

The birth of Functional Grammar in the 'Austronesian School' of Missionary Linguistics

About an unjustly neglected episode in the history of linguistics...

Fundamental notions and starting points of functional grammar (FG) were already used and applied in the seventeenth century by missionaries describing Austronesian languages. Cases were given highly modern and pragmatic definitions and one missionary even defined Topic in literally the same way as Simon Dik would do 400 years later. Below I will give an abstract and main conclusions described in a paper I have presented at the conference on Missionary Linguistics in Valladolid (2006). The paper is published in:

*Zwartjes, Otto, Gregory James and Emilio Ridruejo (ed.)
Missionary Linguistics III, Morphology and Syntax
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Abstract

The functional view on language contends that syntax, semantics and pragmatics are connected in such a way that changes on one of these levels generally lead to changes on one or both of the other levels as well. Hence, language utterances should be studied within the actual context of use, the pragmatical context, and in the describing and explaining of patterns and structures of languages, context specific concepts as Topic and Focus should play an important role.

This functional theory of language is generally thought to have come to existence somewhere in the second half of the twentieth century, as a critical reaction to the theory of Transformational Grammar. In this paper it is argued that the 'birth' of Functional Grammar has taken place roughly 400 years earlier, and probably within the 'Austronesian linguistic school' of the missionaries working in that area.

Conclusions

The 'members of the Austronesian school' of missionary linguists were very well aware of the need to describe a language from a pragmatic-functional perspective. Confronted with languages that don't fit into the Latin nominative-accusative model they gave new meanings to the Latin case names and these meanings are predominantly semantic-pragmatic instead of syntactic-semantic. By doing so, they developed remarkably modern insights in the linguistic phenomena of the Austronesian languages:

1. Blancas defined the notion of Topic in almost literally the same way as Simon Dik did in his Functional Grammar theory almost 400 years after him. Sanvitores and other missionaries working in the same area also used this concept of Topic in explaining language phenomena, like the active-passive diathesis in ergative languages.
2. The concept of Focus as defined in Functional Grammar and the awareness of the influence of Focus on syntax and semantics, is already present in the linguistic descriptions of these 'Austronesian missionaries'.
3. Not only did these missionaries develop the Functional Grammar notions of Topic and Focus. In need of a pragmatic approach for explaining linguistic phenomena they redefined all kinds of syntactic and semantic notions taken from the Latin grammatical system and thus developed all kinds of pragmatic notions which nowadays belong to the standard idiom of modern pragmalinguistics, like Locative, Subject-Goal, Oblique Agent, Instrumental etc.

The history of linguistics should in this respect be rewritten: Functional Grammar is not a theory invented in the twentieth century. Fundamental notions of this grammar theory were actually developed, defined and used already by missionaries in the seventeenth century to explain language phenomena.

