



Systemic Functional Linguistics to Preserve Interpersonal and Ideational Meaning in English-Indonesian Translation

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Abstract

Systemic functional linguistics (SFL) is a language theory that emphasizes the social function of a language in realizing meaning. Traditional ways of translating Indonesian text have relied heavily on generative grammar or grammar translation methods. Using this method, the grammatical function of an utterance may be well preserved yet at the stake of meaning shift. Register (field, mode, and tenor) is an important feature in SFL that may help translators preserve ideational meaning and tenor from the source language to the target language. English sentences on specific scenarios are translated into Indonesian and vice versa using the grammar translation method and systemic functional linguistics. The results are compared to observe translation shift, ideational, interpersonal, and textual meaning. The findings showed that the grammar translation method fails to transfer the ideational meaning into Indonesian, although preserving experiential features are intact. This does not happen in the systemic functional linguistic approach since the approach requires preserving the functional meaning of a sentence instead of the grammar. The grammar categories may change using SFL, but the functional meaning is well preserved. Emphasizing functional meaning instead of grammatical function enables translators to deliver equal meaning in Indonesian. While tenor is not a problem in the translation of Indonesian to English, translators need to carefully consider field, mode, and tenor when translating texts from English to Indonesian.

Keywords: SFL, register, tenor, ideational meaning, experiential meaning, translation shift

Introduction

Many scholars have proposed various theories and approaches dealing with translation problems; equivalence approach ([Dharma Dev & Yu, 2021](#); [Nida, 1964](#)), polysystem ([Even-Zohar, 1990](#); [Gabriel, 2015](#); [Viłceanu & Păunescu, 2022](#)) and

function theory ([Leppihalme, 2017](#); [Snell-Hornby, 2006](#)) to name a few. None of the approaches and theories have given a grounding extensive analysis of the actual practice of translators, textual analysis during the translation process.

One of the approaches tackling the actual practice of translators is the discourse and register analysis approach. This approach is used in translations for meaning-oriented textual analysis. This paper intends to argue the discourse and register analysis approach as the basis for translation practices from English to Indonesian and vice versa. In this paper, the term Systemic Functional Linguistic (SFL) ([Angelelli et al., 2009](#); [Eggins, 1994](#)) will be used to refer to the approach.

This topic will be discussed in this article through the following structures of content; the underlying reasons for choosing the approach, what the approach is about, including who advocates and critiques it, critical analysis of the approach, and finally, its application to professional translation practice.

Before exploring the approach, it is best to argue the underlying reasons for choosing this approach for my translation practice. [Desjardins \(2017\)](#) argues that the most important part of translation studies is semantic, with textual meaning as the key concept. In accordance with this, [Halliday \(2013\)](#) defines translation as a "meaning making activity," so it is not considered a translation activity if meanings from source texts (ST) are not transferred into target texts (TT)."

Therefore, [Newmark \(1987\)](#) and [Newmark \(1981\)](#) suggest that SFL, as a meaning potential, should be a useful tool for translators because their activities exclusively deal with meanings. [Angelelli et al. \(2009\)](#) further argue that translators need to work out meanings at the lexicogrammar level in order to produce a comprehensible meaning at the text level, and SFL provides the bases for such analysis.

This approach originated from Halliday's systemic functional linguistic model ([Halliday, 2004](#); [Ma & Wang, 2020](#); [Thompson et al., 2019](#)). [Catford \(1965\)](#) introduced it into translation studies as a textual analysis approach using linguistic features. Ever since, many scholars have proposed various models for textual analysis of translation texts ([Baker, 2018](#); [Hatim & Mason, 2014](#); [Spoturno, 2017](#)).

Even though many scholars have heavily criticized his early work, [Catford \(1965\)](#) has made a contribution to translation studies by introducing the term translation shift, changes in linguistics between source text (ST) and target text (TT). Similarly, [House \(2015\)](#) and [Angelelli et al. \(2009\)](#) advocate SFL in analysing

translation products. [Angelelli et al. \(2009\)](#) argue that it is possible to analyse translation errors using this approach, while [House \(2015\)](#) proposes a complete model for the analysis. [Baker \(2014\)](#) applies textual meaning to her textual equivalence, while [Hatim and Mason \(2014\)](#) give special attention to ideational and interpersonal meanings in their discourse analysis model.

Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) has been favoured due to its strong connection between linguistic choices, communication objectives, and sociocultural contexts ([Halliday, 2013](#)). However, more recent developments in Halliday's SFL have rarely been applied to translation studies, let alone the translation of Indonesian to English.

SFL treats a language as a meaning-making tool to deliver the intended message of speakers. Three lines of semantics (ideational, textual, and interpersonal meanings) proposed in this approach carry interactants' intended messages in any situation. These semantics are influenced by three aspects of situations called register variables: field, mode, and tenor. These registers and semantics influence the choice of lexicogrammars (transitivity, modality, theme-rheme/cohesion) the speakers use in their utterances. Therefore, in this approach, meanings of lexicogrammars in a text are defined by their relationship with each other within the text and context of registers and even the context of "a wider sociocultural framework" ([Hatim & Mason, 2014](#)).

For example, if translators are asked to translate an email conversation between a student and a lecturer about an assignment task, the first questions they will ask are, what is the text talking about (field)? In what form of communication is the text used (mode)? and what is the relation between the interactants (tenor)?

For this particular situation, the field is the assignment task, the mode is email conversation, and tenor is the relationship between the student and the lecturer. Using this approach, translators should know that field of this task influences the choices of transitivity of the interactants. The field and the choices of transitivity constitute ideational meanings. Mode of the text influences themes and information structures of the text, defining its textual meaning. Tenor of the text influences modality pattern used by interactants in the conversation, defining its interpersonal meanings.

By understanding how registers, semantics, and lexicogrammar influence each other in the way interactants present messages in a text, translators will be able

to understand the meanings of the task. Therefore, they will be able to produce accurate meanings of the TT into the TL by paying attention to how the registers, semantics, and lexicogrammars are structured in the TL. This scheme of textual analysis can also be applied to various kinds of translation tasks.

However, this kind of classification and its relation to other elements of functional grammar is very complicated and confusing. Therefore, the major criticism of this approach is over complicated classifications of grammar and meanings, which cannot be easily realized from one-to-one structures [Hermans \(2019\)](#). [Gutt \(2014\)](#) specifically criticizes that house's model of translation assessment is only valid for finding 'mismatch' of translation errors, which may result from explicitations or compensation strategies.

[Baker \(2018\)](#) admits that theme patterns, part of the textual meaning, in this approach, are English-oriented. SFL suggests that the theme should be realized through its position in the clause; hence, theme in English is often placed in first position (*ibid*). However, other languages may find that process, part of experiential meaning elements, such as Arabic language, may come in first position (*ibid*).

Since preserving ideational meaning of the source language is critical in delivering the accurate meaning of a text to be translated, it is important for the translator to have a few options when working on a text that might otherwise be confusing if translated incorrectly. Thus, in relation to this, this study aims to learn how systemic functional linguistics can be used in certain scenarios when translating text from English to Indonesian and vice versa.

Research Methodology,

This study employed a qualitative analysis using a literature review study by examining existing literature regarding the application of Systemic Functional linguistics into translation practices. After reviewing systemic functional linguistic approach and comparing it to the grammar translation method, the approach is tested in the actual use cases of English to Indonesian translation to see how effective the method is in transferring the ideational meaning from the source language (English) into the target language (Indonesian).

Findings and Discussion

As stated above, the notion of translation shifts proposed by [Catford \(1965\)](#) is very helpful for translators to understand how styles and meanings shifts can be spotted in translations. Then, we will be able to review how far they influence the understanding of the overall text. Since this approach deals with translation processes, it is best to see how this approach is applied in the actual translation process. I will provide two directions of translation, Indonesian-English and English-Indonesia, to show meaning shifts in translation products.

Table 1. Preserving ideational meaning from English to Indonesian

No.	English text	Indonesian translation	English back translation
i	I cut my hand	<i>Tangan saya terpotong</i>	My hand is cut
ii	I broke my leg	<i>Kaki saya patah</i>	My leg is broken
iii	I hurt my ankle	<i>Pergelangan kaki saya terkilir</i>	My ankle is hurt

In the example (i), it appears that there is an obvious shift in the experiential meaning. In the ST there are two participants, "I" and "my hand," but in TT there is only one participant "my hand." Viewing from the angle of the SFL approach, there is a translation error in the TT. However, if we look at how the meanings in the TT language are realized, there is no problem at all with the translation. The target language readers understand the sentence.

In fact, if the two participants are kept in Indonesian, as in "*Saya memotong tangan saya* - I cut my hand." It will produce a different meaning in the TT. The Indonesian sentence "I cut my hand" means "I intentionally cut my hand." However, it is not what the ST means in the general senses, except if the sentence is in a context in which the speaker intentionally cuts his or her hand.

Most translators used to translate this sentence by preserving the two participants, as I relied mostly on traditional grammar to preserve Subject-Verb-Object patterns of the sentence. Since in SFL meaning is more important than lexicogrammar by comparing how meaning is realized in the TL [Bowcher \(2018\)](#), the choice I made to delete the second participant is justifiable. Therefore, in this example, there is no meaning loss in the TT in comparison to the ST by referring to SFL approach.

Table 2. The loss of tenor from Indonesian to English

No.	Indonesian text	English translation
iv	Apakah ini punya anda	Is this yours?
v	Nama Bapak (teacher) siapa	What is your name?

Table 3. Preserving tenor from English to Indonesian

No.	English text	Indonesian translation
vi	What is your name? (asked to older person)	Nama Bapak siapa?

The fourth example (iv) appears to have no shift in meanings at all in the TL when looking at the surface analysis. The native of the TL language will not notice that there is interpersonal shift in the TL. Actually, in the SL, "*anda* – yours" has interpersonal value, which shows that there is a distance relation between the speaker and the partner. "*Anda*" is used to address a foreign person, while another word, such as "*kamu* – yours" shows that there is a close relationship between the speaker and the partner. However, English does not have such interpersonal meaning in the pronoun "yours" to show the distance relation. Therefore, such translation poses no challenges for the translator.

All of the second person pronouns in Indonesian will be translated into either "you or yours" in English. This translation does not carry the interpersonal meaning of Indonesian into English. For this problem, I have to translate it that way, ignoring the interpersonal meaning of tenors in Indonesian. The same problems have been raised by [Sujatna \(2012\)](#) that it seems impossible to translate the interpersonal meaning of Indonesian to English. However, [Bowcher \(2018\)](#) argues that the highest value should be given to ideational meanings instead of textual and interpersonal.

However, when a translator needs to translate the same exact sentence from Indonesian to English, he or she needs to consider its mode and tenor. The fifth example shows that Indonesian has a tenor function to refer to second person pronoun who is older than the speaker as 'Bapak'. English, on the other hand, does not have such a tenor function for the particular pronoun. Thus, translating the Indonesian text into English poses no problem for the translator. However, when they have to translate from English to Indonesian, the translator needs to consider its

mode and tenor. If the mode of utterances is casual and the speakers speak to someone who is older than him, as in sentence number (vi), the translator needs to determine the tenor of the second person pronoun.

The SFL approach gives both advantages and disadvantages for Indonesian translators during the translation process. The advantages of the approach are extensive literature and understanding translation shift potential, while its disadvantages are time-consuming and irrelevant to certain translation tasks. The thorough literature on functional English grammar provided by [Halliday \(2013\)](#) helps translators to understand how meanings in English are realized. By paying close attention to the grammar and how meanings are realized in the TT (Indonesian), professionals would be able to preserve the meanings of the ST (English).

Another advantage of this approach is that translators will be able to notice the translation shift due to the different nature of language structures and meanings realized in the TL. Instead of making arbitrary choices over explicitations and omissions, translators will be able to make the best choice and preserve which meanings are most important in the text. In SFL, semantic equivalence is more important than lexicogrammars, and contextual is the most important one ([Bowcher, 2018](#)).

On the other hand, the disadvantage of this approach is that the complexity of functional structure classifications to realize meanings in a text makes it impossible for translators to work with tasks that demand quick delivery from clients. In order to produce good translation products, the translators would have to spend a lot of time making a thorough analysis of how meanings are produced in the text by looking at words, groups of words, clauses, and sentences level. [Arellano et al. \(2019\)](#) also have shown that time constraints are often the problem in implementing a rationale into practice. However, an extensive analysis would be beneficial for translators to understand the meaning of certain problematic clauses in a text.

[Bowcher \(2018\)](#) explains that this approach demands translators to produce meanings in the ST to be equivalence to the TT by paying close attention to the equivalence function of the meanings between the ST and TT. This practice is not relevant when translators are given translation tasks for the sake of just understanding the meanings of the ST. In this case, they may produce translation

products as freely as it is allowed to make the messages clear to readers instead of preserving the functional meanings and styles of each clause in the text.

On the other hand, when translators are given tasks such as state regulations and official contracts, meanings and their functions in the text are very important, and thus a thorough analysis of meanings presented in the text will ensure the quality of the translation product. The same fate applies if the text in a specific context is used, such as the one in vocational study. [Masykar \(2019\)](#) suggested that specific methods need to be deployed in dealing with English in a vocational context. Therefore, understanding this approach and how meanings are realized differently in the SL and TL will help translators during translation processes.

Another interesting element of SFL approach is genre and register, which is absent from the grammar translation method. Genre is adopted from Greek into English centuries ago. They showed how each form of literary writings, such as lyrics and epic have different purposes. In systemic functional linguistics, the term has been used to classify different purposes of either spoken or written compunction, as described by [Nunan \(2012\)](#).

"A purposeful, socially constructed oral or written text such as a narrative, a casual conversation, a poem, a recipe or a description. Each genre has its own characteristic structure and grammatical form that reflects its social purpose." [Nunan \(2008\)](#) suggested the following five common types of genre; narratives, recounts, procedures, expositions, reports, explanations, and discussions. The function of narrative is to form an arrangement of events culminating in an issue or emergency and a solution or resolution. Recount is to tell what happened, to record a sequence of occasions, and assess their significance in a few ways. Procedure is to teach the pre-user how to make or do something. Exposition is to show a contention in support of a proposition. Report is to display data on an occasion or circumstance. Explanation is to clarify how and why something occurs. Discussion is to looks at an issue from a few different viewpoints before coming to a conclusion.

Each genre has its style of language and structure and is thus useful for translators to decide how they approach the text they are translating. The manual instruction coming with electronic and mechanical equipment and having a set of instruction language is very different from the language used for the product description. The manual instruction is categorized into procedure genre, while the product description uses an exposition language. [Masykar \(2019\)](#) has also pointed out how

specific English used in vocational education demands teachers to approach the teaching materials differently from the generic one. Thus, when translators are assigned a task to translate a document, they need first to decide the genre of the text to prepare a set of approaches in dealing with every problem found during the translation process.

Register, on the other hand, is defined as how a language used across different context and situation ([Matthiessen et al., 2019](#)). Register is different from genre in that genre leans more toward the cultural context of the language use while register is concerned with the contextual situation of the language ([Fang et al., 2022](#)). In systemic functional linguistics, register of the text demand three contextual precondition, namely field, mode, and tenor. Field concerns on the topic of a conversation and often answer the question of what the conversation about is. What represents the situation and the location of the situation takes place and is often realized solitarily where cultural activity is encased ([Darong, 2022](#)). Such topics can be farming, engineering, and school. An example of a field in our daily life is when we answer the general question when we first meet new people. In this context, we tend to introduce ourselves by setting the context of who we are. The teacher, engineer, and Café in the following sentences are the fields of conversation.

1. I am a teacher.
2. I am an engineer.
3. I work in a Café.

Tenor indicates the individual relationships between the people included in an activity. An imperative measurement of a relationship is that of the relationship ([Darong, 2022](#)). The degree of relationship between two interactants will decide how a particular communicative occasion is carried out and will be marked etymologically. Youth talking to elderly persons would use different forms of language compared to when they speak among themselves. Employees would not talk the same to their employers compared to when they speak to their colleagues. Have a look at the example of how the tenor is used in daily communication.

1. Would you mind if I sit here?
2. Can I sit here?

Both sentences have the same field asking for permission. Both carry the same meaning in that someone is clarifying if the seat he or she is about to sit in is available or if sitting in the chair will bother the interactant. What set both sentences apart is the degree of formality, politeness, and distance between the two speakers. The first sentence denotes that the interactant may not know each other and is formal and polite. The second sentence, on the other hand, conveys the closeness of the interactant; thus, informal and casual language is used.

The last variable of the register is tenor. It is defined as the means we use to convey our message, such as face to face conversation or telephone communication ([Fang et al., 2022](#)). Each mean of the communication has its own constraint. In direct conversation, such as face to face, facial expression helps contextualize the conversation, while the tele-communication is absent from facial expression. Short message service has even more limitations in that the voice does not present, and the meaning of the message is interpreted subjectively by the reader on the other end of the phone.

The three register variables are realized into three components of meanings. Field variable is concerned with the ideational meaning of utterances, mode influences the interpersonal meaning, and tenor is related to textual meaning ([Halliday, 2013](#)). The propositional content of field variable influenced the ideational meaning of the text. The relative degree of relationship between interactants affects the interpersonal meaning. The ideational meaning can be observed from speech function, attitude, and the use of polite structures.

Instead of analysing the structure of a sentence in traditional grammar, the ideational meaning can be observed in the verb of a sentence. An apparent example of this is active and passive. In an active sentence, the relation between subject, action, and object is that the subject is doing something to the object. Thus, it is the object which receives the action. In a passive sentence, it is the subject which receive the action from the object. If we merely look at the structure of a sentence, it would be naïve for Indonesian translator to translate certain English passive forms into Indonesian passive forms. It is because Indonesian passive forms are divided into two categories. The passive structure is in which the object received the action from the subject, and the passive structure is in which the object inadvertently received the action and no subject is to perform the action. We will

analyse further how such a problem occurs in English-Indonesian translation and how systemic functional grammar could help the translator solve the problem.

The second meaning variable that is often neglected by Indonesian translators is the interpersonal meaning. Interpersonal meaning is very apparent in Asian languages because there is a superior and inferior feature in most of their languages. In Indonesian, for example, students would not call their teachers by their names, but they need to address them with tenor markers such '*Bapak*', which is an equivalent to 'Mr' in English. Because addressing the teachers by their names are the norm in English, Indonesian translators would find it difficult to translate English text into Indonesian. Translators would be trapped in making a decision to accentuate the tenor marker in order to comply with Indonesian sense or preserve the text in its original form.

The last meaning proposed in functional grammar is textual meaning. Textual meaning is determined by the mode of communication. Spoken languages would be different from written languages in that the former uses informal forms of language while the letter uses formal forms. Casual and informal forms used in spoken languages carry meanings more than written text since they may use slang forms, different pitch and intonation, and non-formal abbreviation. Translator should be careful in deciding how to translate a spoken language that is already written. Thus, the translation of field transcript, even though written, is actually spoken in nature. They should weigh it as spoken text and translate it as it is without considering its formal form.

Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated how the SFL approach is relevant to be used in translating Indonesian to English text and vice versa. In translating Indonesia-English and vice versa, SFL is very helpful for translators, especially when translating problematic words, group, or phrases and clause that carry specific meanings which have a significant function in the text. Despite the complex nature of the approach in analysing text, this approach provides useful means of producing justifiable choices when a translation shift is unavoidable. Using the field, mode, and tenor feature in SFL, a translator would be able to preserve the ideational meaning of utterances compared to traditional ways using generative grammar.

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