

# SYSTEMIC FUNCTIONAL LINGUISTICS AS A BASIC THEORY IN TRANSLATING ENGLISH WORDPLAYS

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## ABSTRACT

*Wordplay are exploited in order to bring a communicatively significant confrontation of two or more linguistic structures. Translating wordplays in English text into Indonesian is difficult; on the one hand, translator has to recognize the use of wordplays in rendering a defined effect and the characteristics of translated text. This paper is designed to explore the importance of systemic functional linguistics (SFL) related to translating English wordplay into Indonesian, particularly the strategies of dealing with those wordplays and its application in solving problems effectively. SFL is most appropriately applicable to text analysis especially wordplay analysis because it is constructed for the sake of text analysis.*

**Keywords:** *wordplay, linguistic, SFL, translating*

## ABSTRAK

*Permainan kata digunakan saat ingin menghandirkan konfrontasi komunikatif yang signifikan dari dua atau lebih struktur linguistik. Menerjemahkan permainan kata dalam teks bahasa Inggris ke bahasa Indonesia sangat sulit; di satu sisi, penerjemah harus mengenali penggunaan permainan kata dalam memberikan efek yang telah ditetapkan dan sifat dari teks yang diterjemahkan. Tulisan ini dirancang untuk mengeksplorasi pentingnya linguistik fungsional sistemik (LFS) dalam menerjemahkan permainan kata bahasa Inggris ke dalam bahasa Indonesia, khususnya strategi untuk menggunakan permainan kata dan aplikasinya dalam memecahkan masalah secara efektif. LFS yang paling tepat diterapkan pada analisis teks, khususnya analisis permainan kata karena dibangun untuk kepentingan analisis teks.*

**Kata kunci:** *wordplay, linguistik, SFL, terjemahan*

## INTRODUCTION

Wordplay is a various phenomena in which structural features of languages used are exploited in order to bring a communicatively significant confrontation of two or more linguistic structures with more or less similar forms and different meanings. It is renowned for its various effects. Translating wordplays in English text into Indonesian is difficult; on the one hand, translator has to recognize the use of wordplays in rendering a defined effect and the characteristics of translated text.

This paper is designed to explore the importance of systemic functional linguistics (SFL) related to translating English wordplay into Indonesian, particularly the strategies of dealing with those wordplays and its application in solving problems effectively, by which Indonesian-translated wordplays are expected to be natural and easy to understand.

### Linguistics Approach to Translation Studies

The development in the linguistic theory has been promoting the development of the translation theory. The important work of translation scholars based on linguistics, such as Mona Baker and Katharina Reiss, has done a great deal to break down the boundaries between disciplines and to move translation studies on from a position of possible confrontation (Bassnett, 1980). Nida & Taber (2001) once stated that some scholars have approached the issue of translating from the viewpoints of linguistic differences between source and target texts. Just as Bell (1991) argues that “It is difficult to see how translation theorists can move beyond the subjective and normative evaluation of texts without drawing heavily on linguistics.”

According to Catford (1965), an English-speaking linguist has applied Halliday’s systemic grammar to translation theory and categorized translation shifts between levels, structures, word classes, unit and system. He proposes that the equivalence in translation should be established in the aspects of discourse and function. He stated that translation may be defined as: “The replacement of textual material in one language (SL) by equivalent textual material in another language (TL). Catford also mentioned that the central problem of translation practice is that of finding TL equivalence and the central task of translation theory is that of defining the nature and condition equivalence.

To understand the nature and the using of law of language is very important to the translation, so the theory of linguistics plays a quite important role in the developing of translation theory. Eugene Nida, in *Science of Translation* (1964) wrote that “It was sometimes hoped to evolve a single theory, a semiotic, if not a linguistic theory, that would encompass all translating that would also produce a single scientific method applicable to all translation human and machine (cf. Newmark 2001, p. 97). Without guidance of the linguistic theory it would be hard for the translation theory to be systematized and theorized, even though the process of translation is influenced by non-verbal aspects, such as, esthetics and culture loaded by different languages. The study of translation theory would be benefited from the theory of SFL. SFL itself takes the actual usage of language as its study object and sees language as a tool for social communication and the latest researches show that the SFL can be applicable to the field of translation, especially to translate English wordplay into Indonesian.

### The Importance of Systemic Functional Linguistics in Translation Studies

Let us now explain why SFL can prove itself useful to the theory and practice of translation and why systemic functional perspective can be used to explore the theoretical problems of translation. Although some scholars might still at times claim that proficiency in a foreign language along with a couple of dictionaries are all that one needs to produce translation, we know that it is not so. Apart from proficiency in two languages, the source and the target ones, translation needs much knowledge

and know-how to draw on a wide range of other disciplines, depending on the text being translated. Translating a language also means a choice of word in a language. However language itself is a colorful resource and provides plenty of choices for language users. According to Halliday (1994), systemic theory is a theory of meaning as choice, by which a language or any other semiotic system, is interpreted as networks of interlocking options. Coffin (2001) stated that "SFL is primarily a linguistic theory" and "one of the main purposes of Halliday developing SFL is to create a theory for solving a range of problems faced by potential 'consumers' of 'linguistics'". Thomson (1996) has at several points used term "choice" in discussing meanings. The idea of choice that the translator has multiple ways to express what they want to convey in a given situation has permeated in many works related to Systemic Functional Linguistics.

Since language is viewed as semiotic potential, the description of language is a description of choice. SFL is mainly established for the text analysis. Berry (1996, p.2) also stated that "one of the great strength of Halliday's work is its applicability to text analysis". While Fairclough (1995) viewed the grammar of SFL as "a textually oriented theory concerned with producing grammatical description which are useable in textual analysis". Language is functional in the sense that it is designed to account for how the language is used and language has evolved to satisfy human needs, and the way it is organized is functional with respect to these needs (Halliday, 1994). After the revealing statements above, we can consider SFL relevant to the study of translation. The main focus of SFL should become clear from the definition offered by Halliday (1994), "It is functional in the sense that it is designed to account for how the language is used." Every text unfolds in some context of use. A systemic functional linguistics shows that everything can be explained, ultimately, by reference to how language is used (Halliday, 1994). It describes language in actual use and centers around texts and their contexts. Since it concerns language and how language is realized in text, in consequence it is also fit to deal with the actual goal of translator: translating text (Torsello, 1996).

Halliday (1978) viewed translating text is not a static and normative kind of approach but rather in one that sees language as dynamic communication and language as "social semiotic". Indeed SFL concerns itself with how language works, how it is organized and what social function it serves. In other words, it is a socio-linguistically and contextually-oriented framework, where language is viewed as being embedded in culture, and where meaning can be properly understood only with reference to the cultural environment in which they are realized. Language is not a simply matter of vocabulary and grammar, but it can never be separated from the culture it operates and is always part of a context and language use will vary according to different context. All of these will be even more evident when dealing with the activity of translation, in which a translator faces not only recognizing and understanding a different social and cultural source context, but also with being able to reproduce meanings in totally different environment, the target one. In short, a translator is often faced with the problem of identifying culture specificity, which obliges finding a way to convey the cultural features to his or her audiences. As a result, we believe that an approach which focuses on language embedded in context can prove itself to be a real help in the act of translating.

## **Systemic Functional Linguistics and Wordplay Translation**

### **Definition of Wordplay**

Humor and wordplay can be and have been studied from various points of view and using many different theoretical approaches and terminologies. Attardo (1994), for example, offers a lengthy survey of literature on humor starting from the time of Plato, as well as a survey of diverse theories of jokes and definitions and classifications of puns (or wordplay).

Many researchers writing on the subject of wordplay seem to use the terms "wordplay" and "pun" more or less interchangeably, while others, e.g. Leppihalme (1997: 142), appear to consider

"pun" to refer to only a subclass of wordplay, namely that of homophonous or paronymical wordplay. It has been suggested that "puns" are most common in languages like English, which have many monosyllabic words (see e.g. Delabastita 1996b: 131). In languages like Indonesian, wordplay is more often based on polysemy (Leppihalme 1997: 142). For this reason, I will be referring to the phenomenon in general as "wordplay".

Dirk Delabastita states his definition of wordplay as: "Wordplay is the general name for the various textual phenomena in which structural features of the language(s) used are exploited in order to bring about a communicatively significant confrontation of two (or more) linguistic structures with more or less similar forms and more or less different meanings." (1996b: 128, emphasis original). The first aspect of this definition is that linguistic structures resembling each other in form are contrasted to create humor out of their different meanings. Delabastita (1996b: 128) lists the different ways that linguistic structures can share a similar form: identical spelling and sound e.g. Indonesian *tanggal* (homonymy), identical sound but different spelling e.g. English *right* vs. *rite* (homophony), identical spelling but different sound e.g. English *read* (present tense) vs. *read* (imperfect) (homography), or differ slightly in both e.g. English *friend* vs. *fiend* (paronymy). The two meanings can be present in the same utterance (vertical wordplay), or they can be revealed through repetition in context (horizontal wordplay).

Although all of the examples above are single words, ambiguous elements that are required to produce wordplay can be found at all levels of language. Such features can be phonological (homophones etc.), morphological (derived and compound words the parts of which have lost their literal meaning), lexical (polysemous words and idioms), and syntactic (ambiguous phrases or sentences), as Delabastita (1996b: 130-131) reminds us. The second aspect according to Delabastita (1996b: 129-130) is that ambiguity alone is not enough to create the humorous effect of wordplay. Rather, he states that it is important to remember that wordplay is a feature of texts. While the possibilities for wordplay exist in language already, they require the context, either verbal or situational, to be activated. Verbal contexts are related to the human knowledge and expectations of grammatical and coherent texts, as well as conventionalized phrases. This concept of verbal contexts can be linked with Attardo's (1994: 169) discussion of local logic, which all kinds of jokes have. Such playful local logic often violates the expectations readers have of grammatical sentences and possible situations, but the audience is ready to accept this for the duration of the joke. Attardo (1994: 169) argues that in the case of wordplay, the local logic is more or less: "since the two sound the same they must mean sort of the same thing". Situational contexts on the other hand would include for example the pictorial element of comics, which gives an additional meaning to the text.

The third aspect that Delabastita's (1996b: 132) definition takes up is the communicative significance factor. This is related to the contextual aspect in the sense that we should differentiate between accidental ambiguities in the text and those used intentionally for wordplay and the effects it creates. Delabastita (1996b: 132) admits that it is often very difficult to determine the intention of the author. In the end, the recognition and appreciation of wordplay depends on the readers' reading habits, as well as the genre conventions of the text. Similarly Leppihalme (1997: 141) considers it often difficult to distinguish between cases of intentional and unintentional wordplay. Sometimes a slip or spelling error, or the text finding its way to a certain context may give rise to a pun that would not exist in other contexts (see also Vandaele 2002).

Also Attardo (1994: 168) discusses wordplay as a consciously metalinguistic phenomenon. This means that the speakers are deliberately taking advantage of certain characteristics of language (namely the existence of homonyms, and polysemous words etc.) to create a humorous effect. The humorous effect appears to be the most important reason for taking advantage of the possibilities language offers for creating wordplay. Veisbergs (1997: 159) and Delabastita (1996b: 130), among others, state that the function or goal of wordplay is to create a humorous effect and draw the

audience's attention to something in the text. In addition to these two goals, Delabastita (1996b: 130) adds that wordplay gives the possibility to address potentially taboo issues.

According to Alexieva (1997: 139-140), humans seem to have a strong wish to create a humorous effect when communicating with others, and this is the motivation behind wordplay. At the same time, they like to test their own and their audience's skills of making analogies. The audience being able to catch the intended meaning, to make the analogy, and to share in the humorous effect may cause a stronger feeling of solidarity between the speaker (author) and the audience. On the other hand, if the audience fails to grasp the meaning, the speaker may get some feeling of power and superiority.

This implies that wordplay has additional goals besides creating humor. The goals include the various social functions that humor may have, including facilitating interaction in a group, creating bonds inside a group and excluding the outsiders, and allowing the speaker not to commit to the words uttered in order to save face (Attardo 1994: 322-330). The author of a humorous text has similar goals, getting the reader somehow involved in interaction with the text, or in a game of recognizing the allusions (Leppihalme 1996: 202). Readers may have varying reactions to wordplay, but in Leppihalme's view the author probably creates the wordplay so that at least some of the readers will appreciate and enjoy it.

From the translator's point of view, this suggests that wordplay should not be taken lightly. It can be presumed that the author has some communicative goal in mind when using wordplay. This goal and the effect the wordplay creates should be preserved in the translation.

### **Translating Humor in Wordplay**

Humor is often mentioned as one of the characteristics of texts that are most difficult for a translator to translate (Heiskanen, 1990). It is often discussed how difficult it is to even define what humor actually is. For the purposes of translating humor, one can consider humor the same as humorous effect, and translating humor then becomes the same as "achieving the 'same humorous effect'" (Vandaele 2002: 151).

Translating humor is difficult partly because being able to appreciate humor does not mean that one is able to create that same effect (Vandaele, 2002: 150). Creating funny texts would appear to be very much a question of natural talent that cannot be learned. On the other hand, a sense of humor is an individual thing since not everyone finds the same things amusing. A strong reaction, either positive or negative, towards humor in the text may make analyzing the humorous effect difficult for the translator (Vandaele 2002: 150). What Vandaele apparently means is that if the translator is very amused by a joke or considers it a failure, he or she may have more difficulties in determining the elements of the humorous effect. Such an analysis is important in deciding which features and effects should be present in the target text.

Vandaele (2002: 154) argues that eventually the translator aiming to achieve the same humorous effect in the target text will need to address two questions. The first is what caused the humorous effect; and the second what effects does the humor in turn cause. As an answer to the first question, Vandaele (2002: 154) considers a humorous effect to be the "physiological arousal" that a person attributes to a particular cause. Particular causes may carry with them different connotations, e.g. wordplay would be considered "witty", physical slapstick comedy "simplistic". As an answer to the second question, humor may be used as a rhetorical device to arouse "goodwill" or similar feelings in the audience or it may cause disgust if it is recognized but not considered funny by the audience. Humor as a rhetorical device may also cause negative feelings, such as making the reader angry about something at the same time as being amused, as is the case with satire.

## **The Use of Systemic Functional Linguistics in Translating Wordplay**

Halliday (1994) offers systemic functional linguistics that could be used for translation of humor. It has been used by authors dealing with various types of issues, ranging from jokes to longer humorous narratives to computational generation of humor and it is possible to use the SFL for any variety of media, including different semiotic systems such as one encounters in movies, television, comic strips etc.

It is suggested that the SFL is a suitable theory for translating humor, because it includes the use of context in interpreting the wordplay, while humor is bounded contextually. However, that the SFL does not claim that the theory is able to explain the similarity and difference between texts, and the mechanics of producing wordplay. Recognizing these limitations, I will follow Delabastita's (1996b: 131) opinion that while a linguistic approach to wordplay will never be able to explain everything, an analysis of the linguistic structure is a good and necessary starting point for studying translation of wordplay, since wordplay is so strongly connected to the linguistic supply of possible devices.

In SFL, the context of situation of wordplay is seen as comprising three components, called 'Field', 'Tenor' and 'Mode'. Field concerns the kind of action taking place and its social nature. Tenor regards the interactive roles involved in the text creation (who is taking part) and Mode refers to the function of language in the organization of the text. A translator who is capable of identifying these different dimensions and is able to reproduce them in a different language, is better able to offer a wordplay which is "functional equivalence" to the source one, even though the structures be different, because languages are different.

The three variables of context of situation above, i.e. Field, Tenor and Mode, affect our language choices because they are linked to the three main functions of language that languages construes, which Halliday calls 'semantic metafunctions', i.e. the ideational, interpersonal and textual. Very briefly, the field is seen as activating ideational meaning; tenor as determining interpersonal meaning and mode as triggering textual meaning, the ones that are closely related to the translation of wordplay.

### **Ideational Metafunction and Wordplay Translation**

The first metafunction that is ideational metafunction is concerned with 'ideation' which is about the content or proposition of message (Halliday, 1994). It can be further classified into experiential and the logical subtypes. The experiential function is mainly realized by transitivity and voice. In translating wordplay, the system of transitivity plays an important role. That system refers to the language features of the clause which represent the speaker's or writer's experience or something else around the world (Eggins, 2004). This is in line with one of the factors that influences wordplay translation, that is *the sender*. The sender may be either known or unknown, an individual or a team. He may be a first sender or a second sender (in the case of translation). This condition may effect the style, experience and intention of the sender, and as a translator he have to understand all of them. SFL with its transitivity system of language will construe experience into a small set of domains of meanings which differ according to the process itself and the nature of the senders involved in it. A particular translated wordplay that construes meanings of source wordplay may convey different meanings because it is possible for translator to use different experience to reproduce original meanings. For example, the wordplay "we'll have jam session or does he want to stunt our growth?" which are adopted in translation test of the second semester of English department students, have several different translated version. Some students relate the word 'jam' with 'selai' and another students relate it with music 'jam session'. Both translation based on the experience in which 'selai' and 'jam session' have close relationship with 'growth' although 'selai' related to children growth while 'jam session' related to teenagers growth.

Therefore, the ideational function that constructs the experiential meaning of clause offers a practical theoretical framework to embark on the comparative analysis of source language and target language and then the evaluation of translated wordplay, that is to say in what respect it succeeds and in what respect it less successful.

### **Interpersonal meaning and wordplay translation**

The second metafunction is related to interpersonal meaning. We use language to interact with other people. They share the message that actually should be understood by each other. The meaning of the message depends on their purpose of function, whether as primarily informative (referential), expressive or operative (Reiss, 1981: 126). It also happens in wordplay which also has various purposes. These variations may influence the translator in translating wordplay. However Halliday (1994) has proposed modality to be the one of important resources for construing interpersonal meanings. He has established a systemic network for modality, which contains such several categories as types of modality (modalization and modulation), orientation in modality (subjective and objective; explicit and implicit), values of modality (high, medium and low) and polarity (positive and negative). The network specially offers practical parameters for the translation of meanings of modality and also provides a criterion for functional equivalence translation. For example, the wordplay:

Hoowey : Are you going to pay up?  
Donald : I didn't find time to read the book – cough! Cough!  
Hoowey : Are you going to *cough* up this or not?

*(taken from Donald Duck and the boys, Carl Bark, 1988)*

The wordplay 'cough' has the meaning of 'coughing' (sickness) implied by the lexical meaning 'pay'. In addition the 'cough' shows that the word has the implicit orientation (one kind of modality) in the source text, which is differently reproduced in several translated text. Some English department students translate the sentence into "Are you going to buy this or not?" while others translate it into "Are you going to pay this or not?" The difference of translation shows us that it is better to deviate from the source text in the aspect of interpersonal meaning, especially modality.

In addition, evaluation also plays an important role in interpersonal meaning. It is worthy to investigated in the course of translation. Evaluation is a central part of the meaning of any wordplay and that any analysis of the interpersonal meanings of wordplay must take it into account (Thompson, 1996). The evaluation system offers us a practical and theoretical foundation, according which the evaluation meaning of lexical items can be identified and analyzed in the process of translation. IN some way it is necessary for translator to choose appropriate lexical items with the help of evaluation theory to reproduce the meaning implied by the corresponding linguistic elements of SL.

### **Textual Organization and wordplay translation**

Translation cannot be separated from the organization rules of SL and TL. The textual organization has been explored by Hallidayan Functional Grammar which also investigates the meanings of how one message fits in with the other message around it. Thompson (1996) holds that these meanings are mainly expressed by the ordering of the constituents of the clause. The theory that specifically deals with the ways of how messages are organized is called textual function, which is mainly composed of three subtypes of semantic systems: thematic systems, information structure and cohesion system. The thematic organization that concerns with the way of how message is conveyed consists of two functional components: Theme refers to a point of departure for the message and Rheme refers to new information about the point of departure.

All languages will have thematic structure for organizing the clause as a message. Because some wordplay include in the clause so it can be said that the wordplay cannot avoid the thematic structure. The theory of thematic structure is applicable to exploring the difference between SL and TL in the course on the wordplay translation. For example: “Duckles! Duckles! You stupid duck, they haven’t been ‘in’ for a long time! Don’t you read the Top Twenty in the Duckburg News? My favorite band now is Sam and the Singing Coyotes!” (taken from *The Code of Duckburg* . Bark, 1998) The point of departure of the sentence above is the wordplay “duck” which particularly confines the time of source text and are differently reproduced in several translated text. Some English Department students translate the word ‘duck’ into ‘bebek’ (name of two legs animals) and the translated sentence is “Bekins! Bekins! Kamu bebek bodoh, mereka sudah tidak terkenal lagi. Kamu tidak membaca kolom top twenty di Koran bebek. Grup music favoritku sekarang Sam dan kawan-kawan.” while others prefer to remain the wordplay in the translated sentence “Duckles! Duckles! Kamu bebek bodoh. Kamu tidak membaca kolom top twenty di koran Duckburg. Grup music favoritku sekarang adalah Sam and the Singing coyotes. The second translation happens because the translation will reduce the humorous effect of the wordplay. It is obviously seen that the two translated wordplay respectively employ different strategies in translating. This might be caused by the thematic structure involved in each sentence. However thematic structure offers us a parameter to explore the comparative analyses of languages as well as translation studies, and it can explain the motivation of choosing a marked theme along with information matter.

## CONCLUSION

Translation is a process of transforming a text in one language into an equivalent text in another language. The theory of linguistics is an important one in developing translation theory. However, SFL is most appropriately applicable to text analysis especially wordplay analysis because it is constructed for the sake of text analysis. Ideational, interpersonal and textual function are really needed in wordplay translation that is cultural and bound. Moreover, SFL that concern with meaning as function in context’ has become a ways to cast light on many aspects of the language as a system and to formulate its statements about that system with particular clarity and comprehensiveness.

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