Lesson 6

M.A.K. Halliday and the context of situation

According to Michael Halliday, linguistics is a branch of sociology, a social semiotic which enable people to exchange meaning and therefore act socially, and not, as Chomsky had argued, a branch of psychology. Halliday’s functional grammar is not a prescriptive or descriptive grammar. At the basis of Halliday’s work is the concept of context of situation and cultural context. Halliday developed an analysis of context in terms of field, tenor and mode. These three components offer a system which help illustrate any socio-linguistic occurrence.

Field: it refers to the subject matter and it may be similar to certain uses of the term domain in computational linguistics: what is happening, to whom, where and when, why it is happening, and so on…

Tenor: it refers to the social relation existing between the interactants in a speech situation. It includes relations of formality, power, and affect (manager/clerk, father/son). Tenor influences interpersonal choices in the linguistic system, and thereby it affects role the structures and the strategies chosen to activate the linguistic exchange.

Mode: it describes the way the language is being used in the speech interaction, including the medium (spoken, written, written to be spoken, etc.) as well as the rhetorical mode (expository, instructive, persuasive, etc.).

These three elements make possible for the speaker/writer to orient himself in the context of situation. The translator must try and maintain the situational and cultural context by finding the corresponding three components in the target language.

Field: the translator will have to take decisions about what terminology to use, to what extent the writer’s context is familiar to the target language reader, the type of grammatical structures to adopt (active/passive);

Tenor: this variable will allow the translator to frame the right choice of register (formal/informal, modern/archaic, technical/non-technical);

Mode: it’s the way the text should be organized (where the information focus lies, what is given and what new information is provided, etc.)

A contextual model

Julian House devises a set of parameters to compare source with target text and calls them ‘dimensions’.

Houses’s dimensions are dependant on the language user:
- geographical origin
- social class
- time

and on the language use:
- medium
- participation
- social role relationship
- social attitude
- province