

المجلة بحوث جامعية عن المحافظ المح

## **Empowerment through language description**, empowering language description

## (Part-III)

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#### 4. Allowing for alternative descriptions

As we develop a systemic functional description of a particular language, drawing on primary and/or secondary sources, we will naturally find that alternative descriptions seem possible at various points; and we need to contextualize them, keeping different "consumer" needs in mind (cf. Halliday 1964). Alternative descriptions may enable us to view the language under description in different ways, allowing us to become aware of different important properties of the language. (And it is of course perfectly possible that the alternative descriptions actually reflect tensions in the system of the language, which will be revealed in the course of evolution: any given language always represents change in progress; it is never static, so it will likely embody within itself transient complementarities, with one version gradually yielding to the other, e.g. in changes between aspect and tense systems; cf. Holes 2004, on MSA and Arabic "dialects".)

### 4.1. Alternative descriptions

The alternative descriptions may hinge on any of a number of properties of the overall "architecture" of a systemic functional description of a language, e.g.:

- the alternatives may give different weights to the different trinocular views ("from below", "from roundabout" and "from above");
- the alternatives may involve systemic ordering, e.g. with two systems ordered in delicacy or described as simultaneous;
- the alternatives may involve the assignment of systems to different ranks, e.g. clause rank vs. group rank;
- the alternatives may involve the foregrounding of different metafunctional views, e.g. interpretations of systems of "voice" as part of the experiential transitivity system of a given language and/or as part of the textual system, related to theme (and information).

I will just give a brief illustration of one of these cases, viz. alternatives involving systemic ordering: systems either ordered in delicacy or represented as simultaneous<sup>36</sup>.

# **4.2.** Alternative systemic descriptions of the core interpersonal resources of the Korean clause

In their systemic functional account of Korean, Kim et al. (2023, 109) base their description of the interpersonal grammar of the clause on FORMALITY rather than on MOOD; they characterize their description as follows:

To describe interpersonal systems and structures, we first recognise the crucial grammatical distinction Korean makes between formal and informal resources. [...] Formal resources emphasise status relations in the negotiation of dialogic exchanges; informal resources on the other hand are more concerned with establishing common ground for affiliation.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>36</sup> These alternatives may be versions during different phases in the evolution of a language, which can be brought out if probabilities are attached in the description to systemic terms: cf. Halliday (1991).

As outlined in Figure 3.1 [reproduced as **Erreur ! Source du renvoi introuvable.** 9, CMIMM] and discussed in detail in Section 3.2, the two key formal systems are formal mood and addressee deference; and the three key informal systems are informal mood, stance and politeness. Mood marking, in other words, deploys different strategies in clauses with the feature [formal] and those with the feature [informal] in Korean. (Kim et al. 2023, 109)

The relevant part of their systemic description of the interpersonal resources of the clause in their Figure 3.1 is reproduced here as Figure 9. Their descriptive decision to treat FORMALITY as the primary system foregrounds interactant status (in relation to the contextual parameter of tenor) in the description. It has a number of other consequences; e.g. the system of MOOD is represented as two variants, viz. FORMAL MOOD and INFORMAL MOOD; and they make extensive use of conditional marking conventions (for issues related to marking conventions, see e.g. Matthiessen 1988, 2023a, 240-242).



Figure 11: Part of "The system of mood: interpersonal systems in Korean"

(Source: Kim et al. 2023, 177)

Alternatively, one can suggest a description of the interpersonal clause grammar of Korean where the systems concerned with the mood and the interactant status are simultaneous, as in Figure 12. This system network is just an illustrative sketch I developed partly in order to show how differences between Korean and English, and also Chinese, can be captured in a multilingual system network. I drew primarily on secondary sources, including S.E. Martin (1992) and Sohn (1999), long before Kim et al. (2023) appeared; and I used my description as part of teaching translation students at Korea University up to 2008. This alternative systemic description of the core interpersonal systems of the Korean clause treats the semantic parameters of speech function and interactant status as independent, representing their grammatical correlates as simultaneous systems.

In comparison with the version by Kim et al. (2023), the system of MOOD is thus factored out as one of these simultaneous systems and not repeated for different interactant statuses. The interpersonal realizations at the end of the Korean clause, where the Predicator is located, are represented in systemic gates with entry conditions from the systems of both MOOD TYPE and INTERACTANT STATUS, illustrated in system network fragment by 'familiar interrogative' and 'deferential interrogative'.

Figure 12: Multilingual system network with the Korean systems of MOOD TYPE and INTERACTANT CONTACT as simultaneous systems



#### 4.3. Status of and choice among alternatives

Up to a point, descriptive alternatives such as those illustrated in Figure 11 and 12 can be taken as versions that foreground different views on the resources being described. However, it is of course possible or even likely that in the development of a comprehensive description of the kind presented by Kim et al. (2023) criteria will emerge making it possible to argue in favour of one version or another (as Bartlett 2020, does in his two versions of the systemic description of the interpersonal clause grammar of Scottish Gaelic, one foregrounding considerations of negotiation and the other of engagement within the stratum of semantics). And as always, criteria will reflect trinocular vision — criteria "from below" (realizations), "from roundabout" (the systemic organization itself), and "from above" (semantics, and by another stratal step, context). (Another interesting consideration is ontogenesis: Halliday 1979, 1984a, shows how the "adult" system of MOOD in English emerges in the course of ontogenesis, and it would be interesting to see a comparable study of the ontogenesis of dialogue and mood in Korean.)

Alternatives of the kind just illustrated for the description of the interpersonal grammar of Korean may emerge during the description of any area of the lexicogrammar of a language; but areas that are particularly likely to lead to the consideration of such alternatives involve **complementarities** (cf. Halliday 2008) such as the complementarity of the transitive and ergative models of transitivity<sup>37</sup>, the complementarity of clause-based transitivity and lower-ranking "verb classes", the complementarity of the tense and aspect models of process time, the complementarity of the theme and information arrangements of information, the complementarity of model and mode, and the complementarity of the modality evidentiality modes of assessment of information. Areas of this kind

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>37</sup> The system is that of TRANSITIVITY; "transitive" and "ergative" constitute two complementary models of the system. Therefore, one should not contrast "transitivity" and "ergativity": this only leads to a confusion of the system, transitivity, and complementary models of that system, the transitive vs. ergative models.

may thus prove to be particularly tough to interpret in the development of descriptions.

## **5.** An example: approaches to the clause in Arabic foregrounding different views

As I have noted at various points in this chapter, when we consult secondary sources like descriptive grammars ranging in scope from elementary introductions to comprehensive reference grammars, we will often or almost always find that they are organized "from below" — that they foreground the view "from below" (cf. Figure 8 above). Consequently, when we develop systemic functional descriptions of particular languages, we need to profile the coverage of secondary sources, as illustrated by my profile of Badawi et al.'s (2016) description of written standard Arabic in Table 6 above, in order to identify areas where the secondary sources need to be supplemented in terms of SFL. This will typically mean adding the views "from above" and "from roundabout" to the view "from below", which is most likely to be foregrounded in the secondary source; and in order to support the development of these views (as well as providing further evidence for the view "from below"), we will almost certainly need to analyse primary sources, i.e. texts in contexts instantiating different registers.

To illustrate the process of adding to the view "from below" provided by secondary sources, I will again turn to MSA.

### 5.1. The clause in MSA: the system of process type

Descriptions of Arabic usually make a basic distinction between "nominal clauses" and "verbal clauses" (e.g. Owens 1988). In the tradition of Arab grammarians, this distinction is based on the nature of the major element at the beginning of the clause, either (in our systemic functional terms) a nominal group or a verbal group; and in the "Western" tradition, it is based on the presence or absence of a verbal group (serving as Process/ Predicator): if it is absent, the clause is classified as "nominal" and if it is present, it is classified as "verbal". Both traditions reflect the view of the clause "from below"; they are based on a syntagmatic view of the clause:

In the case of the tradition of Arab linguists, the account provides a very partial view of the clause as a message
— i.e. of the *textual* organization of the clause: the initial

position of the clause serves to realize the textual prominence of Theme. (The view is partial because other elements may come at the beginning of the clause, e.g. locative مناك huna:ka in an 'existential' clause, thus being given thematic status, and in the case of prepositional phrases realizing circumstances, and also purely textual or interpersonal elements.)

• In the case of the "Western" tradition, the distinction provides an *experiential* glimpse of the transitivity structure of the clause — a view reflecting the conditions under which the Process is present or absent syntagmatically in the structure of the clause.

I will focus on this "western" line of interpretation since it illustrates a common motif in the description of quite few languages, where linguists have (mistakenly in my view) made a primary distinction between clauses based on the presence or absence of a verbal group as Process/ Predicator (cf. Matthiessen 2004, 582, 595-596).

When viewed "from roundabout" in terms of *systemic patterns of agnation* and "from above" in reference to the *semantic correlate* of the clause, so-called "nominal clauses" in MSA turn out to be simply 'relational' or 'existential' clauses that are unmarked in terms of the systems of ASPECT and POLARITY:

- The system of ASPECT: if the clause is 'imperfective' rather than 'perfective', the Process is implicit if it is 'positive' in polarity.
- The system of POLARITY: if the clause is 'positive' rather than 'negative', the Process is implicit if it is 'imperfective' in aspect.

The combinations of systemic terms (features) in the systems of ASPECT and POLARITY are set out in Table 7, showing the paradigmatic environments defined by these two systems where the Process/ Predicator is structurally present or absent<sup>38</sup>. Importantly,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>38</sup> Just to reinforce the point made in this section: it is important to note that the issue is the structural presence or absence of the Process/ Predicator: systemically it is present in the sense of the *valeur* in the system (brought out

the structural implicitness of the Process/ Predicator in the clause is simply the limiting case of the reduced versions of verbs being used in unmarked 'relational' and 'existential' clauses in many languages. For example, in the Arabic clause الطالب ذكي "the student is smart", the Process is structurally absent; in the English equivalent, it's reduced to /s/ and cliticized to the Carrier/ Subject: *the student's smart*: the difference between Ø and /s/ as the reduced realizational version of *is*, enclitic to the Subject, is literally minimal.

Table 7: The systemic intersection of polarity and aspect and the presence of the Process/ Predicator in 'relational' and 'existential' clauses in MSA

		POLARITY		
		positive	negative	
ASPECT	imperfective	Process is implicit in the (transitivity) structure of the clause	Process/ Predicator is realized by the negative verb ليس <i>laysa</i>	
	perfective	Process is realized by the perfective verb لکان ka:na	Process is realized by <i>lam</i> plus the imperfective form of يكن لم <i>ka:na</i> , e.g. كان <i>lan</i> yakun	

Taking one step further, I have used the information in Table 7 to sketch the part of the system network of the clause in MSA that is relevant to the presence or absence of the Process/ Predicator: see Figure 13. The system of POLARITY has all major clauses as its domain; i.e. the entry condition is 'major clause'. Thus it is simultaneous with the systems of FREEDOM and of PROCESS TYPE (among other systems, which are not shown in the system network). In contrast, the system of ASPECT does not apply to all clauses.

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when we adopt the view "from roundabout"). This is of course an important insight contributed by SFL as part of giving the paradigmatic axis primacy over the syntagmatic axis (Halliday 1966), which is discussed at length in Matthiessen (2023a). There I suggest an analogy with David Bohm's (1980) distinction between implicate and explicate order. Systemic organization is implicate, whereas structural organization is explicate. Thus in terms of implicate order, the Process/ Predicator is always present because it is implicated by the combination of 'positive' and 'imperfective'.

According to the system network, it applies only to 'indicative' clauses, not to 'imperative' ones; i.e. it has 'indicative' as its entry condition. This is quite accurate, but I have not included the possibility of 'bound' clauses selecting for ASPECT. (In 'imperative' clauses, there is no aspectual distinction; the Predicator is realized by the 'imperative' form of the verb, if the clause is 'positive', but by the 'jussive' form of the verb, if the clause is 'negative': see Figure 22, to be discussed in Section 5.3 below.) In terms of the system of PROCESS TYPE, the relevant systemic environment is that of 'relational' clauses and of 'existential' clauses. The examples given in the table incorporated in the system network are intensive relational clauses.

Figure 13: The systemic intersection of POLARITY and ASPECT and the presence of the Process/ Predicator in intensive 'relational' and 'existential' clauses in MSA



In the system network shown in Figure 13, I have postulated the system of ASPECT as a clause system. One reason for this is that its entry condition 'indicative' is a term in the clause system of MOOD TYPE; and another reason is of course that its systemic terms are involved in statements of the presence and absence of the Process in the structure of the clause. But let me now go on to examine the system of ASPECT, which also serves as a system of the verbal group in Arabic, together with the system of TENSE.

The verbal group realizes the Process/ Predicator in the structure of the clause. For present purposes, its maximal function structure can be described as in Figure 14 (see e.g. Holes 2004, Section 5.2). (In addition, there are also hypotactic verbal group complexes, prominently ones involving temporal phase; and there are combinations of verbal groups with process nominalizations corresponding to English verbal group complexes such as *I like to travel* — "I like the travelling".)

Figure 14: Maximal verbal group in MSA realizing Process/ Predicator; if the Subject is present in the structure of the clause, the verbal group is discontinuous: the Auxiliary precedes the Subject and the remainder of the verbal group follows it

Function	Auxiliary	<(Subject)>	Modal-	Polarity	Event <sub>[Complement]</sub>
			temporal		
class	auxiliary verb: کان <i>ka:na</i>		modal/ temporal particle: <i>qad /</i> <i>laqad</i> ; sa-	negative particle: <i>la, lam,</i> <i>lan, ma:</i>	lexical verb [enclitic complement pronoun]
			/ sawfa		
	perfective / imperfective				perfective / imperfective
	number, person, gender				number, person, gender

### 5.2. The systems of tense and aspect

As Table 7 shows, the presence or absence of the Process/ Predicator in the structure of the clause depends on the intersection of the systemic values of ASPECT and POLARITY. However, let me take some time now in this subsection to explore the temporal grammar of MSA concerned with the unfolding of the process through time. The central question is whether the temporal grammar is based on a model of tense, a model of aspect or a combination of tense and aspect. (In addition to descriptions of tense and aspect in Classical Arabic, Modern Standard Arabic and [developments in] various dialects, e.g. Bruweleit 2015, there is a very extensive relevant typological literature on tense and aspect, e.g. Bull 1961; Hopper 1982; Comrie 1976, 1985; Dahl 1985; Binnick 1991; Bybee, Perkins & Pagliuca 1994; Bhat 1999; Nordlinger & Sadler 2004; Binnick 2012; but since it would take a great deal of space to review and my purpose here is merely illustrative, I will leave the discussion for another occasion.)

The tense model of process time is concerned with the *location* of the process unfolding through time relative to the 'now' of speaking or to some other 'reference time'. In English, this is past / present / future (see e.g. Halliday & Matthiessen 2014, 398-410; Matthiessen 1996) — relative either to the 'now' of speaking if the tense is a primary tense, or to another reference time if it is a secondary tense (but we find variants of this model in other languages, with different basic systemic contrasts in tense, e.g. past / non-past and present / non-present).

The aspect model of process time is concerned with the *boundedness* of the process unfolding through time (also characterized as the internal temporal structure of the process unfolding through time), regardless of its location to other times such as the time of speaking. In Chinese and in other languages embodying the aspect model, the basic systemic choice is between 'perfective' and 'imperfective'. In their description of Chinese, Halliday & McDonald (2004, 380) introduce the system of ASPECT as follows (see also Halliday & Matthiessen 2006, Chapter 7):

As is characteristic of languages towards the eastern end of the Eurasian cultural continuum, time in Chinese is grammaticized as aspect rather than as tense: that is, the basic variable is not whether the process is construed as past, present or future relative to the time of speaking or other reference point, but rather whether the process is construed as imperfective or perfective relative to the context. The latter perspective takes innumerable subtly different forms in different languages; even within the Chinese dialects there is quite significant variation: in Cantonese, for example, verbal aspect is more clearly distinct from clausal aspect than it is in Mandarin, but at the same time clausal aspect is less clearly distinct from mood. (Halliday & McDonald 2004, 380)

As Halliday has observed (cf. also Halliday & Ellis 1951), in eastern Eurasia, the aspect model is quite common; we find it in languages that do not belong to the same language families, e.g. in Chinese and Tagalog: it is an areal feature. He has also noted (p.c.) that in western Eurasia, tense models are common — English being an "extreme" example (cf. Caffarel 1992 and 2006, on French), and that in-between there are mixed systems, notably Slavic and Indo-Aryan languages. With the extensive information now provided by the Grambank typological database, we can develop an areal picture of the distribution of tense and aspect systems and mixed tenseaspect systems around the world. The picture is finely differentiated, and I hope to discuss it more fully elsewhere; but here I would like to explore briefly the descriptive interpretation of MSA as embodying a mixed tense-aspect system.

Drawing a number of scholars of Arabic, I have interpreted the basic morphological distinction in the verb, e.g. فعل (perfective, or "s-stem", in Holes' 2004, terms) vs. يفعل, (imperfective, or "p-stem") as one of aspect. Holes (2004, 217) characterizes the contrast as follows, highlighting the aspectual origin while allowing for a reanalysis in terms of tense in certain varieties of Arabic<sup>39</sup>:

The s-stem / p-stem distinction was historically not one of tense but of verbal aspect — although, synchronically, as we shall see, it is evolving in both MSA and the dialects towards a tense system. In all varieties of modern Arabic, the s-stem / p-stem distinguishes actions and states conceived of as completed/ factual (s-stem) from ones conceived of as noncompleted/ ongoing/ notional (p-stem). (Holes 2004, 217)

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>39</sup> Holes uses the term p-stem for "prefix stem" (e.g. (يفعل), which has also been called "imperfective" (or "present", in tense interpretations), and s-stem for "suffix stem (e.g. (فعل), which has also been called "perfective" (or "past", in tense interpretations). This is obviously terminology based on the view "from below" in terms of Halliday's trinocular vision (cf. Halliday 1984b).

Badawi et al. (2004, 362-363) also note the combination of tense and aspect in written Modern Standard Arabic (MWA):

MWA formally retains the CA [Classical Arabic] dual aspectual system, perfect vs. imperfect, and these terms will be used for the verb forms as such, but it has now also a complete three tense structure replicating that of western languages, (signs of which were already apparent in CA). Although there are only two paradigms, perfect and imperfect, they can, alone and in combination with modals, express the same range of tenses, moods and voices that are found in the more complex and explicit western system. (Badawi et al. 2004, 362-363)

However, in one of the reference grammars of MSA, it is interpreted as one of tense: this is Ryding (2005, 52), who does however offer a discussion of the alternative temporal interpretation (see also Ryding 2005, 439-440):

Tense and aspect can be seen as two different ways of viewing time. Tense usually deals with linear points extending from the past into the future. Aspect sees the completeness of an action or state as central: is the action over with and completed, ongoing, or yet to occur? The points of view of the two terms are different: one focuses on when the action occurs and the other focuses on the action itself— whether it is complete or not. These two grammatical categories do overlap to some extent and have in practice blended into one in MSA. [Footnote 22: reference to Wright's interpretation of Classical Arabic]

There are two basic morphological tenses in Arabic: past and present, also called perfective and imperfective, respectively. In dealing with the modern written language, many linguists and teachers find it more pragmatic to describe Arabic verbs in terms of tense, and the terms past/present (referring to time or tense) and perfect/imperfect (referring to aspect) are often used interchangeably. There is also a future tense, indicated by prefixing either *sa*- or *sawfa* to a present tense form. Other tenses exist, such as the past perfect, the future perfect, and the past continuous, but they are compound tenses involving

the use of auxiliary verbs and particles. [Footnote 23: reference to Chapter 21] (Ryding 2005, 52)

Ryding's contribution is significant in its own right as a reference grammar of MSA, but also because her description is the sole (secondary) source of information about MSA in Grambank; so a great deal rides on Ryding<sup>40</sup>.

Interpretative choices having to do with how to describe the unfolding of the process through time are often challenging because when we move around the languages of the world, we find two complementary models (on the general challenge involving complementary systems, see Section 4.3 above), viz. those of tense and aspect. The tense model is more familiar in traditional grammar (for its application to descriptions of English up to 1800, see Michael 1970) and may therefore lead to the mis-interpretation of less traditionally familiar aspectual systems in terms of tense, as noted by Bhat (1999).

In order to avoid mis-interpretations, we need to work with primary sources of data, i.e. texts sampled from relevant registers (see Section 3.1.2., and Figure 6 above). As an illustration, consider the excerpt from a traditional story in Arabic shown and annotated in Figure 14. The clauses that advance the main event line of the story are all in the 'perfective' (what Holes 2004, calls the "s-stem"). This does not in itself give us a hint as to whether these verb forms should be interpreted in terms of tense as 'past' tense or in terms of aspect as 'perfective' since both 'past' tense and 'perfective' aspect are commonly used in construing the event line in stories in languages with tense systems or aspect systems. However, the choice in clauses that do not advance the event line but are related to clauses that do is suggestive: they select for the 'imperfective' (Holes' 2004, "p-stem"): بُقَالُ yuqa:lu '[he] is called'; and so on. If the contrast was one of tense, the 'present' tense would be unexpected in the narrative; but if it is one of aspect, these forms make excellent sense; they represent simultaneous unbounded processes (being called, carrying, being spoken of, being shaded, flowing). So, while they are

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>40</sup> In his typological investigation of tense and aspect systems, Dahl (1985, e.g. 70) codes MSA for aspect.

glossed by past English verbs, this is misleading as far as the Arabic temporal system is concerned.

In addition, there are two clauses where the Process is realized by a verbal group consisting of two verbs, the auxiliary *ka:na* followed by the lexical verb *yashtayilu*; and *ka:na* followed by *yaħmilu*. They provide another hint — just an instantial indication — that the nature of the temporal system is based on an aspectual contrast in verb forms, but that tense also plays a role: the auxiliary *ka:na* serves to mark the process as unfolding prior to 'now' and the form of the lexical verb indicates that it is unbounded. In both cases, the English glosses involve the present-in-past (Halliday & Matthiessen 2014, 398-410; Matthiessen 1996). The temporal patterns illustrated by the introductory phase of the story in Figure 14 continue, and appear to be characteristic of this register.