Plain Language from the Perspective of Register Theory

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis applies a functional approach to "plain language" practice — a practice which assumes that the complexity of legal and bureaucratic language is a problem of form. The thesis argues that the linguistic form of a text is a function of its situational context; texts do not have accidental properties, but vary in form according to their function in a given context.

A text analysis using M.A.K. Halliday's theory of functional variation, or register theory, is applied to two versions of an excerpt from the British Columbia Small Claims Act. The analysis demonstrates Halliday's theory of the non–arbitrary relationship between form and function, showing that differences in the situational contexts of the two texts predict their differences in their form.

Register theory thus challenges the assumptions of plain language rewriting and suggests a reorientation of plain language guidelines to take into account the functional nature of linguistic form.

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To my father, Elmer Lawrence Doyle (1911–1994),
who will rest more peacefully, I hope,
knowing that his faith in me was well placed.

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Introduction

Part of knowing a language is knowing which words occur in which social situations and circumstances. For speakers of English, the words

Sunny tomorrow with cloudy periods

That will be $5.69

The three angles of a triangle add up to two right angles

identify particular situations of use: a weather forecast, a shopping transaction and a geometry lesson. The words identify different social activities, different types of exchange and different purposes. Speakers use this knowledge both to make sense out of text and to adapt their own language to the situation.

This variation according to the different *uses* of language differs from variation associated with individual *users* of the language. The latter is generally defined as dialectal difference; difference arising from a speaker's geographical location, social status, age, race or gender. Dialectal differences include variations in pronunciation – Australian English versus American English, for example; in vocabulary – British English *boot* and *bonnet* versus North American *trunk* and *hood*; and in grammar – *ain't* versus *am not.* Dialects are ways of saying the same things with different words.

Differences in the way language is being used reflect differences in the function language is performing. People do not typically "say the same thing" in letters and academic papers, to their colleagues and to their family, in conversations and in business letters. Variations according to function within a situation are generally referred to as "registers." The theory of register variation arises within a general theory of language as functional, as being primarily a means of social action using words.

The purpose of this thesis is to examine one model of register variation – the systemic–functional model of M.A.K. Halliday – and its application to a specific language problem: the rewriting of texts in the style generally referred to as "plain language." Conventional approaches to plain language writing are based on the premise that the difficulty of legal and bureaucratic language is a problem of form; that texts can be improved simply by putting them into "everyday language." They assume, in other words, that the same thing can be said in different words. In spite of a general enthusiasm for these approaches, and a great deal of improvement recently in these kinds of texts, the language of official documents has proven surprisingly resistant to change. In a summary of the state of plain language, Kimble (1992: 5) declares: "The good news is that we have made progress in the last ten years. The bad news is that we are halfway there, at best."

It is argued in this thesis that the problem of rewriting official documents in plain language is one of function rather than form; texts are different because they have different functions in society. It follows from this view that changing a text is equivalent to changing its function in the situation; that is, it is equivalent to shifting registers. In taking this approach, which links the linguistic form of a text to its extralinguistic situation – its social function, this thesis proposes a better descriptive and explanatory model than an approach based on form alone.

The thesis thus has two purposes:

- to demonstrate the potential of this model using Halliday's theory of register variation to analyze two versions of a text; and
- to examine what a register analysis suggests for the practice of plain language rewriting.

1.1 Overview of Plain Language Practice

"Plain language" is the common term for a style of writing and rewriting legal and bureaucratic documents[1] so that they are understandable to the public. Definitions vary, but in general they share two criteria. The first equates plain language with a desired style. The Canadian federal government guidelines define this style as "plain and simple" (Multiculturalism and Citizenship Canada 1991: 4). The Legal Writing Institute in the United States defines it as "agreeing with the common speech" (Kimble 1992: 8). The plain language statute of the state of New York describes it as "clear and coherent ... using words with common and everyday meanings" (Kimble 1992: 14).

The second criterion describes plain language in terms of its desired effect: for example, as language that people "can easily understand" (Knight 1993: 67); as "making sense to the reader" (Multiculturalism and Citizenship Canada 1991); and as "language that is clear and effective for its intended audience" (Law Reform Commission of Australia 1986: 3).

In recent years, the movement to have all official documents written in plain language has gained the support of many lawyers, educators, writers and public advocates. A number of provinces, states and countries have introduced legislation requiring that certain agreements, regulations and contracts be written in language that can be understood by the public they affect. A 1992 review by the Plain Language Institute estimates that in the United States there are at least 580 laws that require the application of plain language to some documents. These laws cover a variety of legal, commercial and government documents, including mortgages, government legislation, public information from government departments, the police, schools, and the health care system, jury

[1] "Official documents" will be used hereafter to refer collectively to the various kinds of documents published by government and the legal system for use by the public.

instructions, ballots, criminal indictments and warrants, and labour relation laws (Plain Language Institute 1992: 56). No similar survey of Canadian plain language laws is available; however, the Canadian Bar Association has passed a resolution in favor of plain language, with specific recommendations concerning the legal profession, banks, and all levels of government. The Province of Alberta has passed the Financial Consumers Act requiring that certain financial documents be written in "readily understandable language and form" (Kimble 1992: 47). A number of provincial governments require that all public information be written in plain language, and a large number of government and legal associations promote plain language practice through courses and research.

Corresponding to the surge of interest in reforming the language of official documents is the abundance of plain language guidelines and rules. A number of popular word processing programs now include automatic readability measures and grammar checkers to help writers simplify their writing. These various aids tend to be based on a set of simple lexical and syntactic rules that can be applied to any written text. A typical set of plain language guidelines is "The Ten Commandments for Plain Language Drafting" prepared for the Canadian Bar Association and Canadian Banker's Association (Eagleson 1989: 6):

1. Consider your reader and write with that reader's viewpoint in mind.
2. Write short sentences.
3. Say what you have to say, and no more.
4. Use the active voice.
5. Use simple, "everyday" words.
6. Use words consistently.
7. Avoid strings of synonyms.
8. Avoid unnecessary formality.

9. Organize your text in a logical sequence, with informative headings, and with a table of contents for long documents.
10. Make the document attractive and designed for easy reading.

I reviewed similar sets of plain language rules published by the Plain Language Institute of British Columbia (1990), the Law Reform Commission of Victoria, Australia (1986), the Canadian federal government (Multiculturalism and Citizenship Canada 1991) and the U.S. federal government (Charrow 1979). The common elements include design guidelines, suggestions regarding the writer's attitude and rules for writing in a "clear and simple" style, such as: keep sentences short and simple; use familiar words; avoid the passive voice; and eliminate unnecessary words.

Most plain language guidelines are a combination of common sense, intuition and traditional principles of good writing style. Some make use of findings from research in psycholinguistics, cognitive psychology and education on the way people process and remember language. The proliferation of plain language rules has unquestionably contributed to the improvements seen in official documents; if for no other reason, they have made many writers aware that there is a problem. However, plain language rewriting has not proved as easy or as successful as its advocates expect. Kimble, a leading plain language researcher, describes the practice as "lagging behind the movement" (1992: 5). Other researchers have deplored the slow pace of progress (Coe 1993; Knight 1993), attributing it variously to a general decline in literacy, an unwillingness on the part of lawyers and bureaucrats to admit there is a problem, or simply to a desire to baffle the public.

An examination of some recent Canadian plain language documents confirms that the movement still has far to go. While texts are now often better organized and visually more pleasing, they are far from meeting most definitions of plain language. For example, the 1994 Canadian income tax guide, which describes itself as using plain language, still contains language that could hardly be called "everyday speech":

> *You have to pay a federal individual surtax of 3% of your basic federal tax after deducting any federal forward–averaging tax credit you are entitled to claim on your 1994 return. If your basic federal tax less your federal forward–averaging tax credit is more than $12,500, you have to pay an extra surtax of 5% (for a total of 8%) on the amount that is more than $12,500.*

Other plain language documents look a lot like the language they replaced. The following example is taken from the plain language version of the British Columbia Small Claims Court rules:

> *An application under subrule (7) will be heard at the court served by the registry where the court file is, except that the registrar may allow it to be heard at another location of the court if (a) all the parties agree, or (b) the registrar is satisfied that the application is urgent.*

Other documents may meet the prescribed plain style, but be no easier for readers to understand. The following excerpt is taken from a rewritten lease renewal form:

> *We agree to renew my lease on the property you own for a period of two more years starting July 1, 1991. I agree to pay the rent and do everything else I have promised in this document or in any agreement this document refers to. In return for these promises, you agree to lease to me all the property described in our first lease. We have attached a copy of this first lease to this agreement.*
>
> *I will pay the rent of $3500 per year in the manner our first lease described. We agree to keep the promises we have made in both this agreement and in our first least. You have the right to take back the property if I break any of my promises. We agreed in our first lease that some other events would also give you the right to take back the property. These will also be part of this new agreement. You can end this lease any time by giving me notice. I will give you back the parts of the property described in the notice.*

This example is from one of four texts tested in a study by Masson and Waldron (in press), each of which was presented to readers in four increasingly "plain" versions (the example above is in the "full" plain style). The study found that reading speed was faster for the plain language versions, as was subjects' ability to answer a simple question about the text. However, subjects' overall ability to justify their answers was found to be only marginally better than for the original "legalese" versions.

Other comprehension studies have produced similar results. A 1992 study, carried out for the Plain Language Institute of British Columbia, tested the comprehensibility of six documents, one of which was a jury duty pamphlet written in what was described as "reasonably plain" language. Subjects in the study gave the document the highest rating for ease of understanding, and were able to read it faster than any of the other documents. However, their actual understanding of the information in the document, as measured by their ability to paraphrase what they had read, was lower than for three of the other "more difficult" documents (Chovil 1992: 23–30). In another study, Charrow and Charrow (1980) tested the effect on readers' comprehension of a number of superficial lexical and syntactic changes, of the type usually recommended in plain language guidelines. Some of these features, such as the use of the passive voice and sentence length, showed no correlation with comprehension. Danet (1985:288) cites a similar experiment on the comprehension of Swedish legislative and administrative language conducted by Gunnarsson (1984) which asked subjects to demonstrate their understanding of the material they had read. The average number of correct responses improved from 5.7 out of 15 on the original documents to only 6.8 on the revised versions.

My purpose in this brief overview of plain language practice is not to offer a comprehensive critique of plain language guidelines. Instead it is to establish the problem as a useful one from which to investigate the relationship between form and function in language. From a functional perspective, the difficulties writers face in rewriting text are the natural consequence of the relationship between a text and its function within a context of situation. To shift registers is to shift functions, which entails a shift in the situation. How easy or difficult that is will depend on the nature of the language event.

A register perspective on plain language writing thus challenges two assumptions that are central to conventional plain language practice:

- that there is a standard "common" language that can serve any function; and
- that all official documents can be rewritten in this language.

The text analysis in Chapter 4 compares the differences in situational context of two plain language texts and shows how these determine the differences in form of the two texts. On the basis of that analysis, it is possible to examine how the two assumptions above appear from the point of view of register variation and what the implications might be for plain language practice.

1.2 Halliday's Systemic–Functional Model of Register

One of the most significant recent trends in linguistics is the movement away from a purely formal paradigm of linguistic theory towards a more functional, pragmatic and discourse–oriented approach to language. In the formal paradigm, syntactic structure is considered to be the centre of linguistic organization as well as autonomous with respect to the semantic content of expressions, and with respect to the pragmatics of how the language is used by speakers. In the functional paradigm, on the other hand, linguistic expressions are seen not as arbitrary formal objects, but rather as being sensitive to, and determined by, their function in human communication. In this paradigm, the wording of a text is not regarded as independent of semantics and pragmatics, but rather as deriving its form from the way in which a language is used to create meaning.

One of the developments within this functional approach is the theory of register variation, also referred to as "functional variation" or "situational variation." Register models have been developed within several current theories of language. Of these, Halliday's systemic–functional theory has been widely applied to text analysis and presents a number of advantages as a theoretical framework within which to examine the rewriting of texts in different registers.

- The first advantage of the systemic–functional model is that it is concerned with the meaning of *texts* – actual instances of language – rather than meaning at the word or sentence level, the levels at which most plain language guidelines apply. As Biber and Finegan (1994: 7) explain, "register *entails* text and implies a relationship between text and context."
- A second advantage is that it views language as a "resource for meaning" (Halliday M.A.K. 1978: 192) rather than as a set of rules or skills to be learned. Texts are the way they are because writers/speakers make choices that realize the meaning they intend. From this perspective, a writer's choice of, for instance, the passive voice is not a reflection of bad style, but rather of the fact that the passive has a function in the writer's meaning.
- A third advantage is that systemic–functional theory offers a functional grammar of texts (Halliday 1994) that can be used to reason grammatically about the way the lexicogrammar realizes meaning. In other words, it presents a method for analyzing the particular wording of a text, but which interprets the wording by reference to what it means.
- Finally, systemic–functional grammar is concerned with the way language functions within its social context. This is a particularly important consideration in analyzing the types of text most often targeted for plain language rewriting since they originate in institutions that play important social roles in the lives of the public with whom they communicate.

In summary, Halliday's systemic–functional linguistics provides a theoretical framework for examining the interdependence of function and form that is explanatory and not simply descriptive.

The four chapters that follow develop the argument that plain language should be analyzed as an instance of register shift. Chapter 2 reviews a range of recent theory and research on the sources of plainness and complexity in written text, demonstrating that the inconclusive findings indicate the need for a theoretical approach that explains the relationship between a text and its context of use. Chapter 3 describes the systemic–functional model, including its historical development and the principal theories of M.A.K. Halliday, in particular his theory of how the situational variables of field, tenor and mode define registers. Chapter 4 presents a sample situational analysis of two versions of a text, demonstrating how the differences in the two registers are determined by the differences in their situational contexts. Chapter 5 discusses the results of the register analysis and its implications for the practice of plain language writing.

Chapter 2
Review of Relevant Research and Theory

The question of what makes language plain has generally been approached in linguistics by examining what makes language complex. Plainness, it would appear, is regarded as an unmarked or default form of language and, as such, has drawn little attention. Complexity, on the other hand, has attracted considerable interest in the fields of cognitive linguistics, psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics and functional linguistics.

This section presents a number of recent research findings from these fields. The question of how complexity is characterized linguistically and how it functions in text is one that touches several of the central concerns of linguistics, such as the questions of how language is produced and how it is comprehended. As a result the literature that relates to the issue of linguistic complexity is immense and leads in many directions. To keep the discussion to a manageable size, I have restricted my review to research that deals specifically with complexity in written language.

I have also tried to restrict the discussion to research that bears directly on the product rather than the process aspects of complexity. As a result I have excluded research from cognitive linguistics and psycholinguistics that takes into account such factors as readers' emotional states, prior knowledge or reading goals. I have referred to research from these fields only where it has direct applicability to the characterization of linguistic complexity of written text itself.

I have divided the research below into three categories which generally correspond to the major theoretical approaches to the sources of complexity in written text.

- The first category of research examines the differences and similarities between the complexity of written and spoken language resulting from differences in the situations in which the two forms of language are produced.
- The second category examines complexity as a feature of particular lexical or syntactic forms, such as word length or the use of the passive voice. Much of this research has been motivated by an interest in uncovering the linguistic factors influencing reading comprehension.
- The third category examines complexity as a feature of the discourse of particular users of written language. It is from this perspective that much of the research on legal and bureaucratic language has been done.

2.1 Complexity as a Feature of Written Language

A great deal of research on complexity has examined the similarities and differences between spoken and written language. Generally the conclusion has been that writing is more complex as a result of a number of differences in the physical situation and in the purposes associated with the two modes of discourse (Biber 1988: 47–48). The first of these is the "difference– in–time" constraint. Typically researchers have found that writing is more structurally complex because writers put more time into the production of written texts, whereas speakers, who are producing language in real time, have no opportunity to go back and polish or correct their words. The second is the difference in social interaction. The fact that most writing is produced without any social interaction is often cited as the reason for its impersonal quality.

In a study of the different linguistic features of twenty written and spoken texts, Chafe (1982), for example, concluded that the two modes differed along two major dimensions. The fact that writing is a slow, deliberate, editable process, whereas spoken language is spontaneous leads to what he distinguishes as the "integrated/fragmented" dimension. In integrated texts, information is more tightly packaged than the speed of spoken language normally permits; in spoken language, ideas are strung together by pauses and coordinating conjunctions, as in the following example:

> *They'll probably move ... and try to find a new place, but I don't think they'll have any luck ... because, they haven't got the kind of money they need."*

The fact that writing is done without personal interaction determines its position on the dimension of "detachment/involvement." The detached quality of written language is most often manifested through the use of the passive voice, as in the example:

> *Its use was observed on only a single occasion.*

Because spoken language involves both speaker and audience, the text is much more likely to show signs of personal involvement, frequently first person reference, such as:

> *I observed it on only a single occasion.*

Chafe suggests that the first of each of these pairs characterizes the more dense, impersonal and informational style associated with complexity.

Chafe (1985) then takes the analysis of these two dimensions further, contrasting the differences between spoken and written language in terms of "idea units." He describes an idea unit as expressing what is held in short-term memory at a particular time, which he defines as "approximately the amount of information that can comfortably be expressed with about seven words of English ... and which changes about every two seconds, so far as linguistic evidence can tell us" (Chafe 1985: 106). Since writing has no equivalent time or information–load constraint on the reader's attention, written idea units tend to be significantly longer and more complex than those of spoken language. The isolation of the writer, Chafe suggests, also leads to the use of a number of constructions associated with complexity, such as the use of passive, abstract, nominalized subjects.

Table 2.1 below presents a summary of the differences in production circumstances and structural complexity between oral and written language based on a review of the proposals of a number of researchers (Horowitz and Samuels 1987: 9). In addition to these differences, many researchers have proposed that the highly informational content of much written text adds to its characterization as complex, elaborated and abstract (Biber 1988: 5).

Oral Language	Written Language
Differences in Production Circumstances	
Reciprocity between speaker and listener	Limited reciprocity between author and reader
Informal	Formal
Natural communication	Artificial communication
Interpersonal	Objective and distanced
Spontaneous	Planned
Shared context	No common context
Differences in Syntactic Structure	
Single predication	Multiple predication
Limited subordination	Multiple levels of subordination
Simple linear structures	Complex hierarchical organization

Table 2.1: Summary of Situational and Structural Differences Between Spoken and Written Language (adapted from Horowitz and Samuels 1987: 9)

In spite of the widely held view that written language is more complex as a result of these production differences, not all linguists are convinced of the greater complexity of written language. Halliday (1987: 66), for example, maintains that spoken language is more structurally complex than writing. In his view, written and spoken language display different kinds of complexity: written language tends to be lexically dense and grammatically simple; spoken language to be grammatically intricate and lexically sparse.

Biber (1988, 1992) has conducted extensive studies of the linguistic features characterizing the complexity of a wide variety of spoken and written text. His 1992 study, for example, analyzed the distribution of 33 surface markers of complexity across 23 varieties of written and spoken language totalling approximately one million words. On the basis of the co–occurrence of certain linguistic features associated with discourse complexity, he developed a multidimensional model of complexity. His conclusion is that complexity is not a unified construct, but rather an interrelationship of five separate dimensions based on many linguistic features. Different kinds of texts are complex in different ways, and to different degrees. The particular type and combination of features of complexity, he concludes "are determined by the situational characteristics" of the particular text.

2.2 Complexity as a Characteristic of Linguistic Features

Much research on the comprehension of written language has attempted to identify the particular lexical and syntactic features that make a text more or less difficult to understand. This type of research tends to look at features of language without reference to context in order to determine their role in helping or hindering the reader's ability to decode and interpret the meaning of a text.

Much of this research has been motivated by an interest in determining which features can provide valid measurements of the readability of written text. Other research has been carried out from a strictly theoretical perspective to discover how individual syntactic and lexical features of written language are processed by readers and their influence on text comprehension.

2.2.1 Readability Research

The effect of individual linguistic features on complexity has been widely studied as part of the development and testing of readability formulas. These formulas assign a numerical estimate of the comprehension ease or difficulty of a written text. Most readability formulas take into account easily measured aspects of text such as word difficulty and average sentence length. A weighted combination of these measurements yields a number, such as a grade level, indicating the number of years of schooling required to comprehend the test.

function-conference paper

Bruce and Rubin (1988: 6) estimate that hundreds of formulas have been developed in recent decades. Readability formulas have long been used to measure the reading difficulty of school text books and reading comprehension tests and are used increasingly to measure the complexity of public documents such as insurance policies, informational pamphets, contracts and jury instructions (Kimble 1992: 15). Plain language legislation in a number of American states require that documents meet a certain readability score (Plain Language Institute 1992: 70). In recent years readability formulas have been built in to a number of popular word processing programs.

According to Klare (1984: 686), readability formulas typically measure two variables, one semantic (word length or word familiarity) and one syntactic (average sentence length). For example, the Flesch reading ease test, one of the best–known readability formulas (Kimble 1992: 15), calculates the readability of a text on the basis of a combined ratio of syllables per word and words per sentence. The Dale–Chall test, another widely used formula, bases its readability score on the percentage of uncommon words (from a 3000 word list of words compiled in 1948) and the average number of words per sentence (Bruce and Rubin 1988: 6).

Although readability formulas are based on the well–founded principles that short words tend to be more familiar to readers than long ones, and that long sentences increase the probability of complexity, their theoretical validity has been questioned by many researchers (for a review of recent research, see Davison and Green 1988). A number of studies have also shown that readability formulas have limited validity as predictors of the difficulty of a given text (Nystrand 1986; Bruce and Rubin 1988; Anderson and Davison 1988; Charrow 1988).

The most common criticisms relate to the assumption that word difficulty, as measured by familiarity, length in syllables or length in letters, is a valid semantic variable. As described in Anderson and Davison (1988: 27–31), research on word length has found that most long, rare words are derivatives and compounds which are "semantically transparent." Among the examples they give of words that would qualify as "difficult" in a readability formula – both because of their infrequency and their length – but which generally present few problems to readers are: *unladylike, helplessness* and *distasteful.*

In a study of a number of morphological factors which are not traditionally taken into consideration in readability formulas, Randall (1988) found morphological complexity cannot be said to have a predictable effect on text comprehension. As she concludes, "the relation between difficulty of comprehension and properties of words is far from simple" (Randall 1988: 244).

The assumption that sentence length per se is a valid measure of syntactic complexity has also been challenged by a number of researchers. A study by Charrow and Charrow (1980) of the comprehension of jury instructions, for example, found that sentence length had less influence on comprehension than sentence structure. The two sentences below are the same length, but subjects found the revised version much easier to recall and paraphrase than the original.

(original)

An essential factor in contributory negligence is that it contributes as a proximate cause of the injury.

(revised version)

If the plaintiff was contributorily negligent, he actually helped cause his own injury, through his own negligence.

As Anderson and Davison (1988: 32) point out, average sentence length correlates with the presence of markers of subordination and of connectives, which generally help to make the meaning relation between clauses explicit. On the other hand, chopping long sentences up into short ones without connectives can obscure meaning, especially if it is not clear from the context what inferences should be made.

Bruce and Rubin (1988: 7–8) suggest that readability formulas are inappropriate guides for writers because they do not take into account current knowledge about reading and the reading process and because they measure features that at best are correlated with difficulty, but which do not specify a causal relationship. A more appropriate model, they argue, would take into account other features that are known to contribute to difficulty, including discourse cohesion characteristics, the number of inferences required of the reader, and the complexity of the ideas presented in the text.

2.2.2 Research on Syntactic Features

A number of psycholinguistic studies have examined the effects of individual syntactic features on comprehension. Of these, the ones that are frequently cited as being sources of complexity in written text are passive forms, nominalizations and embedded clauses. All of these have been identified as major problems in the language of official documents.

The use of passive constructions, for example, is generally associated with a detached, impersonal tone and a general lack of explicitness in text, particularly relating to the agent of the action. However, as Kies (1985: 300) points out, the passive can be effective or even necessary in certain cases: where the focus requires a passive, and where the performer of the action is either unknown or unimportant. The following sentence illustrates both of these cases:

The meeting may be cancelled if it rains.

To make the sentence active, the writer would have to shift the focus of the sentence from the meeting to the person cancelling the meeting, a fact which may not be known or relevant to the discourse.

Studies of the effect of the passive voice on comprehension and reading time have not shown consistent results. According to Charrow (1979:4), psycholinguistic evidence shows that where the topic requires a passive, the active form will be more difficult to process. Anderson and Davison (1988: 38) make the point that a language is unlikely to have any form whose only function is to express information in a more complex way. Passives, they point out, have been shown by many researchers to require less reading time and in certain circumstances to be more accurately comprehended. However, according to Felker (1981), readers are able to understand and more accurately recall information from active sentences than from passive sentences.

Nominalizations are also associated with detached, complex text and often co–occur with passive constructions. Nominalizations are nouns usually derived from verbs; they tend to replace subject and verb of a clause with a single noun. For example:

We discussed your findings becomes *our discussion of your findings.*

We intend to proceed becomes *our intention to proceed.*

Hostilities ceased becomes *the cessation of hostilities.*

By turning clauses into single words, nominalizations tend to make text more dense. They also function to increase the level of abstraction in a text and to reduce information (Chafe 1982: 46).

Examples of the complexity associated with nominalizations are often taken from legal or bureaucratic language, such as the following taken from Charrow (1982: 183):

> *The implementation of this statute necessitates a reassessment of Agency policy and a redefinition of goals on the part of consumer groups.*

In this example, the impersonal, bureaucratic tone attributed to the nominalizations *implementation, reassessment* and *redefinition* is made worse by the presence of words like *statute, necessitates, Agency policy* and *goals.* In fact, nominalized forms are widely used in both written and spoken English. Nouns such as *treatment, use, judgement* or *knowledge* are not generally felt to be complex or difficult to comprehend. The average writer would likely have a hard time knowing that these words are nominalized forms to be avoided. As Halliday (1985b: 72–73) suggests, nominal constructions are particularly suited to the purposes of most written English.

Another feature of written text associated with complexity is the presence of embedded clauses, especially left–branching structures. Yngve (1960) first proposed that left branching places more demands on working memory than right branching because the reader must hold the contents in memory until the remainder of the clause constituents are found. The preposed adverbial clause *because of the temperature* is a left–branching structure in the following sentence:

Because of the temperature, civic authorities have imposed water rationing.

Not all linguists agree that left branches always introduce complexity. Frazier (1984: 163) found that the particular type of left–branching determines how much difficulty readers have. For example, she cites evidence showing that readers process the following sentences in the same way:

That the traffic in this town is unregulated bothers me.

It bothers me that the traffic in this town is unregulated.

However, where a pronoun occurs in the left–branching clause, as in the first sentence below, readers require more processing time:

That people look at him strangely bothers Mary.

It bothers Mary that people look at him strangely.

Multiple–embedding is generally believed to be a particularly difficult construction. Frazier speculates that the amount of processing required to interpret multiply–embedded clauses correctly overloads the temporary processing capacity of the average reader. However, Anderson and Davison (1988: 37) argue that even these structures are not necessarily difficult to process – the degree of complexity depends on the particular composition of individual sentences. They give the following sentence as an example of how the presence of certain easily processed syntactical elements – in this case the conjunction *since* – makes processing less difficult.

Since if you light a match the gas will explode, you should be careful.

Multiple left–branching of this type, they argue, is less complex than examples such as that used by Frasier to illustrate the problems of multiple embeddings:

That that men were appointed didn't bother the liberals wasn't remarked upon by the press. (The press didn't remark upon the fact that it didn't bother the liberals that men were appointed.)

Bhatia (1983) argues that deciding which structural aspects impede comprehension is "highly subjective." Readers, he suggests, employ a variety of strategies in order to discover what they need to know from a text. He cites a study by Schlesinger (1968) who was surprised to find that his subjects comprehended structurally simple and complex sentences equally well. In discussion with them he discovered they were relying on lexical meaning to understand sentences.

Finally, Frazier (1988) presents a comprehensive summary of recent psycholinguistic studies of the processing and comprehension of a variety of individual features and structures associated with complexity. She reviews a number of recent theories describing the mental processes involved in decoding a sentence correctly at the lexical, syntactic and semantic levels of representation. Her conclusion is that context is the crucial variable that must be considered in examining any feature or level of complexity. As she concludes: "At present there is little evidence supporting the view that individual words or phrase types are associated with robust inherent semantic complexity differences." (Frazier 1988: 219).

2.3 Complexity as a Feature of Social Identification

A third area of research has approached the issue of complexity from the perspective of its role as a marker of the discourse of particular social and professional groups. This perspective differs from the previous two in focusing on the complexity of written language not as defined by the medium itself or by particular features used, but as arising from the use of language within a particular social stratum. The complexity of language in this case is associated with its use by a restricted group for restricted purposes.

Among written varieties of language, several professional varieties are associated with particularly complex discourse, including technical prose, scientific writing, legal documents and government communications. While all these varieties share similar features of complexity, such as the use of nominalizations, highly informational content and impersonal tone, the language of the legal profession and of government has the added feature of being associated with social prestige. The discussion below examines the particular "complexifying" features of the written language produced by these groups and how these are maintained as a mark of social identification.

2.3.1 Features of Lexical and Syntactic Complexity

The complexity of the language used in the legal profession has been widely analyzed and criticized. Mellinkoff's (1963) classic treatment of the language of the law is one of the most widely cited descriptions of the particular features of what he refers to as the "priesthood" of lawyers – a language he claims is incomprehensible to the average speaker of English (Mellinkoff 1963: 12). Among the characteristics of legal language that separate it from common language, he identifies the following lexical features:

1. Frequent use of common terms with uncommon meanings (*party* for *person*, *save* for *except*).
2. Frequent use of archaic expressions (*aforesaid*, *said* and *such* as adjectives).
3. Frequent use of words not in the general vocabulary (*lien, easement*).
3. Frequent use of terms of art (*habeas corpus, negotiable instrument*).
4. Frequent use of formal language (*solemnly swear, without prejudice*).
5. Use of words with flexible meanings (*reasonable care, undue influence*)

6. Attempts at extreme precision (*alter or change in any way, any and all manner of action or actions*).

While the complexity of legal language is most often thought of in lexical terms, a number of recent studies have analyzed particular syntactic features that add to the complexity (Charrow, Crandall and Charrow 1982; Danet 1985; Hiltunen 1990).

Danet (1985: 281–283) for example, identifies the following syntactic features as being more characteristic of legal English than the lexical ones and suggests that they play a greater role in complexifying legal text:

1. Nominalizations (e.g., *make provision for*)
2. Passive constructions (e.g., *it is hereby declared*)
3. Whiz deletion: the omission of a wh–form plus some form of the verb *to be* (e.g., *the agreement herein contained* instead of *the agreement which is contained herein*)
5. Prepositional phrases (e.g., *to sell any part of the property either by public auction or private contract with liberty to give time for the payment of any purchase money.*)
6. Sentence length and complexity
7. Impersonality (use of the third person)
8. Multiple negatives (*otherwise than by Will only*)

The other studies mentioned above, as well as analyses done by plain language advocates and legal professionals, have produced similar lists (Eagleson 1989; Plain Language Institute 1992; Kimble 1992).

Studies of bureaucratic language (Redish 1983; Charrow 1982) have found that it is much less complex lexically than legal language – it tends to use fewer terms of art, archaic terms and formulaic language, for example – but is highly influenced by the legalistic style. Redish (1983: 153) summarizes the complexity of bureaucratic writing as being due to three major stylistic problems:

- the overuse of nouns: *(e.g., Interested persons may submit written comments regarding this proposal)*
- the use of jargon: *(e.g., prioritize, promulgate, finalize)*
- the highly legalistic style: *(e.g., Applications, amendments, and related statements of fact filed on behalf of eligible government entities...)*

As described in the previous section, the influence of individual lexical or syntactic features on the complexity of a text is a matter of debate. However, most analysts of legal and bureaucratic language agree that the combined use of these features results in written text that is highly complex, ambiguous, vague and unfamiliar to the average reader.

2.3.2 Complexity and Social Prestige

A number of researchers have studied how the particular complexity of legal and bureaucratic language functions as a marker of social prestige. Charrow (1982: 95), for example, describes how the inpenetrability of these varieties of language functions to establish and maintain the elite status of their users and to keep out outsiders – that is, the public. Since those who are fluent in legal and bureaucratic language tend to hold power in society, the language itself has come to command respect.

Two recent studies support this conclusion. Chartprasert's (1993) study required 172 college students to read samples of bureaucratic and "plain" writing and to rate the credibility of the writer, choosing from pairs of adjectives relating to trustworthiness and expertise. They were also asked to rate the writing quality for such attributes as precision, interest, clarity and meaning. The students rated the plain versions as more specific, more interesting, clearer, more personal and less formal. However, they rated the authors of the bureaucratic texts as more intelligent, more educated and more expert.

A study by Brown and Herndl (1986) investigated the presence of nominalizations in the writings of a group of business professionals. It found that the writers consistently increased their use of nominalizations when they were writing for upper management or for powerful people outside their corporations. The authors of the study concluded that the writers' use of nominalizations was motivated by an awareness that this style of writing characterizes not only professional corporate culture but also prestigious subcultures, including the academic, bureaucratic and legal worlds. Thus, they conclude that the nominalized style has come to function as a sign of social power and education.

Charrow, Crandall and Charrow (1982) and Danet (1985) have noted the ritualistic and magical properties of complexified legal and bureaucratic language, comparing it in form and function to religious language. Charrow (1982: 94) suggests that writers in these fields use complexity to impress ordinary people with the seriousness and power of their words. Bureaucratic language, though it has less of the ritualistic features of legal language, shares much of the power of legal language. Thus, in spite of the dislike most people have of the complex language of the law and government, they understand its social prestige and the value of emulating it.

2.4 Summary

This section has reviewed recent research on complexity in written language from several areas of linguistics and from three different theoretical perspectives. Taken together, the results suggest that while complexity is a well recognized feature of written text, its sources are not clearly defined or understood. The results do, however, indicate the crucial role of context in determining the form, complex or otherwise, that a text takes and the way it functions to make comprehension more or less difficult.

A first aspect of the role of context is the situation in which a text is produced. The special characteristics of the situation in which most written text is created give rise to several typical features associated with complexity, such as the use of nominalized and passive constructions, a heavily informational content, and a detached, impersonal tone. However, whether these features themselves make written text complex is a matter of debate. A more likely conclusion is the one reached by Biber (1992): that complexity is not a unified construct; texts, written or spoken, are complex in different ways and to different degrees.

The importance of context has also been highlighted in research on the role of individual linguistic features in determining how easily readers comprehend written text. The complexity usually ascribed to such features as word or sentence length, passive constructions, nominalizations and embedded clauses has been shown to depend, at least in some cases, on the context in which they occur. While it is possible to find examples where these features seem to have complicated the processing or interpretation of a text, it is also possible to find examples where readers had no comprehension problems or, in fact, relied on the presence of a particular feature to understand the text. The results suggest that particular lexical or syntactic features are not inherently complex, but, as Frazier (1988: 219) concludes, are "heavily influenced by context."

The influence of social context has also been shown to influence the complexity of some varieties of written language. Rather than being an accidental quality, the complexity of the writing of certain professional groups – lawyers and bureaucrats in particular – is both deliberate and highly valued. In these cases, complexity serves to establish and sustain a separate, elite social identification.

None of these findings alone leads to a reliable definition of complexity. Nor do they indicate what makes written text plain. Both qualities would appear to depend largely on several contextual factors that determine how particular linguistic forms are functioning to create meaning.

The next chapter presents a different perspective from which to examine the way in which the linguistic form of written text is determined by its context. It describes the model, developed within systemic–functional linguistics, of functional variation – or register. The register model takes a broader approach to context, bringing together the full range of contextual factors that determine the form of a written text. From the systemic–functional perspective, complexity is viewed not as a by–product of written language but as a joining of form and function to realize the writer's purposes.

Chapter 3
Theoretical Orientation

This chapter outlines the theory of the relationship between context and linguistic form known as register theory. While a number of linguistic models have acknowledged the role of context in language variation, systemic theory, and in particular the systemic–functional model of M.A.K. Halliday, has accounted for register variation within a comprehensive theory of the interrelationship between social context, semantics and linguistic form. Therefore, before introducing register theory, this chapter first summarizes Halliday's systemic–functional theory, beginning with its historical development. Those aspects of the theory that will be used in the analysis in Chapter 4 will be described in more detail in that chapter.

3.1 The Development of Halliday's Systemic–Functional Theory

Chroniclers of the development of systemic linguistics agree that the origins of systemic theory lie in the work of the anthropologist and ethnographer Bronislaw Malinowski (Monaghan 1979: 21; Butler 1985: 2; Patten 1988: 19). Malinowski's work led him to two conclusions that were to play a central role in the development of systemic theory. The first was that language can only be fully understood within its social and cultural context. The second was that language is functional in nature – it is used to perform certain functions in society. The meaning of language, he saw, depended on the use to which it was being put in a particular social context.

These two insights about the nature of meaning as "function in context" were developed into a linguistic theory by J.R. Firth (Butler 1985: 3). Firth's interpretation of the inseparability of language from its context, however, was more abstract than Malinowski's. Firth maintained that the context of situation was not to be interpreted in concrete terms "as a sort of audiovisual record of the surrounding 'props' but was, rather, an abstract representation of the environment in terms of certain general categories having relevance to the text" (Halliday 1978: 109).

At the centre of Firth's theory of language was the idea of "system," which he described as a set of linguistic choices in a specific linguistic context (Patten 1988: 20). The context in which language takes place determines the set of choices within each system, and meaning results from the interrelations of system and structure (Firth 1964: 227). The importance that Firth placed on meaning, and particularly on the role of cultural context in determining meaning in language, is a central theme in systemic theory.

A third major influence on systemic theory was the work of Louis Hjelmslev, particularly his *realizational* view of language as one system coded in another (Halliday 1978: 42). According to Hjelmslev, semantics, grammar and phonology are all semiotics, or sign systems. Signs at one level of language are recoded, or *realized,* by signs at a lower level. Hjelmslev's view of realization was elaborated by Halliday in his theory that the lexicogrammatical system realizes the semantic system, while the semantic system realizes a higher, social level of meaning, which he refers to as the "social semiotic" (Halliday 1978: 123).

Finally, systemic theory was influenced by the functionalism of the Prague School (Halliday 1994 xxvi). Halliday's systemic–functional grammar shares with the Prague

School a functional approach to linguistic structure as well as a three–level approach to how meaning is coded in language, with semantics coded in the lexicogrammar and then recoded in phonology (Davidse 1987: 41). While Halliday's approach differs in many respects from Prague School theories, it is based on the same perspective that language is essentially instrumental in nature and can be understood only if analyzed in terms of its functions in human interaction.

3.2 Overview of Halliday's Systemic–Functional Theory

The systemic–functional theory of language elaborated by Halliday over the past twenty–five years is based on two principal concepts. The first is that language is primarily a system of meaning, one of a number of symbolic or semiotic systems through which a society or culture expresses meaning (Halliday 1985a: 4). He interprets the linguistic system as a large network of interrelated options, from which people unconsciously select when speaking. It is in this sense that Halliday describes language as a "resource for meaning" rather than as a set of rules (Halliday 1978: 17).

The second concept is that language is functional. It is organized around "metafunctions" which reflect both the functions of language in society and the abstract organization of language into sets of system networks. The network of systems that make up a language is thus interpreted as reflecting the purposes which language has evolved to serve. The following discussion gives a brief description of the theory behind these two central concepts of systemic–functional theory.

3.2.1 The Systemic Component

The most distinctive feature of Halliday's linguistic theory is its description of language as a system of interrelated networks through which meaning is realized. In contrast to structuralist theories which treat language as systems of forms with meanings attached, Halliday sees language "as a system of meanings with forms attached to express them; not grammatical paradigms with their interpretation, but semantic paradigms with their realization" (Thibault 1987: 611). The following is a summary of the central characteristics of this systemic theory of language, as presented in Halliday's *Introduction to Functional Grammar* (1994).

Following Firth, Halliday proposes that the nature of the organization of grammar is primarily paradigmatic rather than syntagmatic. The grammar of a language consists of networks of options or features from which a language user makes choices, based on the communicative demands of a particular situation. The syntagmatic relations, or structure, of a language represent the realization of the options chosen.

A system is defined as "an entry condition together with a set of mutually exclusive options or features, one of which must be selected" (Nesbitt and Plum 1988: 7). Figure 2.1 shows a simplified network for MOOD in the English clause. The options in this case are only available at the clause level, which in this case is the entry condition. Systems are ordered along a scale of "delicacy" (that is, of greater detail) from left to right, with each choice in one system serving as an entry condition to the next system. In the system of MOOD, for example, the choice between [declarative] and [interrogative] depends on the pre-selection of [indicative].

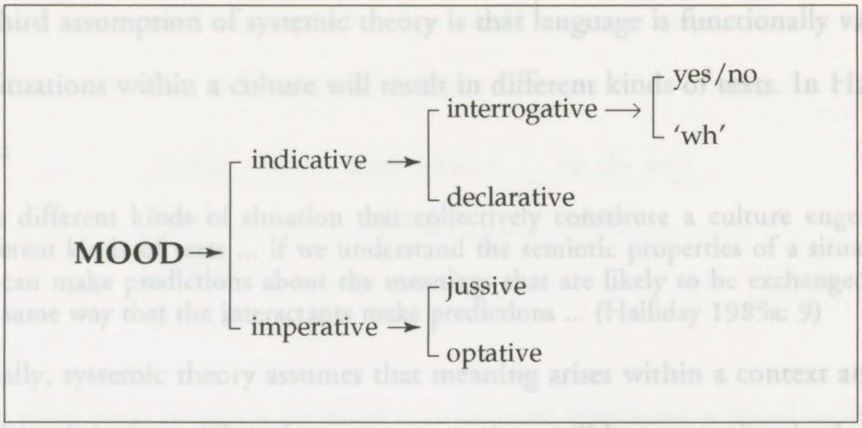

Figure 2.1: A Simplified Network for MOOD (Butler 1985: 44)

An entry condition may also be formed by more than one feature, either disjunctively (where each feature on its own makes a system available) or conjunctively (where several features are needed at once to open up a specific system). A full system network reveals the complex relationships and interdependencies among paradigmatic features (Davidse, 1987, 45). To summarize, a systemic description of a text specifies the set of features selected from the range of options drawn from the different interrelated networks which together constitute the grammar (Morley 1985: 43).

A second major characteristic of systemic theory is its assumption that the relationship between meaning and form is natural – that is, non–arbitrary. This leads to two further important assumptions:

(i) Every structural feature represents some expression of meaning.

(ii) Different types of structure express different types of meaning.

(These two points are illustrated in the text analysis in Chapter 4.) In other words, wordings are a realization of meaning. Verbs and nouns, for example, "match the analysis of experience into processes and participants" (Halliday 1994: xviii).

A third assumption of systemic theory is that language is functionally variable. Different situations within a culture will result in different kinds of texts. In Halliday's description:

> The different kinds of situation that collectively constitute a culture engender different kinds of texts ... if we understand the semiotic properties of a situation we can make predictions about the meanings that are likely to be exchanged, in the same way that the interactants make predictions ... (Halliday 1985a: 9)

Finally, systemic theory assumes that meaning arises within a context and is realized in linguistic form. These last two assumptions will be returned to in the discussion of register theory in Section 2.3, below.

3.2.2 Language Functions

Systemic theory is a functional theory of language – it sets out to describe the relationship between the nature of the linguistic system and the uses it serves. Halliday distinguishes three interrelated senses in which language is functional. The first, he refers to as the "commonsense use of the term," where function equals use (Thibault 1987: 608). It is in this sense that the uses of language can be said to have shaped its system.

The second sense refers to the function of individual elements in any actual structure. These are the functional roles, such as Subject, Actor, Goal, Process, that identify what part each component is playing in a particular structure. The function of an element will depend upon which functional dimension is being analyzed. In the sentence below, for example, *Boys* is functioning as Actor (logical subject), as Theme (psychological subject) and as Subject (grammatical subject).

Boys	*throw*	*stones*
Actor	Process	Goal
Theme		
Subject		

If the sentence were turned into a passive, *boys* would continue to function as Actor, but *stones* would now function as Theme and Subject.

Stones	*were thrown*	*by the boys*
Goal	Process	Actor
Theme		
Subject		

The third sense in which language is considered functional is based on the assumption that the fundamental components of meaning in language are functional components. These semantic components, which Halliday calls "metafunctions" represent the central modes of meaning around which the linguistic system is organized.

This last sense of function is, according to Halliday, "the most important fact about language as a system" (Halliday 1978: 186). It is based on this functional interpretation of systems that systemic–functional theory proposes a natural relationship between meaning and grammar: the organization of the linguistic system reflects the principal modes of meaning "that are present in every use of language in every social context" (Halliday 1978: 112). It is in this sense of functionalism that systemic–functional theory proposes to "illuminate the internal structure of language itself, explaining why language is patterned as it is, and not in one of the many other possible ways"(Butler 1985: 46).

Specifically, Halliday's claim is that the network of systems of a language is a combination of a very few relatively independent networks which correspond to certain basic functions of language. Butler has summarized Halliday's description of the three functional components, or metafunctions, as follows:

> The *ideational* component serves for the expression of "content": that is, of the speaker's experience of the real world, including the inner world of his own consciousness. Within this, the *experiential* subcomponent is concerned with the expression of processes, participants in those processes, circumstances, qualities, and the like. The *logical* subcomponent provides for the linguistic expression of such universal relations as those of "and," "or," negation and implication.
>
> The *interpersonal* component serves to establish and maintain social relations: for the expression of social roles, which include the communication roles created by language itself – for example, the roles of questioner or respondent, which we take on by asking or answering a question; and also for getting things done, by means of the interaction between one person and another. The interpersonal component also includes the speaker's comments on the probability, relevance, etc. of the message, and his attitude towards it.
>
> The *textual* component enables the speaker or writer to construct "texts." or connected passages of discourse that is situationally relevant; and enables the listener or reader to distinguish a text from a random set of sentences. Through the textual function, language provides for making links with itself and with features of the situation in which it is used. (Butler 1985: 47)

At the level of the clause, for example, Halliday found that the relevant system networks cluster in three main sets. The network of TRANSITIVITY, which specifies structural roles such as Actor, Process and Goal for the elements of the clause, encodes the speaker's experience of the world. This represents the ideational metafunction. The network of MOOD, which includes the functions of Subject, Finite, Predicator and Complement, encodes a speaker's relation to other speakers. This represents the interpersonal metafunction. The systems which relate to the ordering of constituents and information in the clause, collectively referred to as THEME, represent the textual metafunction (Davidse 1987, 51).

Halliday summarizes the relationship between system and function in this way:

> These functions are built into the semantic system of language, and they form the basis of the grammatical organization, since the task of grammar is to encode the meanings deriving from these various functions into articulated structures (Halliday 1978: 22).

3.3 Register Theory

The discussion above gives a brief description of the central principles of Halliday's theory of the systemic and functional nature of language.

However, systemic–functional theory is more than a theory of the linguistic system itself. It also seeks to explain the relationship between language and the environment in which it is used – that is "the relationship between the internal forms of the language and its use in contexts of social action" (Thibault 1987: 607). This relationship is what defines Halliday's theory of functional variation or "register."

The following section briefly describes the development of the concept of the context of situation within various linguistic theories, followed by a description of Halliday's register theory.

3.3.1 Theories of the Context of Situation

The term "context of situation" was coined by Malinowski to describe the full environment in which a text is situated – that is, the context beyond the immediate linguistic context (Halliday and Hasan 1985: 6). As described above, Malinowski had concluded from his anthropological and ethnographic studies that linguistic meaning is not contained in words alone. Language he believed becomes intelligible only when it is placed within the context of its total cultural environment and described in terms of the function it serves in that culture.

Following on Malinowski's theories of the role of language in culture, Firth set up a framework for the description of the context of situation that could be used to study texts within a general linguistic theory. What he saw was that, for the purposes of linguistics, the context of situation had to be constrained to those components that were relevant to language (Halliday and Hasan 1985: 8).

Firth described the context of situation as:

> a group of related categories at a different level from grammatical categories but rather of the same abstract nature. A context of situation for linguistic work brings into relation the following categories:
>
> 1. The relevant features of participants: persons, personalities.
>
> (i) the verbal action of the participants
> (ii) the non–verbal action of the participants
>
> 2. The relevant objects
>
> 3. The effect of the verbal action. (Firth 1964: 182)

Firth's approach to linguistics as the study of meaning functioning in context was taken up by systemic (also called Neo–Firthian) linguists who developed even more abstract interpretations that would link the features of a text to the features of a situation. These include frameworks developed by Ellis and Ure (1969); Halliday, McIntosh and Strevens (1964); Gregory and Carroll (1978) and Fawcett (1980).

The role of the context of situation was also incorporated into a number of sociolinguistic models of language use, most notably Hymes' ethnography of speech events. From his work on the ethnographies of communication, Hymes concluded that in order to develop a theory of language,

> ... one needs to investigate directly the use of language in contexts of situation, so as to discern patterns proper to speech activity, patterns that escape separate studies of grammar, of personality, of social structure, religion, and the like, each abstracting from the patterning of speech activity into some other frame of reference(Hymes 1974: 3–4).

Hymes' schema of the components of the speech event include: sender, receiver, purposes, message form and content, channel, code, topic and setting. Along with these components he proposed the following functions of speech: expressive (or emotive), directive (or conative, pragmatic, rhetorical, persuasive), poetic, contact, metalinguistic, referential and contextual (Hymes 1974b: 204). The correlations between the situational components and the functions of speech, he believed, allowed the ethnographer to define which features of the situation determined the use of particular linguistic patterns or forms and thus to classify speech events by their context of situation.

3.3.2 Halliday's Model of the Context of Situation

Halliday's model of the context of situation has much in common with other systemic models. In contrast to Hymes' inclusion of the form and content of the message, and Firth's inclusion of the verbal action of the participant, systemic models are limited to the external factors affecting the linguistic choices that the speaker or writer makes. These are categories at a more abstract level which are regarded as determining rather than as including the text.

> Types of linguistic situation differ from one another, broadly speaking, in three respects: first, what is actually taking place; secondly, who is taking part; and thirdly, what part language is playing. These three variables, taken together determine the range within which meanings are selected, and the forms which are used for their expressions. In other words, they determine the "register" (Halliday 1978: 32).

Halliday named these three aspects of the situation *field, tenor* and *mode,* and defined them in the following terms;

> The *field of discourse* refers to what is happening, to the nature of the social action that is taking place: what is it that the participants are engaged in, in which the language figures as some essential component?
>
> The *tenor of discourse* refers to who is taking part, to the nature of the participants, their statuses and roles: what kinds of role relationships obtain among the participants, including permanent and temporary relationships of one kind or another, both the types of speech role that they are taking on in the dialogue and the whole cluster of socially significant relationships in which they are involved?
>
> The *mode of discourse* refers to the part the language is playing, what is it that the participants are expecting the language to do in the situation: the symbolic organization of the text, its status, and function in the context, including the channel (spoken or written or some combination of the two?) and also the

rhetorical mode, what is being achieved by the text in terms of such categories as persuasive, expository, didactic, and the like. (Halliday and Hasan 1985: 12)

Table 3.1 shows Halliday's situational analysis in terms of field, tenor and mode of two sample texts: the instruction of a novice in the rules of a board game (cited in Butler 1985: 65); and a traditional legal document declaring the transfer of land (Halliday and Hasan 1985: 13).

	Board Game Instruction	Legal Document
Field	Instruction: the instruction of a novice • in a board game (e.g. Monopoly) with equipment present • for the purpose of enabling him to participate	Verbal regulation of social interaction through sanctions of the legal system: codification of exchange of property ('deed of transfer'), including certification that transaction falls within particular class of transactions defined by value of commodity exchanged
Tenor	Equal and intimate: three young adult males; acquainted • but with hierarchy in the situation (2 experts, 1 novice) • leading to superior–inferior role relationships	"Member" (individual) addressing "collective" (society) using formula prescribed by collective for purpose in hand
Mode	Spoken: unrehearsed didactic and explanatory, with undertone of non–seriousness • with feedback: question–and–answer, correction of error	Written to be filed (i.e. to form part of documentary records); text gives status (as social act) to non–verbal transaction; text is formulaic (i.e. general, with provision for relating to specific instances) Performative (i.e., text constitutes, or "realises" act in question.

Table 3.1: Halliday's Situational Description of Two Texts (Butler 1985: 65; and Halliday and Hasan 1985: 13)

3.3.3. The Relationship Between System and Function

In comparison with other systemic models of the context of situation, Halliday's has been elaborated in considerably greater detail (Young 1985: 287). However, the most powerful argument in favour of Halliday's approach to the components of the context of situation is his correlation of the situational variables with the functional components of the language system. As described above, Halliday proposed that the linguistic system was in general organized with respect to three major types of meaning: the ideational, the interpersonal and the textual metafunctions.

Once these metafunctional components were established, further investigation led Halliday to suggest that they could be systematically related to the situational variables. As he explains:

> The semantic system evolved, we assume, operationally, as a form of symbolic interaction in social contexts; so there is every reason that it should reflect the structure of such contexts in its own internal organization (Halliday 1978: 141).

On this basis, he suggests that each of the components of the situation tends to determine the selection of options in a corresponding component of the semantics.

> The semiotic components of the situation (field, tenor and mode) are systematically related to the functional components of the semantics (ideational, interpersonal and textual):
>
> *field* to the *ideational* component, representing the 'content' function of language, the speaker as observer;
>
> *tenor* to the *interpersonal* component, representing the 'participation' function of language, the speaker as intruder; and
>
> *mode* to the *textual* component, representing the 'relevance' function of language, without which the other two do not become actualized.
>
> There is a tendency, in other words, for the field of social action to be encoded linguistically in the form of ideational meaning, the role relationships in the form of interpersonal meanings, and the symbolic mode in the form of textual meanings. (Halliday 1978: 123)

The relationship between the situation and the text is shown in Table 2.2 below.

Situation		Text
Feature of the context	(realised by)	Functional component of the semantic system
Field of discourse (what is going on)		Experiential meanings (transitivity, naming, etc.)
Tenor of discourse (who is taking part)		Interpersonal meanings (mood, modality, person, etc.)
Mode of discourse (role assigned to language)		Textual meanings (theme, information, cohesive relations)

Table 3.2: Relation of the Text to the Context of Situation (Halliday and Hasan 1985: 26)

According to Halliday's theory, each of the elements in the structure of the situation activates the corresponding component in the semantic system, creating in the process a semantic configuration, "a grouping of favoured and foregrounded options from the total meaning potential, that is typically associated with the situation type in question" (Halliday 1978: 123).

An important outcome of Halliday's meaning and context–oriented organization of language is that it provides a high degree of psychological reality. Davidse (1987: 51) points out that a speaker entering into a linguistic interaction must first decode all the variables that make up the specific "contextual configuration"; that is, what is the situational focus, the purpose and the context of the interaction, and the social roles of the participants. The fact that we are able to decode often limited linguistic indications of meaning is evidence, Halliday concludes, of the predictive power of the context of situation.

3.3.4 Register

Halliday's register theory thus brings together the non–linguistic – that is, the context of situation – and the linguistic, via the semantic system of the language.

Variations in the context of situation will systematically correspond with variation in the language. This functional variation is what Halliday calls register. In Halliday's theory, register corresponds to the language itself: it is a variety of language corresponding to a variety of situation (Halliday and Hasan 1985: 38). He defines register as

> ... a configuration of meanings that are typically associated with a particular situational configuration of field, mode and tenor" But since it is a configuration of meanings, a register must also include the expressions, the lexicogrammatical and phonological features, that typically accompany or *realize* these meanings (Halliday and Hasan 1985: 39).

Halliday's register theory leads to a number of conclusions about the relationship between situation and linguistic form. The first is that since all language functions in some context of situation, all texts, or instances of language, are in some register. This contradicts the popular interpretation of register as referring to restricted forms of language, also referred to as "subject matter varieties" or "sublanguages" (Kittredge and Lehrberger 1982: 1).

This leads to a second point arising from register theory: registers differ in the range of meanings they can express as a consequence of restrictions in their situational variables. Examples of very restricted registers would include the language of air–traffic controllers or highly technical discourse, where constraints on the situational variables result in similar constraints on the language used. At the other end of the continuum are very open registers, such as the language of everyday conversation. However, even here, differences in the situational variables will be evident in the language used. For example, *tenor* may vary depending upon whether one is speaking to a co–worker, a neighbour, or a family member. As Halliday points out, register variation has often been approached from the wrong direction, with the typical linguistic form used to define a situation.

> The question is not what peculiarities of vocabulary, or grammar or pronunciation can be directly accounted for by reference to the situation. It is *which* kinds of situational factor determine *which* kinds of selection in the linguistic system. (Halliday 1978: 32)

A third point is that register theory interprets the linguistic system as "probabilistic." The more specifically the context of situation can be described, the more accurate the predictions of the linguistic form a text will take. Halliday describes register variation as "variation in the setting of grammatical probabilities. That is how register is defined... What we call 'a register' is a syndrome of lexicogrammatical probabilities" (Halliday 1992: 68). This approach provides a theoretical framework in which to describe explicitly "the covariation of language and context" (Nesbitt and Plum 1988: 10).

In summary, register theory, as developed within systemic–functional theory, postulates that all language is functioning in context, and that changes in the context of situation will bring changes in linguistic form. Language variation is thus both systematic and predictable.

3.4 Summary

The linguistic theory which presents the most fully elaborated model of the role of context in determining linguistic form is the systemic–functional theory of M.A.K. Halliday. This chapter summarizes the development of systemic theory and the central principles of Halliday's systemic–functional theory as an introduction to his theory of functional variation or register.

Following the theory of J.R. Firth, systemic linguists view language primarily as a system of meaning. They interpret language paradigmatically, as a network of interrelated options from which speakers unconsciously choose when they speak. The organization of the network of systems is seen as functional, reflecting the various functions of language in society. Halliday proposes that these functions are realized by the principal components or "metafunctions" of the semantic system: the ideational (to express experiential and logical meaning), the interpersonal (to interact with others) and the textual (to relate elements of a text to each other and to their context).

The systemic and functional interpretation of language falls within a larger theory of language as a "social semiotic"; that is, as one of the systems through which a culture expresses meaning. Within systemic–functional theory, register theory proposes a systematic relationship between the situation in which a text is produced and the linguistic form it takes. The link between these two modes is the semantic level. Halliday proposes that the situational variables of field, tenor and mode, which define the non–linguistic, or semiotic, meaning, correspond to the ideational, interpersonal and textual metafunctions of the semantics, each of which is associated with particular lexicogrammatical forms that realize these meanings. Halliday's theory of register thus provides a framework that both explains and predicts the relationship between context and linguistic form.

Chapter 4
Register and Situation: A Sample Analysis

This chapter presents a systemic–functional analysis of two versions of the same "content" written in different registers. Its purpose is to see how differences in lexicogrammatical features can be related to differences in the context of situation of each text. Except where otherwise noted, the lexicogrammatical analysis follows Halliday's functional grammar as elaborated in *An Introduction to Functional Grammar* (1994).

As Hasan explains (Halliday and Hasan 1985: 70), uncovering the relationship between text structure and situational context requires a two–way analysis: "...the text defines and confirms the nature of the contextual configuration, while the latter acts as a point of reference for deciding what kinds of elements can appear when, where and how often." The analysis in this chapter follows this approach, applying a lexicogrammatical analysis to the texts in order to see how the two registers instantiate different situational contexts as described in Halliday's register theory.

The texts are short excerpts from two versions of the regulations governing small claims disputes in British Columbia. The Small Claims Court rules apply in disputes adjudicated by the British Columbia Provincial Court. Both versions of the regulations were published by the provincial government for use by the general public, and both were written to conform to current popular guidelines for writing in plain language.

Version A

EXPERTS' EVIDENCE – ADVANCE NOTICE OF EVIDENCE REQUIRED

(3) A party may not call an expert to give evidence of the expert's opinion unless
(a) the party serves a summary of the expert's evidence on all other parties at least 14 days before the expert is called to give evidence, or
(b) a judge grants permission.

EXPERTS' REPORTS MUST BE GIVEN IN ADVANCE

(4) Instead of calling an expert to give evidence, a party may introduce a report stating opinions of an expert, if
(a) the party serves a copy of the report on all other parties at least 14 days before the report is introduced, or
(b) a judge grants permission

EXPERTS' QUALIFICATIONS

(5) A statement of qualifications in an expert's report is proof that the expert has those qualifications unless there is evidence to the contrary.

EXPERTS MAY BE CALLED FOR CROSS–EXAMINATION

(6) A party receiving another party's expert report may serve on the other party, at least 7 days before the trail date, a notice requiring the expert to attend the trial for cross–examination.

COST OF CALLING OTHER PARTY'S EXPERT

(7) If a judge determines that calling another party's expert was unnecessary, the judge may order the party who required the expert to attend to pay the expert's expenses.

Version B

WHAT ABOUT EXPERT WITNESSES?

Experts are the only witnesses who are allowed to give evidence about their opinions. Sometimes an opinion is the only way to prove an important part of your case, such as "Why does the roof leak?"

The other side needs to be prepared to cross–examine your expert or to get another expert opinion. So, if you intend to call an expert witness to give opinion evidence, you must serve the other side with a summary of the opinion at least 14 days in advance. If you don't, you can ask the Judge for permission to call the witness anyway, but you might not get permission, or the other side may succeed in getting a postponement of the trial. If that happens, you could have to pay the other side's expenses of showing up for the trial.

CAN I USE A LETTER FROM MY EXPERT INSTEAD OF BRINGING THE WITNESS TO COURT?

Normally a witness must appear in person, so that the other side has a chance to ask questions, but an exception is made for expert opinions.

If you want to use a letter or a written report, have the person prepare a letter stating his or her qualifications, what the opinion is, and the facts that the opinion is based on. Then serve a copy of the report or letter on the other party at least 14 days before the court date. If you don't, the same rule applies as for failing to give a summary of an expert's testimony in advance.

If you receive an expert's report from the other side and you think it is important that you be allowed to cross–examine the expert, you can notify the other party, in writing, at least seven days before the trial, that you require the expert to attend. Be careful about this because if the Judge decides it was unnecessary, you could end up paying the cost of bringing the expert to court.

Version A is taken from the booklet *Small Claims Court Rules*, published by the British Columbia Ministry of Attorney General (nd). The booklet's purpose is described in its introduction as: "... to make it as easy as possible for people to use the court to resolve their disputes." The rules are described as "written for non–lawyers." Version B is taken from the booklet *Small Claims Court Plain Language Rules* (British Columbia Ministry of Attorney General: nd), the purpose of which is described in the introduction as follows: "It will answer some often–asked questions about the court, and it will describe what happens in an ordinary small claims court case."

Both booklets cover all the regulations governing small claims disputes, including rules for making a claim or counterclaim, for serving and replying to a claim, for the proceedings at a settlement conference or trial, and for pursuing or fulfilling a payment order. The two sample excerpts describe the rules governing the use of expert evidence in a small claims trial.

The excerpts were selected because they are substantially the same in the contextual variable *field*. That is, they meet Halliday's broad description of field as including both topic and social activity (Halliday 1978: 110). The field of both texts can be summarized as:

- small claims disputes
- provincial regulations
- government informing the public

By comparing texts which appear to "say the same thing," it should be possible to identify how the different ways in which it is said are determined by differences in the situational variables *tenor* and *mode*.

The two versions were matched as closely as possible for content; however Version B (Plain Language Rules) adds content in several places. Most of this additional material is represented in some form, usually implicit, in Version A. But in some cases, the elaboration in Version B includes information that is not present in Version A. The clause *Be careful about this* ... in Version B, for example, has no parallel in Version A. However, these differences in wording only slightly alter the value of field, and for the purposes of this analysis will be ignored.

The analysis covers the main lexicogrammatical features that are particularly relevant to written official documents. Thus it does not discuss those features which can only be analyzed reliably in spoken language, particularly the system of Information Structure which is realized chiefly by tonic prominence (accent) and tone contour (melody) (Halliday 1994: 292–307). Similarly, the analysis does not include a description of the prosodic realization of interpersonal meaning, referred to in systemic grammar as "key." Nor does it cover features associated with traditionally less complex written language, such as those found in personal letters and fiction (e.g., address terms and exclamations).

Section 4.1 presents an analysis of lexicogrammatical features realizing the interpersonal metafunction of the two versions. These include the systems of mood and modality, and grammatical person. Each feature is described in terms of both its lexicogrammatical and functional role in each version. The section ends with a situational analysis of the tenor of each version based on the preceding lexicogrammatical analysis. Section 4.2 follows the same procedure for the analysis of mode in the two texts. Section 4.3 summarizes the findings of the chapter.

4.1 Analysis of Lexicogrammatical Features Instantiating Tenor

According to Halliday's register theory, the tenor of a text predicts the choices made in the interpersonal component of the semantics (Halliday 1979). The role of the interpersonal metafunction is to express the interaction between the writer of a text and its intended audience. The interpersonal meaning systems allow the writer to intervene in the text in a variety of ways: through "the expression of his attitudes, evaluation and judgements; his expectations and demands; and the nature of the exchange as he is setting it up" (Halliday 1979: 59–60).

For written text, the principal lexicogrammatical resource is the system of Mood and the associated patterns of modality in the clause. Interpersonal meaning is also realized by the system of grammatical person and by evaluative and attitudinal modifiers.

4.1.1 Mood and Modality in the Clause

According to Halliday (1994: 77), the system of Mood carries "the burden of the clause as an interactive event." The Mood system contributes to interpersonal meaning in three ways:

- it specifies the speech function of each clause;
- it identifies primary tense, modality and polarity; and
- it identifies the grammatical subject of the clause.

The lexicogrammar realizes each of these functions primarily through the Mood element.

Grammatical Mood

The basic Mood system in English classifies clauses as indicative or imperative, and within indicative, as declarative or interrogative, giving rise to the familiar categories of command, statement and question. The choice of mood is determined by the Mood element, which has two parts: the Subject, which is a nominal group; and the Finite element, which is part of a verbal group and consists of either a temporal operator or a modal operator. Thus in *he will*, *he* is Subject and *will* is Finite.

From a functional point of view, the system of Mood realizes speech function and so has a major role in expressing interpersonal meaning. Speech function, according to Halliday (1994: 69), is organized along two fundamental oppositions: information as opposed to "goods and services"(that is, indicative vs imperative); and giving as opposed to demanding (that is, declarative vs interrogative). He proposes a four–way distinction of speech function based on these oppositions: Statement, Command, Question and Offer.

	Information	Good and services
Giving	Statement (Proposition) *I gave you one.*	Offer (Proposal) *Would you like one?*
Demanding	Command (Proposal) *Take this one!*	Question (Proposition) *Which one would you like?*

Table 4.1: Primary Speech Functions (Halliday 1994: 69)

Halliday further distinguishes the speech function of clauses according to whether they function as propositions (that is, giving or demanding information) or as proposals (that is, giving or demanding goods and services). He defines propositions (Statements and Questions) as clauses that exchange information. They can be affirmed or denied; the expected response to them is some form of acknowledgment or reply. Proposals (Commands and Offers) are used to exchange goods and services (that is objects and actions), and thus can be accepted or rejected; generally the expected response to a proposal is some form of undertaking or acceptance. (The validity of the speech function Offer has been questioned by several systemic linguists (Butler 1988: 120), chiefly on the grounds that unlike the other speech functions, it does not correspond to a category of mood in English). Since neither of the texts under consideration contains this speech function, it will be ignored in the present discussion.)

Table 4.3, on page 58, shows the mood and speech function of each clause which selects independently for mood in Versions A and B, as well as the items functioning as Subject and as Finite. Clauses which do not select for mood include non–finite clauses and certain dependent relative clauses whose mood is determined by the independent clause. Any headings that select for mood in the two versions are also included. These include the elliptical clause in Version B: *What About Expert Witnesses?*, where interrogative mood can be assumed by the presence of the question mark.

In Version A, all clauses are declarative and, on the basis of Halliday's criteria, can be functionally analyzed as Statements and thus as propositions. The speech function of Version A is solely that of giving information. In Version B, the majority of clauses are declarative, functioning as Statements. However, this text also contains two interrogatives, functioning as Questions, three imperatives functioning as Commands, and one declarative clause functioning as a Modalised Directive. (Modalised Directives are described below.) Version B thus comprises a mix of speech roles and speech functions.

Gregory (1988: 309) points out that the sequence of speech functions in a text reveals user's Turn, that is, whether the speaker is initiating or responding. In Version A, each Statement is initiating, thus the text can be described as a monologue. In Version B, the sequence alternates between Question and Statements, and thus functions as a dialogue.

Modality

The Finite in the Mood element also expresses polarity; each verbal operator can be either positive or negative (e.g., *has* vs *hasn't)*. Between these two poles is the area of indeterminacy which Halliday (1994: 356) refers to as Modality: "the area of meaning that lies between yes and no – the intermediate ground between positive and negative polarity." According to Halliday, Modality expresses four types of indeterminacy: degrees of probability, ranging from possible to certain; degrees of usuality, ranging from sometimes to always; degrees of obligation, ranging from permitted to required; and degrees of inclination, ranging from willing to determined.

Modality can be realized by a finite modal operator or, depending on the type of modality, by other expressions of the writer's assessment, chiefly modal adverbs (*probably, certainly*). Halliday also distinguishes modality according to the value that is set on the modal judgement: low, median or high, as shown in Table 4.2.

Value	Low	Median	High
	can, may, could, might	will, would, should, is to, was to	must, ought to, need, has to, had to
Expressing			
Probability	possible	probable	certain
Usuality	sometimes	usually	always
Obligation	allowed	supposed	required
Inclination	willing	keen	determined

Table 4.2: Degrees of Modality (Halliday 1994)

The function of modality in interpersonal meaning is to allow the writer to indicate his or her assessment of the degree of possibility, probability, obligation or inclination within the proposition or proposal. The choice of how the modality is expressed depends on whether the modality is being presented by the writer as objective or subjective. For example, *John should go* where it means *I want John to go* is a subjective evaluation of median obligation. The same modality would be expressed objectively as *John is supposed to go*, where the meaning corresponds to *It is expected (by me) that John goes.* Thus modality can be distinguished by type, value and orientation.

The modality for each clause containing a modal operator is shown in Table 4.3. In Version A, the expressions of modality are limited to *may* and *must*, expressing degrees of obligation; that is, what the participants are allowed to do (value: low) or must do (value:

high). The orientation of the modality is objective, of the type: *It is required; it is permitted.* Version A contains no other expressions of modality.

Modality in Version B includes expressions of probability and usuality, as well as of obligation. Except for *must,* expressing obligation (value: high), the value of the modality is low. The orientation of the modality is clearly more subjective. For example, Version B includes *you might, you could* corresponding to the more explicit subjective expression: *It seems to me.* This version also contains several modal adjuncts which explicitly indicate the writer's appraisal of the information, as in: *Sometimes* and *normally.*

Smith (1985: 243) suggests that all evaluative modifiers should be regarded as features related to modality in cases where they express the writer's assessment of the propositional content. Only Version B contains any of these evaluative modifiers: the adjective *important,* and the intensifier *only.*

Subject

In addition to expressing grammatical mood and modality, the Mood element identifies the grammatical subject. Halliday (1994: 76–78) interprets the function of Subject as identifying the element on which the argument of the clause rests. This, he points out, is not "what the clause is about" (which is established by Theme – see Section 4.2.1) but that to which the Mood element refers.

In propositions, the Subject is that with which the Finite is concerned, regardless of voice (i.e., the grammatical subject). For example, in the sentence:

I'll be guided by your wishes.

the Subject is not functioning as Actor (filled by *your wishes*) but still specifies the element on which the argument rests. The Subject has "responsibility" in Halliday's terms, for the validity of the proposition. In proposals, the Subject is the element which carries "responsibility" for realizing the offer or command. For example, in the imperative *Give me that,* responsibility for accepting or refusing the command lies with the implicit subject *You*. Thus propositions and proposals differ in the type of "modal responsibility" vested in the Subject (Halliday 1992: 337).

This distinction of the function of Subject according to the speech function of the clause explains how certain declarative clauses can be interpreted as Commands, or what Butler (1988) refers to as Modalised Directives. These are polite imperatives that function as Commands, but use a modal operator to encode the command. For example, in the sentence:

He must have more money.

the Subject *He* is the element on which the validity of the argument rests, but is not the thing towards which the Directive is issued. The sentence is thus functioning as a Statement. In contrast, in the sentence

You must give him more money

responsibility for the requested action rests on the Subject, thus the sentence is functioning as a polite Command, or Modalised Directive. It can be interpreted as a polite version of the imperative:

Give him more money.

On this basis, it is possible to analyze the sentence in Version A:

Experts' reports must be given in advance

as a Statement, while analyzing the sentence in Version B which contains the same modal auxiliary:

You must serve the other side with a summary of the opinion ...

as having the speech function Modalised Directive, where responsibility clearly rests with the Subject.

In Version A, the role of Subject is filled by third parties; that is, the validity of the propositions rests neither with writer nor reader but with third parties and non–persons (e.g., *a party, judges, experts' reports*). In Version B, 15 of the clauses that select for mood have *you* as Subject and one has *I* as Subject (where *I* refers to the reader). Thus, the modal responsibility in this text is shared by the reader and the third parties referred to in the rules.

4.1.2 Person

The function of Person is to indicate the presence or absence of the writer or reader, or both, and thus has a major role in determining the interactive nature of a text. It is also one of the ways of expressing social distance. The system of Person is expressed both by pronouns (*you, I, they*) and possessives (*your, their*).

Version A is exclusively in the third person. As Smith (1985: 242) points out, this is the least interactive option possible, obscuring as it does the presence of both writer and reader. It also creates maximal social distance, since no interaction takes place. Unlike narrative uses of the third person, such as that found in fiction, the use of the third person in an official document of the type analyzed here is the traditional way of representing an institutional addressor, that is, someone speaking on behalf of an institution. The addressee is unnamed and unenumerated, but includes the reader in so far as he or she may be one of the parties referred to.

Version B uses the second person throughout, and also contains first and third person forms. Smith describes the use of the second person as the most interactive option since it explicitly acknowledges the presence of the reader. Even though the writer's presence is not revealed by the use of the first person (which is used in this text to represent the reader), the use of the second person presupposes a writer addressing the reader.

Subject	Finite	Mood	Type & Value of Modality	Speech Function
Version A				
a party	may not	declarative	oblig. – high	Statement
the party	serves	declarative	n/a	Statement
a judge	grants	declarative	n/a	Statement
experts' reports	must	declarative	oblig. – high	Statement
a party	may	declarative	allowed – low	Statement
the party	serves	declarative	n/a	Statement
a judge	grants	declarative	n/a	Statement
a statement ...	is	declarative	n/a	Statement
the expert	has	declarative	n/a	Statement
there	is	declarative	n/a	Statement
experts	may	declarative	allowed – low	Statement
a party ...	may	declarative	allowed – low	Statement
a judge	determines	declarative	n/a	Statement
the judge	may	declarative	allowed – low	Statement
Version B				
elliptical	elliptical	interrogative	n/a	Question
Experts	are	declarative	n/a	Statement
an opinion	is (sometimes)	declarative	usual – low	Statement
the other side	needs	declarative	oblig. – high	Statement
you	intend	declarative	n/a	Statement
you	must	declarative	oblig. – high	Modal Directive
you	don't	declarative	n/a	Statement
you	can	declarative	allowed – low	Statement
you	might not	declarative	possible – low	Statement
the other side	may	declarative	possible – low	Statement
that	happens	declarative	n/a	Statement
you	could	declarative	possible – low	Statement
I	can	interrogative	allowed – low	Question
witness	must	declarative	oblig. – high	Statement
the other side	has (a chance)	declarative	allowed – low	Statement
an exception	is	declarative	n/a	Statement
you	want	declarative	n/a	Statement
	have	imperative	n/a	Command
	serve	imperative	n/a	Command
you	don't	declarative	n/a	Statement
the same rule	applies	declarative	n/a	Statement
you	receive	declarative	n/a	Statement
you	think	declarative	n/a	Statement
it	is	declarative	n/a	Statement
you	can	declarative	allowed – low	Statement
	be	imperative	n/a	Command
the judge	decides	declarative	n/a	Statement
it	was	declarative	n/a	Statement
you	could	declarative	possible– low	Statement

Table 4.3: Mood, Modality and Speech Function – Versions A and B

4.1.4 Situational Analysis: Tenor

From the above analysis of the lexicogrammatical features of the two registers, it is possible to describe the specific differences these features realize for the situational variable *tenor.*

The first difference is in the nature of the exchange. The speech role of Version A is solely propositional – that is, its function is to give information. Every ranking clause is in the indicative declarative mood, functioning as Statement. Version A functions as a monologue, and further, one in which there is no evidence of the addressee.

In Version B, the speech role is markedly different. First, it combines propositions and proposals, so it is both giving and demanding information, and demanding "goods and services" which in this case are actions recommended by the writer (e.g. *Be careful...)* In terms of speech Turn, Version B is structured as an exchange, with questions being posed and then answered. It functions as a dialogue, albeit one in which the writer assumes both participant roles.

This difference in speech function corresponds to the distinction made in pedagogical theory between declarative and procedural knowledge. The nature of the exchange in Version A is that of a declaration of rules to an unnamed audience; the other is that of instructing the reader in how to apply the rules.

The nature of the participants in the two versions is similarly distinct. In Version A, there is no indication of the presence of either the writer or the reader. Given the field, however, the nature of the writer can be recognized as institutional. Similarly, the audience is unspecified. Thus, the nature of the participants is largely abstract – "government" and "the public." Even though there is a writer (though there may be no reader), the writer's presence is presented as objectively as possible. This can be seen in the use of only objective expressions of modality *may* and *must,* identifying the degree of permission or obligation as set out in the small claims rules. Similarly, the writer maintains a stance of neutrality, giving no advice or subjective assessments of either probability or usuality.

Even though participants are not identified, there is maximal social distance. The writer's role dominates the text, stating the rules to everyone and to no one. The "modal responsibility" is vested in third parties – *a person, an expert, a judge* – or in an abstraction – *experts' reports.* The status and roles of the "participants" are thus traditional for this type of text.

In Version B, the presence and nature of the participants is overt. The writer's presence and "intrusion" in the text take more varied forms are more subjective than in Version A. The reader has central modal responsibility (as identified by Subject) and thus is assumed to be an actual person who is going to undertake an activity. The status and roles of the participants in Version B is non–traditional for this type of text. The writer addresses the reader directly throughout the text, explaining his or her obligations and the procedures to follow. Even though the writer only intrudes in the text in the form of intensifiers and disjunct adverbials, such as *only, normally,* the initiation–response sequence provides a relatively high degree of interactivity for a text of this type. The use of imperatives such as *be careful* indicate a role relationship such as that between instructor and student.

The differences in tenor between the two versions are summarized in Table 4.4.

Tenor: Version A	Tenor: Version B
Statement of information	Instruction in procedure
Monologue	Formatted as dialogue
Institutional authority addressing unenumerated audience.	Institutional authority giving guidance to reader.
No presence of writer or reader	Overt presence of both writer and reader
Objective assessment of obligation	Objective/subjective assessment of obligation, probability, usuality
Affect: Neutral	Affect: helpful/guiding
Traditional 3rd party relationship between government and public	Non–traditional relationship between government and public

Table 4.4: Summary of Differences in Tenor

4.2 Analysis of Lexicogrammatical Features Realizing Mode

Halliday describes mode as the role assigned to language in a given situation (Halliday 1978: 110). Within register, it is the expression of textual meaning and so is realized primarily through the textual resources in language. These are the resources of the grammar which writers use to organize and structure their message and to emphasize different elements of ideational and interpersonal meaning within it.

The lexicogrammatical realization of the textual metafunction is seen primarily in a text's thematic structure and information focus. (Since information focus is identified primarily by tonic prominence, it is omitted from the present analysis). The other major textual resources are the various devices used to create cohesion. Differences in mode can also be seen in the way the textual resources are used to package information in a text, which Halliday (1994: 350–352) refers to as "lexical density" (see Section 4.2.3).

4.2.1 Theme

Halliday (1994: 37–38) describes the grammatical function Theme as the element of clause structure which "serves as the point of departure of the message; it is that with which the clause is concerned." Thematic structure – that is, the sequence of Themes in a text – realizes the nature of a text as message, foregrounding certain pieces of information. Throughout a text the writer selects certain participants, processes or circumstances as themes. These elements, as they appear and disappear, create an organizational structure which establishes for the reader what the text is about. It is this thematic structure that Fries (1983: 135) refers to as a text's "method of development."

In English, Theme is realized by position in the clause. In Halliday's interpretation, Theme includes the first element in the clause that has a function in transitivity (that is, an element representing a process or any participants or circumstances associated with the process) which he calls the "topical" Theme, together with any elements that precede it. For example, in the following sentence, Theme includes the topical Theme *you*, as well as the textual elements preceding it. The remainder of the clause is referred to in Prague School terminology as the Rheme.

<table>
<tr><td>Well then</td><td>you</td><td>will have to try harder</td></tr>
<tr><td>textual theme</td><td>topical theme</td><td></td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">Theme</td><td>Rheme</td></tr>
</table>

(Since the material that precedes the topical Theme does not identify the "point of departure," it is not included in the present discussion.)

The analysis here incorporates Martin's (1992: 436–437) proposal that texts may also contain "hyper–Themes." He defines hyper–Theme as "an introductory sentence or group of sentences which is established to predict a particular pattern of interaction among

Theme selections in following sentences." The headings in the two versions will be assumed to function as hyper–Themes.

Version A is shown below with the topical Theme marked in bold. Following Halliday (1992: 63), embedded and non–finite clauses are not analyzed for theme since they contribute little thematic content; however all headings, whether they are minor or major clauses, will be considered to function as hyper–Themes.

Version A: Thematic Structure

EXPERTS' EVIDENCE – ADVANCE NOTICE OF EVIDENCE REQUIRED

3) **A party** may not call an expert to give evidence of the expert's opinion unless

(a) **the party** serves a summary of the expert's evidence on all other parties at least 14 days before the expert is called to give evidence, or

(b) **a judge** grants permission.

EXPERTS' REPORTS MUST BE GIVEN IN ADVANCE

4) Instead of calling an expert to give evidence, **a party** may introduce a report stating opinions of an expert, if

(a) **the party** serves a copy of the report on all other parties at least 14 days before the report is introduced, or

(b) **a judge** grants permission

EXPERTS' QUALIFICATIONS

(5) **A statement of qualifications in an expert's report** is proof that the expert has those qualifications unless **there** is evidence to the contrary.

EXPERTS MAY BE CALLED FOR CROSS–EXAMINATION

6) **A party receiving another party's expert report** may serve on the other party, at least 7 days before the trail date, a notice requiring the expert to attend the trial for cross–examination.

COST OF CALLING OTHER PARTY'S EXPERT

(7) If **a judge** determines that calling another party's expert was unnecessary, **the judge** may order the party who required the expert to attend to pay the expert's expenses.

Of the 11 topical themes in Version A, nine refer either to *a/the party* or *a/the judge*. These appear in the sequences:

a party – the party – a judge;

a party – the party – a judge;

a party – a judge – the judge.

Thus, the thematic structure strongly foregrounds the roles of the parties in a dispute and the judge's authority. It is noticeable in this version that the hyper–Themes, four of which refer to "experts," are not picked up in the paragraphs themselves. This lack of thematic continuity between the hyper–Themes and the topical Themes is found in each paragraph with the exception of the section headed *Experts' Qualification*, where the hyper–Theme is picked up in the first topical theme: *A statement of qualifications* ...

The headings in Version A, in fact, function not as hyper–Themes, predicting the subsequent thematic structure, but either as summaries of each paragraph's information (as in the paragraph headed: *Experts' Reports Must Be Given in Advance*) or as topics whose prominence does not carry through the following paragraph (as in the final heading where the cost of calling an expert is announced and then overshadowed by the prominence given to the judge's authority in deciding who should pay the expert's expenses).

This lack of continuity between hyper–Theme and Theme can be interpreted in terms of the structure of Given and New information. (For a full description of Halliday's interpretation of the relationship between Theme/Rheme and Given/New, see Halliday 1994: 295–302.) Basically, Halliday identifies the unmarked pattern as Theme within Given and New within Rheme. Halliday distinguishes Theme/Rheme structure as "speaker–oriented" and Given/New as "listener–oriented." That is, while the writer chooses Theme as the point of departure of the message, the reader follows the structure of Given/New to find the continuity in the text. From this perspective, the first Theme in each paragraph would in the unmarked case repeat some element of the hyper–Theme as Given, followed by the Rheme as New information. For example, *Cost of Calling Other Party's Expert* (New hyper–Theme) would normally be followed by a Theme functioning as Given (e.g. *The cost ...*). Where the New introduced in the hyper–Theme is followed by New in the first clause Theme, as in Version A, the pattern is marked and thus less speaker–oriented.

As the highlighted topical Themes in Version B below show, this version has a substantially different method of development from that of Version A. Of the 25 clauses analyzed for Theme, 15 have *you* as Theme (interpreting the imperatives *have, serve* and *be* as including the implicit Theme *you*). Thus the nature of the message as being directly concerned with what the reader should know is strongly foregrounded.

Version B begins with the hyper–Theme *What About Expert Witnesses?* The topical Themes that follow – *expert* and *opinion* – elaborate the hyper–Theme and also pick up as Given elements of the hyper–Theme. The text then alternates between *the other side* and *you*, while the interplay of the two roles in the dispute is described.

The second hyper–Theme: *Can I Use a Letter from My Expert Instead of Bringing the Witness to Court* introduces a new topic. Once again, the first Theme *witness* picks up where the hyper–Theme leaves off and develops the general discussion of the circumstances in which an exception can be made. The thematic progression returns to *you*, introducing at the end of each paragraph the possible consequences (*the same rule applies, the Judge decides)* of the processes described.

Thus the thematic structure of Version B is clearly dominated by one topic: *you*. The hyper–Themes strongly predict the series of topics that follow, which follow the unmarked pattern of Given followed by New. As Martin (1992: 437) points out, texts in which the hyper–Themes predict the sequence of clause Themes that follow display greater coherence than those in which the predictions are frustrated by shifting thematic prominence.

Version B: Thematic structure

WHAT ABOUT EXPERT WITNESSES?
Experts are the only witnesses who are allowed to give evidence about their opinions. Sometimes **an opinion** is the only way to prove an important part of your case, such as "Why does the roof leak?"

The other side needs to be prepared to cross–examine your expert or to get another expert opinion. So, if **you** intend to call an expert witness to give opinion evidence, **you** must serve the other side with a summary of the opinion at least 14 days in advance. If **you** don't, **you** can ask the Judge for permission to call the witness anyway, but **you** might not get permission, or **the other side** may succeed in getting a postponement of the trial. If **that** happens, **you** could have to pay the other side's expenses of showing up for the trial.

CAN I USE A LETTER FROM MY EXPERT INSTEAD OF BRINGING THE WITNESS TO COURT?
Normally **a witness** must appear in person, so that **the other side** has a chance to ask questions, but **an exception** is made for expert opinions.

If **you** want to use a letter or a written report, **[you]** have the person prepare a letter stating his or her qualifications, what the opinion is, and the facts that the opinion is based on. Then **[you]** serve a copy of the report or letter on the other party at least 14 days before the court date. If **you** don't, the **same rule** applies as for failing to give a summary of an expert's testimony in advance.

If **you** receive an expert's report from the other side and **you** think it is important that you be allowed to cross–examine the expert, **you** can notify the other party, in writing, at least seven days before the trial, that you require the expert to attend. **[You]** Be careful about this because if the **Judge** decides it was unnecessary, **you** could end up paying the cost of bringing the expert to court.

4.2.2 Cohesive Ties

The textual resources of the linguistic system include a variety of cohesive devices that are responsible for the continuity of a text. As Halliday and Hasan (1976) explain, cohesive ties establish meaning relations between the parts of a text, thus contributing to its overall coherence.

Halliday (1994: 309) organizes the various cohesive devices in English into three categories according to their function: lexical cohesion and reference; ellipsis and substitution; and conjunction.

Lexical Cohesion and Reference

These cohesive ties include elements introduced at one place in the text that serve as a reference point for something that follows. Cohesive devices of this type create "chains" of reference that allow the reader to follow various roles in a text as they interact with one another. The following text, for example, contains three typical reference chains (distinguished by bold text, italics, and underlining).

> *After you subscribe to a list, don't send anything to it until you've been reading it for a week. Trust me, it's been getting along without your insights since it started and it can get along without them for one more week.*

The principal means of creating cohesion among lexical items are:

- repetition: *Buy a car if a car is what you need.*
- lexical co-reference: *Whenever you hit a snag, just look up the* ***problem*** *in the index.*
- pronominal reference: *If John answers, tell* ***him*** *the news.*
- the use of demonstratives: *Include* ***your address****.* ***This*** *will help us contact you.*
- the use of the definite article: *If you have* ***a question****, send* ***the question*** *to us.*
- comparatives (of identity, similarity or contrast): *Would you like the* ***same one or a different one****?*

Ellipsis and Substitution

Ellipsis and substitution are cohesive devices that set up relationships in the wording of a text. These devices create cohesion not through co–reference but by omitting an element or using a substitute as a placeholder to indicate that an element is missing. The cohesion is created by tying the missing element back to an earlier reference.

- ellipsis: *Is that all? No.* [that is not all]
- substitution: *Can you come? I don't think so.* [that I can come]

Conjunction

Conjunctive relations establish causal links between the various messages in a text. As Halliday (1994: 324) explains, conjunctions create bonds of cause and effect between two clauses. The textual resources of English include a wide range of conjunctive devices whose functions include:

- elaboration (apposition, e.g., *in other words*; clarification, *e.g., or rather)*;
- extension (addition, e.g., *moreover*; adversative, e.g., *on the other hand*; variation, e.g., *alternatively)*
- enhancement: (spatio–temporal, e.g., *here, just then, finally*; comparative, e.g., *likewise*; causal–conditional, e.g., *so, in consequence*; and conditionals of three kinds: positive, e.g., *in that case*; negative, e.g., *if not*; and concessive, e.g., *however*.

The cohesive devices used in Version A are limited mainly to repetition and anaphoric reference using the definite article: *an expert/the expert*; *a report/the report*; *a party/the party*. The text contains one comparative reference functioning to specify the difference between the two referents: *a party receiving another party's expert report may serve on the other party ...*

In several cases in Version A, reference chains consist exclusively of repetition which in some cases function in an anti–cohesive manner, as in the sentence:

Instead of calling an expert to give evidence, a party may introduce a report stating opinions of an expert.

Here the cohesive reference would normally use the definite article: *an expert – the expert.* The repetition of the indefinite article suggests that these may be separate referents.

Version A contains no instances of ellipsis or substitution. It includes two conjunctive relations, neither of which strictly qualifies as a textual cohesive conjunction (expressing cause and effect between clause complexes), but functioning rather as structural interdependencies between clauses within a clause complex. These are the sentences:

A party may not call an expert to give evidence of the expert's opinion unless (a) the party serves a summary of the expert's evidence ... or (b) a judge grants permission.

A statement of qualifications in an expert's report is proof that the expert has those qualifications unless there is evidence to the contrary.

In both cases the conjunction is *unless*, indicating a causal–conditional interdependency, and in the first case is followed by *or* which serves to extend the causal–conditional relationship.

Version B also relies heavily on repetition, but contains several instances of reference chains that combine repetition and co–reference, such as: *expert witness – the witness – a witness; the person – an expert – the expert.* Version B includes three instances of pronominal reference:

if that happens

Be careful about this

it was unnecessary

It also includes one instance of cataphoric comparative reference (combined with ellipsis of the nominal group):

the same rule applies as [the rule] for...

Other instances of ellipsis in Version B include: *What about expert witnesses?* where there is ellipsis of subject and verb; and two instances of *If you don't* where everything following the mood element is omitted. Version B also contains a variety of conjunctive ties, functioning both as cohesive devices and to signal clausal interdependencies. These include:

such as – functioning as elaboration.

> *Sometimes an opinion is the only way to prove an important part of your case,* ***such as*** *"Why does the roof leak?"*

Then – functioning as a temporal conjunction linking clauses.

> *If you want to use a letter or a written report, have the person prepare a letter stating his or her qualifications, what the opinion is, and the facts that the opinion is based on.* ***Then*** *serve a copy of the report or letter on the other party at least 14 days before the court date.*

So and *If that happens* – both functioning to signal a causal relationship between clauses; and

the series *but ... or* signaling a clausal interdependency.

> *The other side needs to be prepared to cross–examine your expert or to get another expert opinion.* ***So****, if you intend to call an expert witness to give opinion evidence, you must serve the other side with a summary of the opinion at least 14 days in advance. If you don't, you can ask the Judge for permission to call the witness anyway,* ***but*** *you might not get permission,* ***or*** *the other side may succeed in getting a postponement of the trial.* ***If that happens****, you could have to pay the other side's expenses of showing up for the trial.*

4.2.3 Lexical Density

Lexical density is a measure of the density of information in a text according to how tightly the lexical items are packed into the grammatical structure. For the purposes of this analysis, lexical items can be assumed to be content words as opposed to grammatical items. Halliday (1985b: 63) distinguishes the two classes in terms of whether they belong to open sets or closed sets. Nouns, verbs, adjectives and most adverbs belong to open sets. Grammatical words – e.g., pronouns, articles, modal auxiliaries – belong to closed sets. Lexical items contribute lexical content to a text, while grammatical items establish meaning relationships between lexical items.

Lexical density is not itself a resource for creating textual meaning, but rather an indicator of the way in which the various textual resources have been used to package the lexical information in a text. In a study of register differentiation, Ure (1971) found that the lexical density of a text is a function of its place on a register scale, which she characterized as ranging from "most active" to "most reflective," with spoken language tending towards the former end of the scale and written language tending towards the latter end. Thus lexical density is a measure of how the various text–forming resources create patterns of lexicogrammatical organization that are more or less "written." Depending on the particular lexical items and how they are distributed in the grammatical structure, lexical density may also indicate the amount of effort required by the reader of a text.

The difference in the lexical density of Versions A and B can be analyzed at two levels:

- as the percentage of content words in the text; and
- as the ratio of content words to clauses.

Measured as the percentage of total words in a text, content words account for approximately 50 percent of the words in Version A, compared with 40 percent in Version B. The difference in lexical density between the two texts is most evident, however, in the ratio of lexical items to clauses in each version. This indicates how densely packed the lexical items are in each clause, which Halliday considers the main information unit in a text (1987: 67). As shown in Table 4.4 below, this measure most clearly reveals the difference in lexical density between Versions A and B.

	Lexical Items	Total Words	% Lexical Items	Clauses	Lexical Items per Clause
Version A	86	175	50%	12	7.2:1
Version B	124	311	40%	24	5.2:1

Table 4.5: Lexical Density of Versions A and B

Part of the explanation for this difference in the two texts can be found in the textual features already examined. The different choices of Theme in Versions A and B, for example, lead to different ways of packaging the lexical content, with Version A relying less on grammatical relations and more on dense informational content. The following statements express roughly the same content (the extra content in Version B is enclosed in brackets), however the choice of Theme leads to very different packaging of the information.

if a judge grants permission ... (Version A)

You can ask the Judge for permission [to call the witness anyway] but you might not get permission ... (Version B)

The greater number of cohesive ties in Version B is another difference in textual organization that contributes to its lower lexical density. The use of pronominal reference and ellipsis, for example, replaces lexical items with grammatical ones. For example, the sentence in Version A:

If a judge determines that calling another party's expert was unnecessary

becomes, in Version B:

If the judge decides it was unnecessary.

4.2.4 Situational Analysis: Mode

From the above analysis of the lexicogrammatical features of the two registers, it is possible to describe the specific differences that these features realize for the situational variable *mode*. The most important of these is the different nature and function of language in the two texts. In Version A, the text functions in traditional legal fashion as a statement of rules for the permanent record. The message focuses on what the various parties in a small claims dispute may and may not do and the judge's role in interpreting the regulations. The thematic structure is that of a list, with topics showing little thematic continuity from section to section and introducing marked information units (New–New sequences between hyper–Themes and topics).

The language in Version A is highly edited and thus follows the legal tradition of extreme precision to the point of impeding coherence. There is little use of cohesive ties other than repetition which has in at least some cases the effect of reducing the continuity and cohesion of the text. In summary, the language of Version A functions to record, which entails little attention to communicating the message.

The function of language in Version B, by contrast, is to communicate the message. The text's thematic structure foregrounds the reader's role, thus giving clear prominence to the message: "this is what you, the reader, need to know." The general topic is announced in the headings and is then taken up in the pattern of Themes that follows. The text moves from the reader to the other participants of the text, always returning to the Theme *you*, which anchors the message of the text. The language of Version B is less precise and more cohesive than that of Version A, reflecting the difference in function. It includes instances of ellipsis and pronominal reference which give it greater continuity but which also permit the reader more freedom of interpretation than is usually allowed in legal documents. For example, the anaphoric reference in the clause:

Be careful about this

may be considered too imprecise to stand as law. In summary, the language of Version B functions to communicate, and as such is generally oriented towards the reader.

Even though the medium of the two texts is the same – that is, written – they differ in their degree of "writtenness." Gregory (1988: 311) describes more delicate distinctions of medium, distinguishing, for example, texts that are written to be spoken from texts that are written to be read. From this perspective, Versions A can be described as "written for the record," while Version B, with its lower lexical density and greater use of cohesive devices used in spoken language (e.g., *so, then*) can be described as "written to be read or spoken."

Taken together, these features of mode can be summarized as indicating two different purposes and rhetorical modes. Version A encodes the traditional regulatory purpose of legal language. Its rhetorical mode can be described as expository, of the type traditionally associated with a statement of legal rules. The mode of Version B, on the other hand, resembles much popular communication of the "how to" variety. Its rhetorical mode is thus didactic, functioning to guide the reader through the rules.

Table 4.6 summarizes the differences in mode for the two versions.

Mode: Version A	Mode: Version B
List regulations	Communicate regulations
For permanent record	For public information
Written for record	Written to be read/spoken
Expository	"How–to"
Regulatory	Didactic

Table 4.6: Summary of Differences in Mode

4.3 Summary

In this chapter, Halliday's functional grammar was applied to two texts in different registers which ostensibly "say the same thing." Both texts are plain language versions of the legal regulations regarding the use of expert witnesses in small claims disputes. The purpose of the analysis was to examine how the lexicogrammatical features of the two registers realize different contexts of situation – that is, different configurations of field, tenor and mode – and to identify what those differences are.

The texts chosen are substantially the same in field; that is, they have the same topic and reflect the same social activity. Functionally, they express very similar ideational content. Their different registers, according to Halliday's theory, must therefore realize different settings in the situational variables of tenor and mode.

In Section 4.1, Halliday's functional grammar was applied to the two texts in order to identify differences in the lexicogrammatical features realizing tenor. These differences in register were then related to differences in the situational context of the two texts. Section 4.2 followed the same procedure for the analysis of lexicogrammatical features realizing mode. From these analyses, and the description of the field of the two texts, the full context of situation of each version can be summarized as shown in Table 4.7 below.

	Version A	Version B
Field	Small claims disputes Provincial regulations Government informing the public	Small claims disputes Provincial regulations Government informing the public
Tenor	Statement of information Monologue Institutional authority addressing unenumerated audience. No presence of writer or reader Objective assessment of obligation Affect: Neutral Traditional 3rd party relationship between government and public	Instruction in procedure Formatted as dialogue Institutional authority giving guidance to reader. Overt presence of both writer and reader Objective/subjective assessment of obligation, probability, usuality Affect: helpful/guiding Non–traditional relationship between government and public
Mode	Record regulations For permanent record Written for record Regulatory Expository	Communicate regulations For public information Written to be read/spoken "How–to" Didactic

Table 4.7: Summary of Situational Analysis – Versions A and B

Chapter 5
Summary and Conclusions

5.1 Discussion

The purpose of applying Halliday's register model to the two small claims texts was both to demonstrate how linguistic features of a text – the particular pattern of wording of register – can be predicted from the situational context, and to examine what this relationship suggests for the rewriting of texts in plain language.

In Halliday's model, a shift in register represents a shift in the nature of the interaction (the interpersonal meaning), in the experience being represented (the ideational meaning) or in the message (the textual meaning) – or in a combination of these. Each situation predicts a certain range of choices, and each of these choices precludes other choices. This is the paradigmatic nature of language. The small claims texts, both plain language versions of the former Small Claims Court Act, have the same ideational content, but are written in different registers. Thus it was assumed that the two registers realized differences in the setting of tenor and mode in the two situations. These functional differences were shown to explain a number of linguistic features in the two texts.

Version A is an official statement of the rules; as such, it reflects the traditional tenor of official documents. It is a non–exchange; the writer is speaking on behalf of the state's authority, which in our society is represented in the third person, and addressing an unnamed audience — that is, everyone to whom the state's authority applies. The situation thus predicts that in the text neither writer nor reader will be represented. Accordingly, in Version A we find:

- no first or second person pronouns
- no attitudinal modifiers
- no subjective expressions of modality
- no direct questions or direct imperatives
- no signs of involvement through expressions of affect.

As a text, the function of Version A is to "lay down the law" in the form of a written record. Thus, the message that is foregrounded by thematic focus is each party's rights and obligations under the law, and the authority of the judge in enforcing them. The text is organized with attention to its function as a record and, as a consequence, with little attention to its function as communication. The wording is precise and neutral, reflecting its regulatory rhetorical function.

Version B has a markedly different function. It is meant to help the reader understand the act. The text is shaped as an exchange, so both the writer and reader are present in the text. The writer intrudes in the text in the role of teacher, guiding the reader through the message, suggesting what he or she should pay attention to. The message, as pointed out earlier, is "You should know this." As a text, its function is to communicate with the reader and so its organization is "friendlier." The focus is on the reader rather than on the information, thus the text is looser, has more thematic continuity and is more cohesive, reflecting its purpose as a guide.

In summary, the analysis shows that the two texts function so that they say different things; they are not two ways of saying the same thing. Version B complements but does not equal Version A, nor can it replace Version A, since it is not the statement of rules. Version B comes closer to the ideal of plain language, but it does not fulfill the function of Version A. Thus the different situational contexts determine different functions which are realized by different wordings.

The text analysis demonstrates the three central premises of Halliday's model. First, it shows that all language is in some register because all language is taking place in some situational context. Register is not, as is sometimes assumed, a special case of language. As the two small claims texts show, rewriting the text is not a matter of moving from a specialized register to a standard variety. The register that results from the rewriting embodies the change in the way language is being used.

The analysis also supports Halliday's interpretation of registers as being more or less open as a consequence of restrictions in their situational variables. The tenor of Version A is dictated by convention; the range of possible interpersonal functions is constrained by the nature of the relationships between the legal system and the public. As demonstrated, the function of an official statement of rules precludes certain choices of mood (imperative), modality (subjective) and person (first and second person). The function of Version B, in contrast, allows a wider range of interpersonal expressions, including a range of features expressing the presence of reader and writer.

Finally, the analysis supports Halliday's proposition that language is probabilistic. The differences in form of the two texts were shown not to be accidental; given the differences in situational context, it was predictable that Version B would be plainer than Version A. As mentioned at the beginning of this thesis, the probabilistic relationship between form and context is one of the keys language users rely on to make sense of texts.

In summary, the analysis has demonstrated an approach to linguistic analysis that both describes and explains the relationship between function and form. The patterns of wording associated with registers are the natural outcome of the systemic nature of language. They represent a kind of "opportunity cost" in language: meanings, and the choices in the linguistic system they entail, preclude other meanings. To say things differently means saying different things.

5.2 Implications for Plain Language Practice

The second purpose of the text analysis was to see what a register analysis reveals about plain language. This thesis has argued that an approach based on functional variation offers a useful theoretical basis for examining language that is clearly defined by its use in society. Shifting registers, it has been shown, entails a change in function as well as form. This conclusion challenges two central assumptions of plain language practice and suggests the need for a functional approach.

The first is the assumption that there is a single "unmarked" variety of language, a standard variety that can be used in all situations and can be understood by everyone. As described earlier, this is variously referred to as "everyday language," "the common speech," and "clear and simple language." Both of the small claims texts were written as plain language, but as shown in the text analysis, they are in very different registers, reflecting their different functions. They are also unequal in their degree of plainness.

From a register perspective, a better approach to rewriting official documents would acknowledge that the form of a document may be constrained by its function and to look for solutions that incorporate that understanding. One such solution is the publication of parallel documents – one stating the rules and one explaining them, for example – as in the small claims court texts. Others involve using visual aids to help readers make their way through complex text. Research has shown that readability can be improved in a number of non–linguistic ways: for example, by using good document design methods, incorporating graphics and clearly identifying the structure of the text through the use of headings. Content can also be explained outside the main text through various means of annotation, and by using explanatory side bars and examples (in effect, changing registers within the document).

Of particular importance to plain language practice is the challenge that register theory presents to the assumption that any difficult text can be improved by rewriting — the assumption that the problem is in the words alone. The reality of the interdependence of the meaning and the wording of a text is, of course, evident in the notorious difficulty in changing the words of documents that have legal force. To develop a first draft of a plain language will, for example, required six months of revisions and testing (Continuing Legal Education Society 1993: 1). Version A of the small claims text, while described as "written for non–lawyers" is still very much the language of a faceless authority addressing a faceless audience. This is the nature of the relationship between government and the public in our society. Changing the tenor of these types of exchange would mean altering the structure of the state's authority. It is easy to see that this is not a choice that is available to the individual drafter of official documents.

Halliday's theory predicts that the possibility of altering the situational configuration of field, tenor or mode in order to shift to a more open register will be constrained by the particular linguistic situation. Clearly, shifting registers is not a problem in many cases of plain language writing. The language of many government communications has changed registers dramatically over the past few decades. Both versions of the small claims texts are examples of relatively new registers for government regulations. However, the reality of situational constraints on the degree of register shift is evident in at least two of the problems associated with complexity of text identified in Chapter 2.

The first is the resistance of certain register features, generally identified as markers of social prestige, to rewriting. As the study by Brown and Herndl (1986) found, writers consistently increased their use of nominalizations when they were writing for upper management even when they were asked not to use nominalizations. Seen from the perspective of register shift, this is a situational constraint on rewriting. Denominalizing is likely to entail a change in tenor or mode. The following sentence, for example:

> *Implementation of this program depends on acceptance of our budgetary calculations.*

may become:

> *We have calculated how much money we need and if we receive our budget we may be able to implement this program*

or, it may be rewritten as:

> *The people who give us our money will let us know whether they accept our budget as we have calculated it and then we will know whether we can implement this program.*

In either case (and the sentence could be reworded in many ways), the topical theme is different, as are the speech roles, the participants and processes and the textual organization. It makes sense that writers, especially those writing for their seniors, find it difficult to express new interpersonal and textual meaning, especially where it involves identifying agency.

The reality of situational constraint on register shift is also evident in the lack of success in plain language rewriting. As described in Chapter 1, much plain language practice does not result in improvement and in some cases appears to increase the difficulty readers have in understanding a text. From a register perspective, situational constraints may mean that rewriting is constrained to permit as little change in the meaning as possible. Thus, for example, passives may be removed from a text but agency may still not be expressed. For example, the sentence:

> *Candidates will be selected after examination on the basis of grades.*

may be replaced with the sentence

Selection proceeds on the basis of grades.

The passive has been removed (according to rule), but the tenor constraint still obscures agency. Depending on what precedes this sentence, the rewording may make the sentence more complex. This appears to be what Charrow (1979: 4–5) is referring to when she points out that eliminating features of surface complexity can drive the complexity elsewhere.

Similarly, the attempt to go against mode constraints can lead to a disruption in textual organization. This appears to be one of the problems in the rewritten version of a lease renewal studied by Masson and Waldron (in press) as described in Chapter 1. An analysis of the text reveals that the thematic organization is discontinuous, with no message consistently foregrounded. In removing all the passives, the rewriting has disrupted the theme–rheme continuity, with the effect that new information often follows new, rather than conforming to the unmarked pattern of given followed by new.

The register model suggests that a better approach is to examine what is difficult about a text not from the point of view of style or individual features, but from the point of view of context. As demonstrated in Chapter 4, this requires a two–way analysis, examining linguistic features in order to make a situational analysis and then using the situational analysis to identify the source of the complexity. At a minimum, writers can look at a text in terms of field, tenor and mode to consider what constraints may be present. They might ask, for example:

- What is the social activity? How is it revealed in the vocabulary? Who are the participants? Are they concrete (people, things) or abstract (ideas, concepts). How common is the experience being conveyed?
- What is the nature of the text as an exchange? What is its speech function: to state information, to explain, to guide, to make suggestions? How much interactivity is

there between writer and reader? How much social distance? What are the roles and relationships? Can they be changed?

- What role is language playing: to communicate, to persuade, to regulate? What is the focus of the message? How dense or loose is the information packaged? Is the text meant to be read or stored for reference?

5.3 Conclusion

This thesis set out to demonstrate the usefulness of a register perspective in the practice of rewriting official documents in plain language. Specifically, it has argued that linguistic form is a function of situational context; rewriting text is equivalent to shifting registers – to using language in a different way to say different things. This theory was demonstrated by the text analysis in Chapter 4.

The thesis suggests that a number of assumptions of plain language advocates should be re–examined from a functional perspective. Putting the language of government and the legal system into "the language of everyday life" has been shown to reflect a view of language as being a sort of accidental or arbitrary system. It supposes that people select, well or poorly, from the language to express their meaning – that the words, in Halliday's terms "are a conduit through which meaning is poured." From a register perspective, situations precede text; the words – whether "gobbledygook" or plain – are a function of the situation.

In examining this issue, the thesis has touched on a number of specific problems and questions related to the relationship between context and form that suggest fruitful areas of linguistic research. The most obvious area for further research is register analysis of texts that have been tested for public comprehensibility. Studies such as those mentioned in Chapters 1 and 2 have generally assumed conventional definitions of complexity as a property of linguistic form. As was pointed out in reviewing those studies, results have been inconclusive, largely because they have not taken the situational context into consideration.

A second area of research suggested by this thesis is to define more precisely the scale of an open/restricted continuum of register and to tie location on the continuum to various situational parameters. Differences in tenor, for example, seem to define an interactive/active continuum. As Biber (1994:39–41) suggests, identifying clear parameters for each situational variable will allow a more accurate comparison of the similarities and differences between registers and a more accurate description of which forms are probable in which situations.

A third area of research suggested by this study is the relationship between dialect, social dialect and register. Recent sociolinguistic research has begun to refine the definitions of the various types of language variation (Ferguson 1994: 15–17). Halliday (Halliday and Hasan 1985b: 42) points out that there is a close interconnection between dialect and register: "different social groups, speaking different dialects, engage in different kinds of activity, with the consequence that different registers become associated with different dialects." Changes within these different types of variation influence each other. In the language of government and the legal system, there are clearly changes that correspond to dialectal shift; replacing archaic forms of address for modern ones, for example. Other forms, such as markers of social identification, may indicate social dialect rather than register distinctions. One possibility that emerges from the study here is that the features easiest to change – for example, lexical items such as *in the event* for *if*, or *save* for *except*, may be differences in social dialect – that is they appear to have no function. Passive constructions, on the other hand, are clearly functional and thus subject to situational constraints.

Perhaps most of all, this study suggests the need for greater attention within linguistics to the social function of language. If the language of lawyers and bureaucrats is incomprehensible to most people, it indicates a world of meaning far removed from everyday life. At least one of the ways of exploring this social gap is through the study of the patterns of words in which that meaning is hidden.

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