Frederick J. Newmeyer’s *Language Form and Language Function*

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When checking the new issues of linguistic journals in the library, which titles do you pick up? *Linguistic Inquiry, Natural Language & Linguistic Theory, Linguistic Analysis*, and *Syntax*, or rather *Functions of Language, Cognitive Linguistics, Journal of Pragmatics, Studies in Language*, and *Linguistic Typology*? In other words, are you a ‘formalist’ or a ‘functionalist’? The reality of linguistic theorizing is, of course, more complex than this dichotomy suggests, but I agree with Newmeyer that these two ‘orientations’ exist and play a role for linguists seeking to profile themselves in the field of theoretical linguistics. As you are reading *Functions of Language* now, you are probably a functionalist. That is why I will pay special attention here to the question of how functionalist views are dealt with in the book under review.

Newmeyer gives the difference between formal and functional orientations a central place in his 1998 book *Language Form and Language Function* (LFLF). In the main Chapters 2 to 6, he discusses several issues on which linguists with a formalist or functionalist orientation typically take different stances. I will first give a quick survey of these chapters and then revert to some of the issues in more detail.

Chapter 2 deals with three well-known linguistic dichotomies: language knowledge versus language use, grammatical versus non-grammatical knowledge, and syntactic versus non-syntactic knowledge. Functionalists tend to relativize these dichotomies (grammatical knowledge is usage-based, it is not easy to separate lexical from encyclopedic knowledge, syntactic distinctions are...
at the same time meaningful, semantic distinctions, etc.), whereas formalists tend to stress the importance of these distinctions. In the formalist view, knowledge of language is autonomous in relation to language use, grammatical knowledge is autonomous in relation to non-grammatical knowledge and within grammatical knowledge it is possible to distinguish a syntactic part, which is autonomous in relation to semantic and other grammatical knowledge. Newmeyer does not report these opposite views neutrally, he evaluates them and takes sides, as shown by the last sentence of the chapter (p.94): “In each case, I have argued that the [autonomy] hypothesis is correct”.

From Chapter 3 onwards, the book focuses on syntax and its properties (categories, rules, constructions). The central question in Chapter 3 is whether we can explain syntactic properties. Formalists, in particular in the Chomskyan generative tradition, typically assume that the syntactic properties of natural languages can be explained by appeal to an innate universal grammar. This type of explanation is called ‘internal’ in the literature, because syntax is explained by syntax, albeit of a different order. On the other hand, explanations that are based on factors that relate to the function of language in processes of conceptualization and communication are called ‘external’. Newmeyer scrutinizes a range of such external explanations that have been proposed in the functionalist literature and concludes that most of them are not convincing. There are only two that pass: first and foremost Hawkins’ (1994) processing theory which has explanatory value for word order phenomena, and secondly, the idea that there is a close match between syntactic and semantic constituency. Newmeyer calls this match PSCI, “pressure from structure-concept iconicity” (p.129).

In Chapter 4, Newmeyer discusses the question of how syntactic categories should be defined. Can categories like noun and verb, but also relational syntactic categories like subject and object, or syntactic rules like Passive or Wh-movement, be defined in purely syntactic terms or should they be based on semantic distinctions like that between ‘thing’ and ‘process’ (in the case of ‘noun’ vs. ‘verb’), etc.? It will be clear that Generative Grammar (and Newmeyer) takes the first view, whereas functionalism (in particular the cognitive branch of it) favours the second.

The second topic that Newmeyer discusses in ch. 4 is the question of whether syntactic categories (rules, relations, etc.) should be seen as prototypical categories, the members of which can be more or less typical representatives of that category. In a view that assumes such prototypicality, there are subjects that are typical subjects (when the NP is an agent and a topic at the same time) and less typical subjects; there are active constructions that can
undergo the passive rule and others that cannot, which might correlate with being a more or less prototypical exemplar of the active construction, etc. In the functionalist literature, the idea that grammatical categories have prototypical and less prototypical members is rather popular. Newmeyer argues strongly against this view: a noun is a noun, a subject is a subject, etc. In his view, there is no need to assume prototypes or fuzzy categories.

Chapter 5 is called “Deconstructing grammaticalization”. There is a growing literature, mainly functionalist in orientation, in which function words and derivational and inflectional affixes are seen as the product of diachronic processes, in which full lexical words shift in syntactic status, at the same time undergoing semantic bleaching and phonological reduction. In the functionalist view, these syntactic, semantic, and phonological processes typically go together and condition each other. Newmeyer does not deny that diachronic changes as signalled in the grammaticalization literature exist, but he does not recognize the assumed conditioning between the linguistic levels. In his view, changes on different levels only happen to co-occur in particular instances, because each of these changes can occur without any of the other changes. According to Newmeyer, it is superfluous to assume a separate diachronic process of grammaticalization for those cases where the changes happen to co-occur.

Chapter 6 deals with the typological literature, again mainly as it exists in the functionalist tradition. Here, Newmeyer’s critical remarks pertain primarily to the methodological side of the enterprise. Are the existing languages representative of the possible human languages, are the samples in typological research representative enough, are the descriptive grammars from which the typologists take their data reliable enough? Newmeyer suggests that the typologists lack methodological caution and reflection, so that many of their claims rest on shaky grounds.

The five central chapters, as I have just summarized them, are framed by two short introductory and concluding chapters. They feature Sandy Forman, an imaginary graduate student from MIT, and the imaginary Chris Funk, a graduate student from the University of California at Santa Barbara, personalizing the formalist and functionalist orientation in the field, respectively. Their imaginary discussion in Chapter 1 does not result in any rapprochement between the two. In Chapter 7, however, on the last page of the text (p.369), Newmeyer expresses the hope that his book has contributed to a better mutual understanding between Forman and Funk, i.e. between the two orientations in the field. The book concludes with a long bibliography (45 pages), and useful name and subject indices.
As this is a rather late review, I have had the opportunity to read six published reviews on Newmeyer’s book: Battistella (2000), Haspelmath (2000), Moravcsik (2000), Tallerman (2000), Cureton (2001), and Francis (2002). The reviews by Cureton and Haspelmath are partly critical and partly praising, the other reviewers have minor critical remarks but are on the whole very positive about the book. The strong praise is indeed remarkable, cf. Battistella (p. 437): “[An] excellent work, supported with extensive research and lucid and crisp writing”; Haspelmath (p. 253): “Despite these various criticisms, I still regard LFLF as an excellent book, and I recommend it to every linguist”; Moravcsik (p. 170): “[T]he extremely rich content of this very interesting, in my view highly significant, and eminently readable book […]”; Tallerman (p. 424): “I found all this most valuable, as well as enjoyable and stimulating: the book is quite simply a very good read”; Cureton (p. 75): “LFLF is a substantial and important book. In essence, it synthesizes, scrutinizes, and critiques a good part of the most interesting and innovative work on syntax over the past twenty-five years — the new functional paradigms”; more than once in her review, Francis calls the book “impressive”, and she concludes (p. 55): “I recommend this book highly for its thoughtful and provocative discussions of form and function in syntactic theory”. These evaluations harmonize with the recommendations on the dust jacket of the book: “fair and complete in his presentation of both sides of the dialogue” (Kenneth Hale); “should be a must read for all linguists” (Victoria Fromkin); “Newmeyer is surely the most authoritative and fairest voice urging formalist and functionalist linguists to attend to one another’s work” (Stephen Anderson); “Newmeyer is well informed, thoughtful and impeccably non-ideological” (Peter Culicover). All admire the quantity of the literature that Newmeyer has taken into account.

What can one say, after all this praise? “Read this text”, seems to be the only reasonable advice. The book has already become a classic reference for the formalist-functionalist discussion. Some caution to the future reader might, however, still be in place, as I hope to show in the rest of this review.

The first problem with Newmeyer’s book is the ‘internal mismatch’ between the expectations raised by the fictitious dialogue in the first chapter and the actual substance following it. On the basis of Chapter 1, one expects a balanced treatment of the issues on which the formalist and the functionalist side differ. But what one finds in the rest of the book is mainly a critical discussion of the functionalist literature, based on a generative perspective. Cureton (2001:72), in the critical part of his review, characterizes the book as “a full frontal assault on the accomplishments of his [Newmeyer’s] functionalist
adversaries. Ranging across the full scope of functionalist approaches to syntax, Newmeyer faults functionalist methodologies, questions functionalist data, dismantles functionalist arguments, and, wherever possible, (sternly) rejects functionalist conclusions”. And Haspelmath (2000:252) fears that “most functionalists will get away with the impression that Newmeyer’s main purpose is functionalist-bashing”. That is indeed the impression I got away with. Part of the title of Chapter 5 “Deconstructing Grammaticalization” can be transferred to the book as a whole: it is a deconstruction of functionalist proposals.

Newmeyer does not take a distanced, neutral perspective, as did for example Harris (1993) or Huck and Goldsmith (1995), when they reviewed the controversy between Generative Semantics and Autonomous Syntax, the earlier controversy in the field, of which the present functionalist-formalist debate is a reflection. Newmeyer takes the modular view of the Chomskyan Principles-and-Parameters model of the 1980s for granted, and takes that point of view to look critically at the functionalist literature.

To be fair, Newmeyer does make a few critical remarks with regard to the generative approach. First, he criticizes some minor details in the generative model. In Chapter 4 (p.179), the generative feature analysis of the categories N, V, A and P is said not to be very illuminating and at the end of the same chapter (p.221) it is acknowledged that certain parameters that have been proposed are too language-specific or even construction-specific. Furthermore, Newmeyer is skeptical regarding developments of the generative model in the 1990s, in particular Minimalism (p.13) and Optimality Theory (cf. Newmeyer 1999a). And he is unhappy with the way generativists have tried to do typological research (cf. p.357–63). Although the notion of ‘parameter’ as it became popular in Generative Grammar in the 1980s, opened up the possibility of typological research within the generative paradigm, such research was hardly carried out. The few studies that appeared dealt with the null subject parameter and word order, and were not very successful. Newmeyer criticizes in particular Kayne’s (1994) methodology in his word order study, which consisted, in Kayne’s own words, of “a rapid look at (at small subset of) the world’s (presently existing) languages” (LFLF, p.359).

These critical remarks with regard to the generative enterprise are nothing compared with the massive criticism directed at the functionalists. If Newmeyer had really wanted to give equal treatment to both parties, he could, for example, have balanced his criticism of Lakoff’s analysis of English *there*-constructions with adequate mention of a paper like Kuno and Takami (1997), in which the authors demonstrate sloppy observation and argumentation in generative
analyses of several topics like reflexivization, extraposition, wh-extraction, light predicate raising, and quantifier scope.

If the obvious bias of the book may come as a surprise after Chapter 1 and most of the reviews, those who are familiar with Newmeyer’s earlier work will be less surprised. From 1980 onwards, Newmeyer has written several books (1980, 1983, 1986 [= 2nd edition of 1980], 1996) that contain a defense of Chomskyan generative grammar and a criticism of opposing ideas. In the 1980 book (ch. 5), it was Generative Semantics that was criticized (repeated in 1986, ch. 4 and 5, and 1996, ch. 8 and 9). In the present 1998 book, the criticism is extended to cover a broad spectrum of functionalist approaches. Elements of the present criticism can be found already in ch. 7 of (1980), in particular 7.3 (“Perceptual explanations”) and 7.4 (“Functional explanations”), and in ch. 4 of (1983) (“Formal grammar and extragrammatical principles”). The same critical attitude towards functionalism can be found again in Newmeyer’s (1999b) review of Tomasello (1998).

A survey of all these publications makes it clear that the issue of the formalist versus functionalist orientation is a longstanding concern in Newmeyer’s thinking. In the course of 20 years, Newmeyer has been remarkably constant in his view: the Chomskyan approach is the best, the ideas of the others are mostly ill-directed, and in general their proposals are not precise and constrained enough. His implicit advice is: practice generative grammar, but keep an eye on the functionalist literature, one cannot exclude that every now and again there is something of value there.

The next question to be asked is whether Newmeyer’s deconstruction of functionalism is fair and successful. A precondition for appropriate deconstruction is an adequate reading of the original texts. Although I have only read a fraction of what Newmeyer has read, in those cases where I did read the texts he discusses, I regularly felt that he focuses on certain aspects where other aspects could have been focused on as well. My second problem with Newmeyer’s book, therefore, is that his treatment of the literature is, at least partly, subjective. A few examples will illustrate this point.

Chapter 1 contains, apart from the dialogue between Sandy Forman and Chris Funk, a useful survey of different formal and functional schools. Among the formal frameworks that Newmeyer mentions, he could also have listed Seuren’s Semantic Syntax framework (cf. Seuren 1996), which is a direct continuation of the generative semantic framework that Newmeyer rejected with such force in his earlier writings.
Newmeyer orders the functionalist frameworks on a continuum from ‘external functionalism’ via ‘integrative functionalism’ to ‘extreme functionalism’. The latter position is ascribed to the Columbia School, but in my perception, the Columbia School is in several respects less extreme than integrative functionalism (Hopper’s Emergent Grammar). Practitioners of the Columbia School subscribe to two of the three autonomies that Newmeyer distinguishes, viz. the autonomy of the language system in relation to language use and the autonomy of linguistic knowledge in relation to the rest of cognition. Like most other functionalists, they do not subscribe to the autonomy of syntax, and on this point they hold the special position that there is much less syntax in language than most linguists assume, as most combinatorial regularities can be explained on the basis of lexical and morphological signs and the way it makes sense to combine them (cf. Contini-Morava 1995).

Chapter 2 is inspired by Croft’s (1995) paper on the notion of ‘autonomy’ in grammatical theory. Newmeyer’s arguments that grammar is autonomous in relation to language use are unconvincing and fail to refute those put forward in the functionalist literature, see, for example, the papers in Barlow and Kemmer (2000), and Bybee and Hopper (2001), to mention a few recent contributions to the debate where it is argued that grammar is based on and shaped by its use. As to grammatical knowledge in relation to other types of knowledge, many cognitive linguists hold that grammatical principles (hierarchical structure) are similar to general cognitive structures as we find them outside of grammar, and that conceptualisation inside and outside of language is guided by the same principles.

Most controversial of all is the claim about the autonomy of syntax, defended in generative grammar. Under a certain interpretation of ‘autonomy’ functionalists are actually perfectly prepared to accept the autonomy of syntax, witness Harder (1999:215), who has nicely summarized this view: “By stressing the fact that autonomy is only partial, one avoids the basic generative fallacy […], i.e. the postulation of a mental safe-deposit box for grammatical structure in which all contextual links are severed”. It would have been more interesting and constructive if Newmeyer had responded to such views, instead of simply upholding the established generative views on autonomy. All that Newmeyer does in Chapter 2 is re-affirm his generative viewpoint, impervious to any functionalist arguments, regardless of their subtlety and power.

Chapter 3 deals with explanations for syntactic properties of languages. As this is the central point in the formalist-functionalist controversy, I will elaborate on this point somewhat longer. If syntax is autonomous, one would
not expect external functional explanations for syntactic phenomena to have much chance. Still, Newmeyer does not see a contradiction here. Although he does not believe in most functionalist explanations of syntactic phenomena (information flow, competing motivations), there are two proposals that he regards as functionalist in nature and worth considering. One of them is what he calls “Pressure for structure-concept iconicity” (PSCI, p. 129). In Newmeyer (1999a:236), this principle is reformulated as “form-meaning alignment” (FMA): “syntactic constituents reflect semantic units”. This seems rather trivial: if syntactic constituency did not reflect semantic constituency, language users would have a hard time figuring out what a sentence means, cf. Newmeyer (p. 129): “I suggest that this pressure has its roots in parsing”. Hawkins (2001:2) holds the same view: “The explanation for adjacency in grammars is ultimately one of language processing”. So, PSCI or FMA is reducible to processing ease as the real explanatory factor.

Newmeyer’s second explanatory factor is exactly this factor of processing ease, more specifically in the formulation of Hawkins (1994). Given that PSCI can also be reduced to processing ease, the notion of processing ease is in fact the one and only non-syntactic explanatory factor that Newmeyer acknowledges as having real explanatory value. It may seem as if Newmeyer shares Hawkins views fully, but Newmeyer believes in autonomous syntax in the generative sense, whereas Hawkins holds a usage-based view, cf. Hawkins (2001:29): “[…] grammars have conventionalized the preferences of performance, selecting frequent and efficient variants for grammaticalization, in proportion to their frequency and overall efficiency”. There are other differences between Hawkins and Newmeyer: Newmeyer rejects the idea of competing functional motivations, because in his view they can not be subjected to empirical testing. Hawkins tries to reduce as many observations as possible to one parsing principle which he calls “Early Immediate Constituents” (EIC), but where necessary he does recognize the existence of other principles, cf. Hawkins (2001:28): “This can be explained by the fact that the two preferences, EIC and Fillers First, make mutually reinforcing predictions for head-initial languages, whereas their preferences compete in head-final languages, resulting in variation”. Thus, Hawkins does not reject the idea of competing motivations, as Newmeyer does.

One functional explanatory factor that Newmeyer is particularly negative about is ‘information flow’, the factor that relates to the status of information as topic, focus, old or new, etc. Newmeyer criticizes the classical Prague School idea of Communicative Dynamism, according to which there is a gradual
increase in ‘newness’ from the beginning to the end of the sentence, as well as Givón’s notion of Communicative Task Urgency, according to which new information comes first. Newmeyer gets really involved here, cf. formulations like: “[…] there is little reason to believe that the conveying of information is a central function of language to begin with” (p. 133), “[…] do we really have a clue as to what our information state is, or what that of our addressee might be?” (p. 133), or “The spectacular failure of Communicative Dynamism and Communicative Task Urgency […]” (p. 134). He fully subscribes to Hawkins’s formulation that “pragmatics appears to play no [explanatory] role whatsoever” in linear ordering (p. 134).

But today’s functionalists have much more differentiated ideas about information structure than the earlier Prague School, as Newmeyer himself acknowledges in Newmeyer (2001a). And it is not too difficult to find serious recent literature in which information flow is given a place as an independent factor in determining word order, cf. for example Arnold et al. (2000: 50): “The overall picture that emerges (…) is that the role of each factor depends on the strength of competing factors. When there is a big weight difference between constituents, there is a strong tendency to produce the light argument early, and discourse status may not play as large a role. In contrast, when one argument is extremely accessible, by virtue of having been mentioned in the immediately preceding clause, discourse status will influence constituent ordering more than weight”.

Without wishing to detract from Hawkins’ work, one wonders why Newmeyer puts all his cards on processing as the one and only functional explanatory factor that deserves the status of scientific respectability: assuming competing motivations, for example in an Optimality Framework, seems to be an attractive alternative. The Prague School idea of Communicative Dynamism and Givón’s principle of Communicative Task Urgency do, at first sight, seem contradictory, but maybe both these ideas have something of value to offer. It might be helpful to return here to Simon Dik’s (1986) interesting paper on word order, in which he argues against simplistic views on functional explanations. One of the points he makes with respect to word order is the special status of the first position in the sentence (p. 14): “All languages use the first position in the clause (P1) for ‘special purposes’ including, at least, the placement of constituents with the pragmatic functions of Topic and/or Focus”. If this view on the first position in the sentence is right, then the ideas of the Prague School and Givón need not be contradictory at all.
In Chapter 4 (a shortened version of which appeared as Newmeyer 2000a), Newmeyer argues against those who define syntactic categories in non-discrete, prototypical, terms. For him, a noun is a noun, not ‘nouny’. Newmeyer does not deny that there are phenomena that look prototypical: some members of a category have a more flexible distribution than others, but in his view this can be accounted for by assuming the interaction of different grammatical modules. Newmeyer clearly prefers a modular over a more holistic view on linguistic phenomena, but if both views can handle the phenomena equally well, it is hard to prove that one is superior to the other.

In the same chapter, Newmeyer also argues against notional definitions of syntactic categories, taking Langacker’s framework of Cognitive Grammar as an example. One of the main goals of Langacker’s enterprise of Cognitive Grammar is indeed to give notional definitions of grammatical categories and relations. In 2,5 pages, Newmeyer ‘shows’ that Langacker’s notional definitions of the categories ‘noun’ and ‘verb’ are “not successful” (p. 208), implying that if the enterprise fails with such primary and simple categories, we cannot expect much of value for the others. But Newmeyer’s discussion thoroughly fails to do justice to Langacker’s ideas. Newmeyer suggests that Langacker’s proposal that “a noun designates a region in some domain” (p. 206) will get into trouble with relational nouns like friend, translator, but there is no reason for such a suggestion, as demonstrated in Langacker (1999:28), where relational nouns like aunt, husband, and wife are analysed in terms of this proposal.

Chapter 5 (a shorter version of which was published as Newmeyer 2001b) argues against grammaticalization. A similar kind of preferential difference seems to play a role here as in Chapter 4: modularity versus holism. In the view of grammaticalization theory, the semantic, syntactic, and phonological changes that occur in the development of function words and morphology go together and trigger each other. In Newmeyer’s view, these changes can be seen as independent of each other, since each of these types of change can also occur outside of the set of examples that are regarded as instances of grammaticalization.

Does the fact that the types of phonological and semantic change that we find in relation to grammaticalization processes also occur independently of such processes mean that grammaticalization does not exist? This logic is hard to follow. It would be surprising if the phonological and semantic changes that occur in the context of grammaticalization were of a different nature from those that occur elsewhere. What is remarkable is the frequent co-occurrence of changes on different linguistic levels, and it is this co-occurrence that grammaticalization theory considers as a phenomenon that deserves special attention and explanation.
Then there is the issue of unidirectionality: loose discourse develops into syntax, and content words develop into function words and morphology. These processes are, in the view of grammaticalization theory, unidirectional. Newmeyer gives many examples of changes that go ‘against the stream’, which in his view proves that unidirectionality cannot be an inherent property of change. It is of course correct that grammaticalization is only one type of diachronic change: lexicalization is another one, and in the process of lexicalization, bound morphemes can become words. Speakers constantly enrich their language with new words to enhance their expressive possibilities, taking the material from all possible sources, borrowing them from other languages and using all kinds of material that exists in the language itself, even affixes. In other words, there are different diachronic processes going on side by side, only one of which is grammaticalization, so there is no reason to claim emphatically that “there is no such thing as grammaticalization” (p.226).

In Chapter 6, Newmeyer’s critical discussion of typological research is primarily directed at the methodology, in particular the methodology of using secondary sources (all kinds of existing descriptions of languages), which in his opinion are unreliable. He takes Stassen’s (1985) book on the comparative construction as an example, not because he sees this book as a good example of bad typological research; on the contrary, he considers it to belong to the best of what he has seen in that research tradition. Stassen finds implicational relations between the type of comparative construction a language has and its word order, for example: “If ‘Exceed comparative’ then SVO”. Newmeyer objects to Stassen’s findings as follows (p.330): “Classical Greek, Latin, and Classical Tibetan, all SOV languages, manifest a wide range of comparatives of the ‘Exceed’ type. How could Stassen have missed noting this fact about the two former languages, which are both in his sample? Reliance on secondary sources is to blame — the existence of the Exceed Comparative in these languages is virtually never mentioned in their published grammars” (p.330). Two points are to be made here. First, as Stassen states on p.26–27 of his book, he is well aware of “the fact that quite a few languages appear to have more than one alternative to express NP-comparison. An example of a language in which this is the case is Latin”. In such cases, Stassen chooses the “primary comparative construction, which is somehow more ‘natural’ or ‘unmarked’ than its possible alternatives”. Moreover, the secondary alternative in Latin and Classical Greek is not at all an Exceed comparative but a Separative comparative, and it is standardly mentioned in the published grammars. If these languages have an Exceed comparative, then so does English: He exceeded his brother in strength.
There is no question of Stassen having “missed noting this fact”. Clearly, Newmeyer’s criticism of Stassen’s work cuts no ice.

Chapter 6 easily gives the impression that typologists are either naïve (they do not see the methodological problems), or very courageous (continuing the enterprise, despite the problems). I subscribe to the latter view, cf. the special issue of the journal *STUF (Sprachtypologie und Universalienforschung)*, dedicated to ‘Methodology in Linguistic Typology’ (53:1, 2000).

The question remains whether there really is compatibility between the formalist and functionalist approaches, as Newmeyer claims several times in his book, and has repeated more than once elsewhere. In the Proceedings of the 1996 Milwaukee Conference on ‘Formalism and Functionalism in Linguistics’ (Darnell *et al.* 1999), co-organized by Newmeyer, he states: “I argue that there is no fundamental incompatibility between the central tenets of the formalist and functionalist approaches. In a nutshell, there can be an autonomous structural system at the center of language and syntactic structure can be motivated functionally. Hence each of these approaches to language can make fundamental contributions to our understanding of grammar” (469). In a similar spirit, reviewing three books on language evolution that were published in 1999, Newmeyer (2000b:390) welcomes one of the reviewed books as “the latest, and in my opinion, the most creative, of an increasing number of works designed to demonstrate that there is no incompatibility between autonomous generative syntax and a functional explanation for why grammars have the properties that they have”. Newmeyer (1999a:235) characterizes himself as “a formal linguist who has long taken the position that there is no fundamental incompatibility between the program of constructing autonomous models of grammars and that of advancing functional explanations for why grammars have the properties that they have”.

Despite this repeated claim of compatibility, the book under review does not provide one with a clear picture of how Newmeyer exactly conceives of this compatibility. This then, is the third main criticism of the book I wish to make.

The linguistic literature contains several ‘compatibility models’. In one view, one of the two ‘parties’ does the description and the other the explanation. An example of such a view can be found in Kuno and Takami (1997:245), who propose to leave the descriptive task to the formalists and reserve the explanatory side of the job for the functionalists: “It is important to stress the significance of the role that syntactic theories, especially formal syntactic theories such as GB, play in linguistic analysis. The first step towards progress in linguistics is to identify phenomena that require explanation. Generative theory of grammar
has made immeasurable contributions to the progress in linguistics in that sense at the very least. They have provided the functional linguists with a long list of phenomena to account for”. One fears, however, that generativists would not be happy with such a division of labour. And indeed, Newmeyer takes the opposite view, at least with regard to functional-typological research (p.356): “[T]he second conceptual shift in generative grammar has opened up the possibility of explaining typological facts about language in ways that would have been impossible in earlier models”.

Another possibility to divide the linguistic cake is to cut two pieces that each contain both descriptive and explanatory ingredients. In a typical generative view, there are indeed some facts of language that are explainable by an appeal to UG, whereas other facts have a communicative and conceptual explanation. The first type of facts have to do with ‘core grammar’, the other with ‘periphery’.

At least some functionalists would argue against both types of division of labor. In their view, only a functionalist approach from the beginning to the end can lead to proper description and explanation, as argued in Copeland (2000:xv): “[W]hat unites functional linguists is an implicit belief that language cannot be conceptualized or described separate from its functions in discourse; that autonomy of form or formal categories separate from function is a misguided myth, a myth that ultimately constrains progress in the understanding of language as a dynamic human phenomenon”. And Langacker (2000:358), rounding off his analysis of raising constructions, states:

The basic point of contention between ‘formal’ and ‘functional’ schools of linguistics is whether functional considerations are subsidiary to the investigation of language structure, hence properly undertaken after the latter has been studied independently and described autonomously; or whether they are foundational to the enterprise, in that linguistic structures cannot be understood or correctly described in the first place without a clear appreciation of their function. If the foregoing discussion has been at all convincing, it strongly suggests that functional considerations cannot be relegated to subsidiary status.

Copeland’s and Langacker’s views come closer to the Prague school view of language as a functional system (“La langue est un système de moyens d’expressions appropriés à un but”, Travaux 1929:7), than to de Saussure’s view (“La langue est un système qui ne connaît que son ordre propre”, 1968 [1916]:43). Indeed, the tension between the two orientations was there already early in the 20th century. A real understanding of the history of 20th century linguistics from the point of view of this tension might contribute to solving it in the 21st century.
In conclusion, my evaluation of Newmeyer’s book is less positive than that of most other reviewers. The three main objections I have brought forward are: a mismatch between a purported dialogue between the two orientations (ch. 1 and 7) and an actual one-sided criticism of one of them at the expense of the other (ch. 2 to 6); a subjective reading of at least part of the literature; and a failure to show what the claimed compatibility between functionalist and formalist approaches would look like in an integrated model of language analysis and description.

Newmeyer ends his text on an optimistic note (p. 369): “To return one last time to Sandy Forman and Chris Funk, I hope that both have found something of value in this book. I hope that Sandy’s horizons have been broadened with the realization that functionalists have enriched the field with many important generalizations regarding the influence of function upon form. And I hope that Chris now appreciates the fact that such explanations in many cases rely crucially on the theoretical apparatus arrived at in the last few decades of generative grammar”.

In my view, Newmeyer’s book has failed to bridge the gap. Sandy and Chris will have to continue the debate for some time, I am afraid. And indeed, the debate goes on, with Newmeyer (2002) in the role of Forman and Bresnan and Aissen (2002) as Funk. The latter conclude that “the anti-functionalist criticisms that are levelled against Optimality Theory just miss the point”. Is there, then, no hope for bridging the gap? Newmeyer (to appear) distinguishes between Atomistic functionalism (AF) and Holistic functionalism (HF). In AF, “there is direct linkage between properties of particular grammars and functional motivations for those properties”, whereas in HF “there is no direct linkage between external functions and grammatical categories. The influence of the former on the latter is played out in language use and acquisition and (therefore) language change and is manifested only typologically”. According to Newmeyer, HF is a more modest goal than AF, but it is “hardly an insignificant goal. If accomplished, it will achieve one of the central tasks facing theoretical linguistics today — coming to an understanding of the relationship between grammatical form and those external forces that help to shape that form”. So, there is hope for a real dialogue, after all?
References


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