THE ANALYSIS OF AN ONLINE DEBATE –
THE SYSTEMIC FUNCTIONAL GRAMMAR APPROACH

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Abstract. *This paper will offer an analysis of an online debate using Halliday's Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG) approach. The main goals are to give an analysis of genre, comment on ideologies, beliefs and the social purpose of the text, as well as to explore the cultural and situational contexts. It will also conduct an examination of field, tenor and mode of the given text. The emerging patterns will be summarized to reveal whether the text has fulfilled its generic structure potential, evaluate the writers' attitudinal motifs and clarify whether and how the cohesion of the text has been accomplished.*

Key words: *SFG, genre, context, ideology, belief, field, tenor, mode*

INTRODUCTION

Systemic functional theory views language as a resource people use to accomplish their purposes by expressing meaning in context. Halliday (1985: 7 – 11) describes the fundamental concepts of this theory, saying that language exists and must be studied in various contexts, those being professional settings, classrooms, etc. Particular aspects of a given context define the meanings likely to be expressed and the language likely to be used to express those meanings. In addition, particular aspects of context comprise elements such as topics being discussed, the language users and the medium of communication. All of them are used to describe the linguistic variation in a given text, more widely known as register (Halliday 1985: 12). It is seen as a linguistic consequence of the interaction of the already mentioned aspects of context which are called by Halliday "field, tenor and mode". Field refers to the topics and actions which language expresses, tenor denotes language users, their relationships and their purposes, and mode describes the channel in which communication takes place, be it speaking, writing or any combination

of these two. Each analyzed text can be viewed as having three important facets: textual, interpersonal and ideational. The first one refers to the type/token ratio, vocabulary use and register, the second one relies on concepts like exchange structure, involvement and detachment, personal reference and use of pronouns and discourse markers, whereas the third one describes propositional content and modality.

The analysis in this paper will try to encompass as many of these factors as possible in order to arrive at a valid and accurate interpretation of the text analyzed. This text is a part of an Internet chatroom conversation on the very controversial subject of same-sex marriages which have been the focus of media attention as well as many debates. Engaging parties in these debates have expressed a wide variety of attitudes using different linguistic choices, making this type of discourse highly interesting for research, especially within the framework of Halliday's Systemic Functional Grammar. This approach allows for fine discrimination between lexical and grammatical nuances that are expressed through the field, mode and tenor of discourse. In order to be able to analyze the features of the debate in question, it is necessary to begin with a broad category of genre (Eggins 1994: 34), which will allow us to venture deeper into the finer analysis of the social context (ideologies and beliefs), interpersonal relationships, textual meanings and means of achieving coherence.

The part of the online debate which was analyzed consisted of 20 turns, which realistically represent the exchange of ideas throughout the whole debate. The utterances were analyzed in detail in search of attitudinal and ideological meanings on the one hand, as well as experiential, interpersonal and textual meanings on the other.

GENRE

Genre is how people use language to achieve culturally appropriate goals and is seen as a manifestation of language choices with a social purpose (Eggins 1994: 25). In order to examine whether the text has fulfilled its generic potential, we must first look at the genre of debates and then examine the relevant lexico-grammatical features in the text to confirm that the text has achieved its social purpose.

In debates candidates state and defend their positions on major issues. Debates are often held in public places or are broadcast on TV, radio and/or the Internet. Outcomes of debates may be decided by voting, by judges, or by combination of both. It is therefore clear that in a debate communication is characterized as:
- interaction of two or more people
- face to face interaction
- spoken, formal speech
- social distance: ranging from minimal to maximal (more usual)
- purpose: to "win over" the other participants and/or the audience
- argumentation; challenging opponents' arguments
- social status of participants: approximately equal
- field of discourse: non-specified, highly controversial

In the text chosen for the analysis there are 11 participants. The supporters of the idea are represented by 13 entries and the opponents by 7. The challenging of the ideas can be confirmed through an analysis of the mood block (Butt et al. 2000: 94), where we find that the interrogative and declarative moods are present.

The specific context of the situation here is dominated by the fact that this is an Internet debate, where ultimately the only "winning over" can be a satisfaction gained through the recognition of one's ideas, rather than a concluding vote or a judgment by an extraneous body. Due to the fact that speakers are not visible to each other, there is a two-sided approach to interpreting the social distance: (1) the speakers are unknown to each other thus making the social distance substantial; (2) however, the lack of visibility and the nature of Internet communication in general (for a detailed analysis of chatroom discourse see Radić-Bojanić 2007) decreases the social distance since it is easier to express oneself with less constraints.

The most convenient way to demonstrate different aspects of language usage is through a division of participants into supporters and opponents of the idea. The speakers' ideologies and beliefs can be found in Table 1 below. The summary of the beliefs expressed by the speakers shows that the two opposing sides are using strong argumentation and enriched positive or negative words (*hate, love, bigot, homophobe, embarrassed, admire, ill, nightmare, rid of,* etc.) with a lot of appraisal motifs (*equal, happy, loving, stable, closedminded*, etc.) in their pursuit to promote their opinions (Butt et al. 2000: 121). Their beliefs can be characterized as revolving around the ideas of "equal rights" and "marriage for procreation". The ideologies mainly revolve around Catholicism and personal interpretations of its teachings and democracy on the other hand. Both groups of speakers make references to the Bible and Catholicism. The opposing side uses this to deny the same sex marriage rights, while the position finds either the Bible supporting the idea, or merely identifies the speakers' religious and sexual orientation as non-conflicting.

Table 1. Semantic choices illustrating ideologies and beliefs

SUPPORTERS	OPPONENTS
• validate their relationship; admire their commitment; (as a) heterosexual, Catholic church (to criticize) • my thoughts and love • have the same rights • (why let) such a harsh stand against happiness; hate into hearts; quote the Bible "Love thy neighbor" • happy day • happy couples • leave.... bigoted, closed minded homophobes; (I am a) Catholic hetero married man • religious marriage; benefits and protections; deny civil benefits; equal citizens • I am a Catholic and I am gay • building a loving stable relationship; love one another	• democracy received a blow (will of the people neglected); marriage???; get rid of this • sad day; embarrassed to be from Massachusetts • how can you procreate (with the same sex partner?) • marriage – NO; see what Bible says about this • this kind of thing; isn't there a war going on; makes me ill • it taken away • can't wait ... divorces...; nightmare

As previously mentioned, the speakers are unidentified and unknown to each other. Some have identified themselves through religion and/or sexual orientation. All of the speakers belong to a developed society (usage of technology for communication and information is obvious) and are most likely the citizens of the USA, interested in current political issues. Their participation in such a debate indicates that they see themselves and other speakers as approximate equals in the communicative process.

FIELD OF DISCOURSE

The speaker's language choices are primarily influenced by the field of discourse, i.e. what the text is about (Halliday et al. 1964: 90-92). This is done by conveying the experiential meanings of Processes, Participants and Circumstances.

Processes

From Table 2 found below we can see that Behavioral processes are absent from the text. The most frequent processes are the relational ones. Their role in this debate is either to identify the speakers or assign the attributive function when classifying ideas, feelings and behaviors. Also, there is a dominant occurrence of mental processes, which project speakers' beliefs, opinions, wishes, dislikes, characteristic choices when expressing one's attitude. Finally, there is a significant number of material processes, with approximately 50% of processes referring to ideas of "entering marriage" or "having children" and other processes are referring to actions of affirmation (*offer, provide*, etc.) or denial (*taken away, be denied*, etc.). The identified processes are appropriate choices for stating arguments for and against ideas; the material processes indicate that the topic discussed was about entering marriage and having children.

Table 2. Experiential meanings: Identification of processes

MATERIAL	BEHAVIORAL	MENTAL	VERBAL	RELATIONAL	
				identifying	attributive
can validate		cannot wait	quote	is	am
provided		has waited	say	do not have	am not
offers		can't wait	has to say	to be	is
to share		admire	speak	can you be	am
live		see	are speaking	are we not	are
go out		see	saying	to have	make
has received		see		does it make	are
went through		have to see		to have	it is
to get rid		have to even		to come	makes
taken away		hear		isn't	feel
was neglected		do not focus		seems	is
let		to be considered		am	^will be
to marry		to criticize		is	are unable
enter		take (a stand)		cannot call	^am
to procreate		do not think		be	^am
can you do		dunno		am	
(procreate) to		think		am	
have		don't recall		does .. make	
(children)		do not deserve		is	
not to		love		had	
procreate		love		is	
to procreate		love			
to have		don't want			
can't have		hates			
leave		believes			
isn't .... going		believe it or not			
on					
building					
deciding					
be denied					

Participants

The identification of Participants will enable us to define the field of discourse more closely. Identified patterns of participants (Table 3 below) bring us closer to the topic of the debate and the ideologies represented: *(many) people, gay people, marriage, Civil marriage, an institution, rights, benefits and protections, Catholic Church (CC), God, their commitment*, and a lot of pronominal elements: *they* (both distant and general), *we* (exclusive), and a plethora of *I* – indicating a frequent subjective opinion and/or identification. It is obvious that this is a debate on legalizing same-sex marriages as a reaction on the laws passed in Massachusetts courts.

Table 3. Participants

MATERIAL PROCESS		MENTAL PROCESS	
actor	goal / range / beneficiary	Senser	phenomenon
who	their relationship	I (admire)	their commitment
a partner (to share)	the rest of my life with	I (think)	PC: any politician or
Democracy (recvd)	a blow	politician or CC	the Catholic church is...
no actor (neglected)	the will of people	(criticize)	these people
many people (enter)	marriage	God (hates)	gay people
a man and a woman	marriage	they (love)	one another
they (have)	kids	my kids (have to see)	this kind of thing
an institution (offers)	benefits and protections	(do) we (not deserve)	the same rights

VERBAL PROCESS			RELATIONAL PROCESS	
sayer	verbiage	receiver	idfd / carr.	idfr / attr
many people (will quote)	the Bible		I (am)	PC: happy for...
^many people (say)	PC: that God hates gay people marriage		...any politician or CC (is)	in any position...
			I (do not have)	a partner
you (speak of)			I (am not)	against a legal union
			I (am)	embarrassed to be
			^I (to be)	from Massachusetts
			Civil marriage (is)	an institution
			(does that make) me	a monster
			they (are)	unable
			(are) we (not)	people

Circumstances

To conclude the analysis of the experiential meanings we look at the Circumstances conveyed in the text. It can be concluded that circumstances do not represent a crucial moment in this text. There are two emerging patterns (Table 4 below): the first is location in time, mostly giving a time limit before something (unfavorable) happens. The other pattern deals with cause, which would be a consistent choice with argumentation and/or expressing subjective opinions (why one feels a certain way, or why people do things in a certain way). Further on, Circumstances of comparison and role are present to indicate the validation of arguments for "equal citizens" and the usage of the Circumstances of matter are to reinforce the subject matter avoiding repetition (*about this, against happiness,* etc.).

Table 4. Analysis of Circumstances

EXTENT	LOCATION (TIME AND PLACE)	CAUSE	ACCOMPA NIMENT	MATTER	ROLE	MANNER (MEANS, QUALITY, COMPARIS ON)
so long	now today until 2006 in 2006 till the divorces begin before deciding to have children on the news into our hearts here	for all the couples for the entire human race for those who went through everything for gay humans because they love one another	with a same-sex partner between themselves	about this about this against happiness	as a heterosexual as happy couples as one	as others (ungramm.) so much like everyone else as you (ungramm.)

TENOR OF DISCOURSE

When modeling communication, speakers adjust their language according to whom they speak, what type of exchange is underway and what their attitudes are. Language choices that come from this variable of human interaction belong to the category of Tenor (Halliday et al. 1964: 90-92).

The examination of Mood confirmed the existence of declarative mood as the dominant one, followed by interrogative and few cases of imperative (of 11 speakers, 5 are demanding information).

To discuss power structure let us look at individual speakers rather than individual Tenor variables. Speaker SAD DAY FOR HUMANS sees self in power over other speakers. This is reflected through several aspects: usage of negative appraisal *(sad day)*, negatively enriched words *(embarrassed, makes me ill)*, focus *(this kind of thing)*, pronominal uses *(about this)* to avoid addressing the issue, using an interrogative to revert the subject of discussion to another issue and modality of obligation used with mental verbs *(have to even hear, have to see)*.

It can be assessed that OLD FASHION, MG and GOOD DAY see themselves as equals in the communicative process, all of them giving and demanding information, where the latter two are also using vocatives to address OLD FASHION, putting them slightly higher on the hierarchy of power relations. All three speakers are mainly using modal finite *can* (ability). MG uses Mood Adjuncts to distance self from the possible misinterpretations of the facts *(maybe, do not really)*, as well as a phrase "*believe it or not*" which is an imperative. It seemingly gives the addressee a chance to distance self, thus increasing the strength of MG's argument ("*it is a fact whether You choose to believe it or not!*"). OLD FASHION uses imperative *(just see)* to point out his or her level of education. GOOD DAY uses expressions like "*I don't recall*" and modality of obligation *(why [^should we] let...? should they be...?)* in the ironic attempt to prove OLD FASHION's attitudes wrong. All three speakers are using enriched words and epithets to express their attitudes.

Another speaker who is interesting to mention is CATHOLICSFORGAYMARRIAGES. He states his power through the usage of imperative demanding service (*leave*!), inclusive[1] WE (*we don't want*), usage of epithets and strong words (*bigoted, closed-minded homophobes*), and a multiple self identification (*I am a Catholic hetero married man with a family*).

Speaker HIPCHIC0150, although seemingly demanding information, is seeking approval, which can be seen in the polarity of the interrogatives used and the exclusive WE (*Are we not people too? Do we not deserve..?*), and it can be said that this speaker sees self in the lack of power. Other speakers to a greater or smaller extent see themselves and others as approximate equals in the communication, as has already been mentioned.

To summarize the Tenor variables of the whole text, it can be said that interpersonal meanings are dominated by the attitudinal adjustment through the usage of epithets and enriched words, seen with all speakers. Modality is expressed though modal finites of ability, although some meanings of obligation are present, and power relations established on the basis of the usage of vocatives and imperative and interrogative moods (see Table 5 below).

Table 5. Interpersonal meanings

declarative		interrogative		imperative	
55		13		3	
positive	negative	positive	negative		
45	10	10	3		
Modality expressed through					
• **modal finites**					
ability	obligation	usuality			
can validate	^should we let	will quote			
can you do that	have to even hear				
they can have	should they be denied				
cannot call	have to see				
can't wait					
can't have kids					
• **mood adjuncts**					
maybe that is why					
do not *really* focus					
Appraisal through:					
• **epithets (force)**					
sad					
harsh					
great					
pretty darn happy					
happy					
bigoted, close minded					
loving stable					
this kind of thing					

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[1] This could be interpreted as follows: inclusive – he as heterosexual and other homosexuals; exclusive - we the non-homophobes versus (bigoted, closed-minded) homophobes.

• **focus**	
this kind of thing	
• **engagement**	
I dunno	
I don't recall	
I do not think...	
believe it or not	
• **enriched words**	
positive negative	
happy blow	
admire embarrassed	
congrats hate	
happiness homophobes	
awesome ill	
love monster	
Nightmare	

Person
1st person singular – 15 (all declarative); plural: 3
2nd person – 2 interrogative, 4 declarative (one addressing, three general), 3 imperative
3rd person both singular and plural: 45

MODE OF DISCOURSE

How a text is organized depends on the medium and channel of communication in the first place. This will dictate the presentation of information (Theme and Rheme) at the clause complex level, and coherence at the level of the text as a whole.

Interesting issues with the analyzed text are its medium and channel. In its organic form, this is a spoken text, however, it is realized through the graphic channel. The expected level of formality was high due to the genre of debates and the written channel. The invisibility of speakers to each other, the controversy of the topic, speed of communication, and the aspect of spoken language, however, have decreased the level of formality of this text to informal. This can be seen through language choices such as the usage of vocatives and omission, incorrect grammar, spelling and punctuation. It is beyond the scope of this paper to deal with ungrammaticality and punctuation. As for omission, it is worth noting that mostly the omitted elements are finites and subjects (*why [^should we] let..? what about the will of people...? I think it awesome... What a nightmare for the insurance companies!*). This is an effective choice for spoken communication where speakers benefit from sharing the same situational and cultural context.

Looking at the Themes presented (Table 6 below), it can be said that the vast majority represents unmarked themes for all the three Moods. The declarative mood being dominant, the majority of Themes are Participant: Actor, Subject. Two marked themes are with a Circumstance as a topical theme and a Range as a Subject in a passive sentence. In all three moods, complex themes are present, with Textual themes showing mostly coordinated clauses, typical for spoken communication. Themes interesting for the analysis are those with Clauses acting as Interpersonal or Topical themes:

What about *the will of the people* **that** was neglected to be considered?
But what about those couples **who** can't have kids?

Table 6. Themes

TEXTUAL	INTERPERSONAL	TOPICAL: EXP MEANING:	MARKEDNESS
		I: Participant	
		who: Participant	
as		a heterosexual: Circumstance	Marked
		I: Participant	
		I: Participant	
		any politician or CC: Participant	
although		I: Participant	
		my love and thoughts: Participant	
		who: Participant P	
		Democracy: Participant	
		I: Participant	
and		live: Process	
	What about the will of the people	that: Participant (range)	
		I: Participant	
		This: Participant	
		I: Participant	
		Many people: Participant	
and		deny: Process	
	Old Fashion why can	you: Participant	
	Are	we: Participant	
	Do	we: Participant	
	What difference does	it: Participant	
	Who	love: Process	
	Why	let: Process	Marked
and		say: Process	
		The main reason to marry: Participant (dep. clause)	
If		you: Participant	
And		I: Participant	
		To have to even hear about this: Participant (dep. clause)	
When		you: Participant	
Just		see: Process	
And		believe	
But	what about those couples	who	
	Old Fashion, maybe	that	

In sentence: "**To have to even hear about this** makes me ill" the non-finite clause acts as a topical theme of the sentence, as a Participant. This seems marked, since participants are usually represented by nominal groups, however, a Participant, Actor, Subject mapped onto the Topical theme do not qualify as a marked case.

Looking at the Thematic progression, the most frequent pattern is with the repetition of the themes, within individual speakers and as a whole, a pattern consistent with persuasion, delivering more arguments about one topic.

The coherence of the text is rather high with a loose structure, which comes from the fact the 11 speakers are addressing one issue from their subjective angles using different

arguments. In other words, we can speak of the high micro-coherence (at the level of individual speakers), whereas the macro-coherence (at the level of the whole text) can be considered rather low. Analyzing lexical chains, it can be concluded that there is a core "strain" of conversation, with a higher coherence maintained, (*marriage* and *procreation* as underlying themes) while other speakers' comments can be qualified as "satellites". The confirmation of the maintenance of the topic can be seen through the cohesive device of repetition, semantic relations and reference.

CONCLUSION

Upon the analysis of this text, we can say that the text has both fulfilled our theoretical expectations and that the theory has helped us understand the text better. In other words, Halliday's approach to grammar is an interaction of texts and extra-linguistic situations, functioning as a bottom-up and top-down process. "Systemic Functional Grammar in particular provides a principled and systematic description of the relationship between function, meaning and grammar" (Derewianka 2001: 262). SFG represents the description which "starts from the evidence rather than from imposing some theoretical model" (Derewianka 2001: 262) and is therefore of great importance for the field of applied linguistics and discourse analysis. It reveals how language users predict the meanings that are likely to be exchanged and the language that is likely to be used. When people are communicating they make predictions by using the values of field, tenor and mode to understand the register and when linguists analyze texts they use the same values to understand the speakers' choices and the system that lies behind them.

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Appendix (text of the analyzed online debate)

Congrats 10:13AM	I am happy for all the couples who now can validate their relationships. As a heterosexual I admire their commitment. I do not think any politician or the Catholic church is in any position to criticize these people.
hipchic0150 10:13AM	Congrats!!!!!!!! Although I do not have a partner to share the rest of my life with.. My thoughts and love go out to everyone who has waited so long for this day....
Old Fashion 10:14AM	Democracy has received a blow today. I am not against legal union, but marriage??? What about the will of the people that was neglected to be considered. I can not wait until 2006 to get rid of this.
sad day for humans 10:15AM	this is a sad day for the entire human race. i am embarrassed to be from Massachusetts.

MG 10:16AM	Old fashion...why can you be for legal unions and not marriage for same sex couples?
hipchic0150 10:17AM	What about the will of the People??? Are we not people too. Do we not deserve to have the same rights as others? What difference does it make to have 2 people who love each other so much to come together as one. "like everyone else"
good day 10:17AM	These are complex times. It makes me sad to see people take such a harsh stand against happiness. Why let hate into our hearts? Many people will quote the bible and say God hates gay people. Isn't one of God's 10 great Commandments "Love thy Neighbor?" I don't recall hate being in God's plan
Yippee 10:17AM	I dunno, seems like a pretty darn happy day for gay humans
Old Fashion 10:17AM	The main reason to marry was to pro-create. How can you do that with a same sex partner?
Goforu04 10:18AM	I think it awesome that they can now have same sex marriages and live there lives as happy couples
CatholicsForGayMarri... 10:18AM	If you are embarrassed, please leave, we don't want bigoted, closed minded homophobes here. And I'm a Catholic hetero married man with a family.
Old Fashion 10:19AM	Legal Union - Yes Marriage - NO (Just see what the bible has to say about this)
sad day for humans 10:19AM	its great that my kids have to see this kind of thing on the news. isnt there a war going on? to have to even hear about this makes me ill
Old Fashion 10:20AM	But I do feel bad for those that went through everything today just to see it taken away in 2006.
Couple#12 10:20AM	When you speak of marriage and pro-creation you are speaking of religious marriage. Civil marriage is an institution that offers benefits and protections provided by our government, irregardless of race creed OR religion. You cannot call yourself a democracy and denies these CIVIL benefits to equal citizens of this country.
hipchic0150 10:20AM	Everyone believes in something. Whether it be the Bible or Another form of Culture. I am a Catholic and I am gay does that make me a monster
MG 10:21AM	Old fashion...maybe that is why the divorce rate is so high...they do not really focus on building a loving stable relationship between themselves before deciding to have children...and believe it or not a lot of people enter marriage because they love one another and not to procreate.
LOL 10:22AM	I can't wait till the divorces begin. What a nightmare for the insurance companies!!!!!
good day 10:23AM	Old Fashion - My mother had the same stance as you, saying that marriage is to procreate. But what about those couples who can't have kids? Should a man and a woman be denied marriage if they are physically unable to have kids?

ANALIZA ONLAJN DEBATE –
SISTEMSKO-FUNKCIONALNI PRISTUP

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Ovaj rad analizira onlajn debatu koristeći Halidejevu sistemsko-funkcionalnu gramatiku. Osnovni ciljevi su da se analizira žanr, komentarišu ideologije, verovanja i društveni ciljevi teksta, kao i da se ispitaju kulturološki i situacioni konteksti. U radu će se takođe istražiti tematski, interpersonalni i medijumski registar datog teksta. Uočeni obrasci će se sumirati da bi se otkrilo da li tekst ispunjava potencijal svoje generičke strukture, da bi se ocenili piščevi stavovi i pojasnilo da li i kako se postiže kohezija teksta.

Ključne reči: *sistemsko-funkcionalna gramatika, žanr, kontekst, ideologija, verovanje, tematski, interpersonalni i medijumski registar*