic vs. static language use has only been described as something to do with formal considerations – to do with the realization of (semantic) processes either through verbs or through some kind of verbal transformation (i.e. a nominalization). Meaning, however, also plays a role. In other words: the various process types organized in the system of TRANSITIVITY differ with regard to their degree of dynamic.

In the description of Danish, we operate with four different process types in the system of TRANSITIVITY, namely material, relational, mental and verbal processes (cf. Andersen & Smedegaard 2005). These process types can be organized in a system of co-ordinates, giving us a picture as Figure 4.

mental
consciousness, inner
symbolism

material
energy
change over time

relational
no energy
no change over time

verbal
communication, outer
symbolism

Figure 4: Process types in Danish

In Figure 4, the horizontal cline represents a real plane, while the vertical cline represents a symbolic plane. The figure illustrates that the processes two and two form oppositions: in material processes we find a doing or happening demanding energy, as well as they cause a change in the world (e.g. *He runs* or *He trashed his racket in frustration*); this is not the case in relational processes (e.g. *The dog is in the house* or *She has a grey couch*). In mental processes the world is construed as some inner feeling (e.g. *He loves her*), while we in verbal processes put words on our feelings and beliefs, thereby construing them as something outside ourselves (e.g. *He told her about his feelings for her*).

The most dynamic processes are the material ones since they are characterized by use of energy and a change of the state of affairs. As a contrast, the relational processes are the most static; here, we find no action at all, merely a description of the state of affairs. The mental processes as well as the verbal processes also express some kind of action, but the dynamics of these process types is not as forceful as the dynamics of the material processes.

2.2.   Description via the trinocular perspective

The principle behind describing a feature of language use such as dy-

namic language use as opposed to static language use (or personal/impersonal language use and concrete/abstract language use) is to use of the angle 'from around' in the trinocular perspective.[ii] In other words, we are looking at how different systems from different metafunctions go together to create dynamic or static texts.

In this article, I have combined textual considerations (voice) with experiential considerations (process types/TRANSITIVITY) and ideational considerations (two types of ideational metaphor[iii], namely adjectival nominalizations and substantive nominalizations). To some extend, modal assessment realized by modal verbs also plays a role with regard to linguistic dynamics; this would add an interpersonal consideration.[iv]

3. The second step: working out the distributional tendencies of the various signals

Describing how choices in different linguistic systems convey signals regarding dynamic/static language use, personal/impersonal language use, and concrete/abstract language use is only the first step. The second step is to work out how the dichotomies function in different registers (or genres). Or to put it in other words: the second step is to answer the question: "How are the various signals distributed across registers/genres?"

As the question indicates, this second step in creating a linguistic foundation for copy writing involves analysis of registers.

A register can be defined as

> "...a subdivision of a given language, a 'situational variety' constituted by a selection of choices from among the total linguistic options offered by the specific language." (Ure & Ellis 1977: 198).

Registers are "configuration[s] of semantic resources (...) associated with a situation type" (Halliday 1978: 111), and at the cline of instantiation they function between language seen as a system and language seen as a text – i.e. between system and instance (cf. Hjelmslev 1993). This is illustrated in Figure 5 below.

System	Subsystem / Text type:
Instance	
Language system	Register
Text	
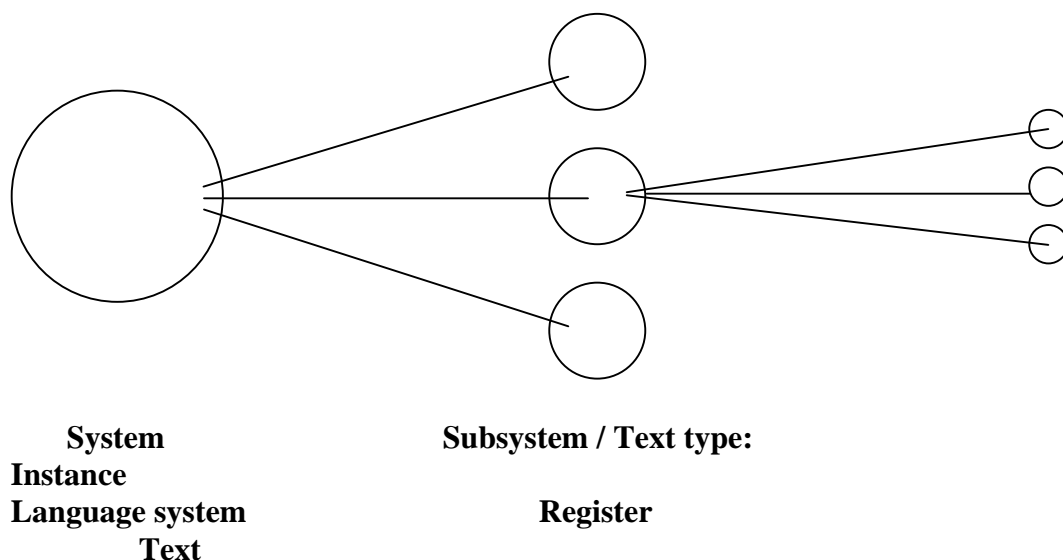
Figure 5: Register and the cline of instantiation

Following the model, we can analyse a register as a type of text with certain properties. In other words, if we move from right towards the left on the cline of instantiation and analyse a number of the same type of texts, we will develop a picture of the linguistic resources associated with that particulate text type. We will for example get a picture of the distribution of dynamic signals in the text type – in the register. When we have this picture, we can then move from the middle towards the right on the cline of instantiation and use our knowledge of the register to write a text corresponding to this. In doing this, we use the analysis of register as the empirical basis for saying something normative about copy writing.

To illustrate the idea: if we want to know how to write a press release, we can take a number of press releases and analyze them. This will give us an idea of the linguistic resources used to write a press release. As Ghadessy states, variation in registers is

> "...systematic variation in probabilities; "a register" is a tendency to select certain combinations of meanings with certain frequencies, and this can be formulated as the probabilities attached to grammatical systems, provided

> such systems are integrated into an overall system net-
> work in a paradigmatic interpretation of the grammar."
> (Ghadessy 1993: 6).[v]

When we have a description of the linguistic resources of press releases, this showing us for instance the probabilities for dynamic/static signals, we have a basis for writing a press release that conforms to the register.

The analysis of registers also makes it possible to assign (for example) the notion of dynamic language to certain types of texts while assigning the notion of static language to other types of text. And that goes for personal/impersonal language and concrete/abstract language as well. To take a few prototypical examples, the language use associated with advertisements is dynamic, personal and concrete, while the language use associated with letters from the public authorities is static, impersonal and abstract.

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[i] See Halliday & Matthiessen 2004: 24-26 for a description of stratification. As an alternative model of stratification, see Martin 1992: 14-21.

[ii] The trinocular perspective is a perspective that embodies the idea of stratification: through the trinocular perspective we can approach any system in the language (i) 'from above' (from the stratum above, i.e. from context or from semantics), (ii) 'from below' (from lexicogrammar) of 'from around' (from diverse systems at the same stratum) (cf. Halliday & Matthiessen 2004: 31; Halliday & Matthiessen 1997: 4-5).

[iii] For a description of ideational grammatical metaphors, see for example Andersen 2003, Halliday & Matthiessen 1999, and Halliday 1996.

[iv] The role of modal verbs to linguistics dynamics is yet to be fully described which is why this connection is only mentioned and not elaborated in this article.

[v] For studies of probabilities in linguistic subsystems, see for example Andersen 2000, Halliday & James 1993, and Matthiessen 1992.