

# 5 | Forms and functions

## Introduction

In this unit we look at the relation between language forms and the functions these forms serve in their contexts of use. This is the area of language study sometimes called *pragmatics*.

## Tasks

### 1 Form and function

Let's revisit the STOP sign from the previous unit.

So far we have analysed it solely in terms of its *forms* – as a text, a sentence, a word and so on. But what does it *mean*? What is the combined effect of these forms? What is the sign *doing*?

And how is it the same or different from this sign? Both include the word *stop*, after all.



What is the purpose of each sign? That is to say, what is its *function*? And how do we know?

### 2 Functions

Here are some more signs. What is the function of each one? How do you know?



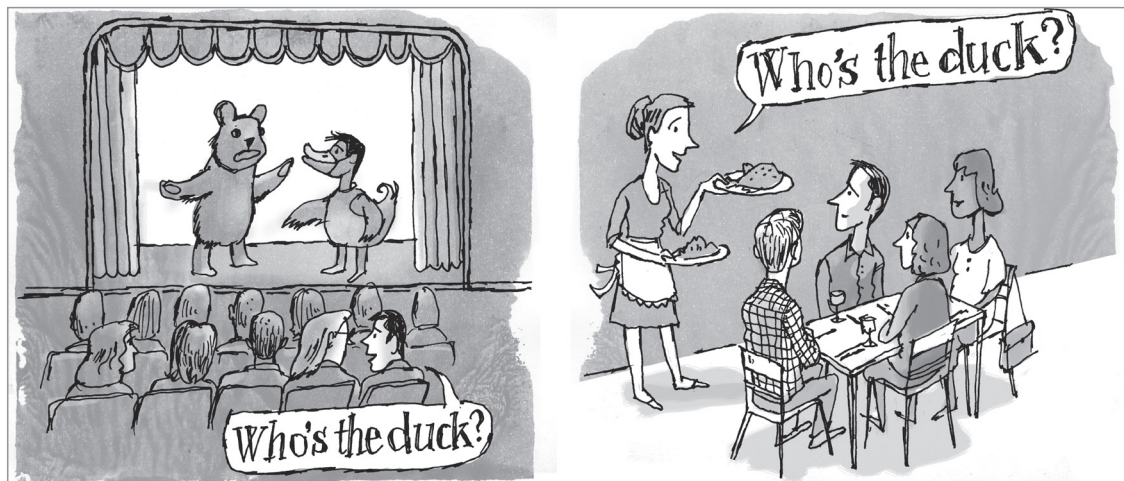


b Now, do the same for these. In what way are they different from the signs above?



### 3 Semantic vs pragmatic meaning

The previous task suggests that we need to distinguish between two kinds of meaning: the literal, or *semantic*, meaning of an utterance or text, and its meaning in context: its *pragmatic* meaning – also called its *communicative function*. The semantic meaning alone may not tell us what the purpose of the text is. Moreover, the same text can have different meanings, according to the context. For example:



Think of different contexts for the following utterances. What communicative function does the utterance perform, in each case?

- a I'm in the bath.
- b There's a policeman crossing the road.
- c It's ten to five.
- d How many fingers have I got?
- e That seat's taken.
- f Let him have it!

### 4 Text functions

Language does not exist in isolation. A starting point in the analysis of language is the text, including the function of the text in its context of use.

Look at the following short texts. In each case can you identify:

- the kind of text it is (its text type);
- whether it is written or spoken;
- its probable context – that is, the situation in which it is used; and
- its communicative function?

- a My grateful thanks to David Newby, for making valuable comments on the manuscript – and to Professor Sidney Greenbaum for allowing me to quote from the spoken and written texts that form the Survey of English Usage at University College London.
- b Hi, I'm MA student of TEFL in Iran. My topic of my theses is teachers' perception of classroom management but I can not found some article in ELT domain. Could you please send me some article.  
best,  
[name]
- c American Airlines flight 54, turn left heading 100, intercept the localizer and proceed inbound, cleared for the ILS approach to 13 Right, maintain 2,200 until established. Contact tower on 120.6 at NOLLA.
- d Pour boiling water over the tea bag, one bag one cup. Infuse for 3-5 min, a second brewing tastes even better than the first one.
- e Your attention please. Passengers alighting at the next station are advised to be aware of the gap between the train and the platform.
- f Rest assured, your room is smoke-free so enjoy the clean air. Understandably, we reserve the right to assess a \$200.00 cleaning fee to your account should smoking occur.
- g Site unavailable. Your Online Banking service is temporarily unavailable. We apologize for any inconvenience. Please try again later. Thank you for being our customer.
- h Congratulations! Your e-mail has been selected as the Prize winner of (€2,000,000.00) Euros in Euro Raffle Lottery Held NOVEMBER, 2012 in Barcelona, SPAIN. Respond with INFO;  
Name:  
Add:  
Phone:  
Claim prize.  
Regards.

## 5 Form and function

There is no one-to-one match between form and function.

- a The following extracts (from *Tea Party and Other Plays* by Harold Pinter) are all requests of one kind or another. What grammatical structures do they use?
- 1 Could I have Newcastle 77254, please? = *modal verb 'could'*
  - 2 Can I have a private word with you, old chap?
  - 3 I was just wondering if you'd mind if I put my high-heeled shoes on your chair.

## Tasks

- 4 May I ask the reason?
- 5 Find that girl for me. As a favour.
- 6 Why don't you lend Wally a few pound, Mr Solto?

b Identify the (probable) function of each of these utterances:

- 1 Have a custard tart, Mr Solto. = *offer*
- 2 Ring Disley. Tell him to come here.
- 3 Come on. Annie, help me clear the table.
- 4 Buzz off before I call a copper.
- 5 Mind how you go.
- 6 Take my tip, Wally, wipe the whole business from your head, wipe it clean out of your mind.

What verb form do all the examples in b share?

c Parts a and b of this task suggest that one function can be realised by any number of different linguistic forms, and that any one linguistic form can be used to express a number of different functions.

Think of five functional uses of the 'first conditional' (*If you do X, I'll do Y*).

## 6 Functional syllabuses

A functional syllabus is one which is organized around selected language functions rather than around language forms (or structures). Nowadays, rather than adopting an exclusively functional or an exclusively grammatical approach, many textbooks intersperse functions and structures.

Here are some items from the contents page of an intermediate level coursebook. Can you separate them into functions, grammatical structures and vocabulary areas?

Unit 5	Unit 6
thanking and replying clothes and dressing suggestions and responses intensifying adverbs giving instructions adjectives and adverbs obligation and permission: <i>(don't) have to, must(n't), should(n't), (not) be allowed to</i> supermarkets uses of <i>get</i>	<i>-ing</i> form education giving and responding to exciting news sentences with <i>if, when</i> and <i>unless</i> talking about advantages and disadvantages <i>sort, type, kind</i> jobs in a company agreeing and disagreeing <i>fortunately, hopefully, surprisingly...</i>

(from *Natural English Intermediate Student's Book* by Gairns and Redman, 2002)



## 7 Teaching functional language

Here is the section in Unit 5 of the above mentioned coursebook that targets 'suggestions and responses'. Think of how you could adapt this sequence to present and practise the function of 'asking favours and giving responses'.

## 8 Pragmatics and culture

The way that contextual factors shape language can vary from culture to culture, and from language to language. In some languages, such as French, social distance is expressed by the choice of verb form: singular (*tu as...*) or plural (*vous avez...*). Languages also vary in the extent to which they favour a direct versus an indirect style with regard to such speech acts as requesting, apologizing and complaining.

Here is some advice about apologizing in English, from an elementary textbook. Evaluate the approach in terms of its accuracy and usefulness. What other areas in English might deserve a similar treatment?

### lead-in

- Which do you think is the worst problem, and why? Tell a partner.
  - you have to give up smoking
  - you have financial problems
  - you can't get to sleep at night

#### natural English

#### Suggestions and responses

5.2

**Why don't you try** giving up with a friend?  
Yes, (that's a) good idea.

**Have you thought about** hypnosis?  
Hmm, I'm not sure about that.

**You could** avoid places where people smoke.  
Yeah, that sound sensible. /sensəbl/

Listen and say these suggestions and responses with a partner.  
Listen and practise again without the book.

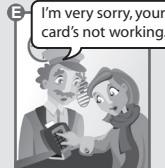
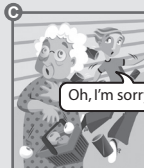
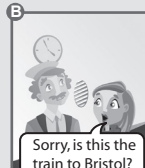
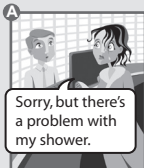
### 2 Think! In A/B pairs:

- A you can't get to sleep at night.  
B you haven't got enough money to buy a computer.  
Decide on three suggestions to make to your partner.
- Make your suggestions and respond to your partner's ideas.

(from *Natural English Intermediate Student's Book* by Gairns and Redman, 2002)

### Across cultures Saying sorry

- The word *sorry* has a lot of different uses in English. Match pictures A–E with situations 1–5.



You can use *sorry* when:

- you want to apologise.
- you don't understand or can't hear someone.
- you ask for information from people you don't know.
- you want to complain about something.
- you give bad news.

- Read what people from different countries say about saying *sorry*, and discuss the questions in pairs.

“ In Spain you use different words to say *sorry*. When you can't hear something you say *perdón?* or *¿qué?* When you want to complain you say *lo lamento* or *discúlpame* or *lo siento*. MANUEL ”

“ In Britain, people apologise a lot. When you bump into someone, or when someone bumps into you, both people usually say *sorry*. MATTHEW ”

“ In Sudan if you are not happy about something you just complain about it, you don't say *sorry*. KHALID ”

“ In Switzerland the word for *sorry* is *Entschuldigung* but if we can't hear someone we don't normally say *sorry*, we just say *what? uh?* NATHALIE ”

- Does your language have one word for saying *sorry*, or different words for different situations?
- Do you think people apologise a lot in your country? What about other countries you know?
- What do you say in situations 1–5?

(from *English Unlimited A2 Elementary Coursebook* by Tilbury et al., 2010)