

Chapter 8: System

8.1 SYSTEMS

Systems are lists of choices which are available in the grammar of a language. A system is a list of meanings between which it is possible to choose. They are meanings between which the grammar of a language is able to distinguish. The items in a system are, then, distinct and distinguishable meanings. The technical name for these items is the *terms* in the system. For instance, in English there is systems of:

1. *Number* with the choice between *singular* and *plural*.
2. *Person* with the choice between *first*, *second* and *third*.
3. *Gender* with the choice between *masculine*, *feminine* and *neuter*.
4. *Polarity* with the choice between *positive* and *negative*.
5. *Tense* with the choice between *past*, *present* and *future*.
6. *Mood* with the choice between *declarative*, *interrogative* and *imperative*.
7. *Finiteness* with the choice between *finite* and *non-finite*.

Finite means ‘being limited in respect of such properties as person and number’, while *non-finite* means ‘not being limited in respect of such properties as person and number’. The choice between finite and non-finite applies to verbal groups. A finite verbal group has its person and number specified in its own clause. For example, the verbal groups of (*/*) *am*, (*he*) *sees* and (*they*) *went* are all finite. A non-finite verbal group has its person and number left vague; there is nothing in its own form to specify person or number. For example, the verbal groups of *having finished (the course)*, *to pass (the exam)* and *(if) prevented* are all non-finite.

Although distinct, the terms of a particular system belong to the same area of meaning. Singular and plural are distinct but they both belong to number, so they belong to the same system. Past, present and future are distinct but they all belong to time. While singular and past do not have an area of meaning in common, so they belong to different systems.

8.2 THE ESSENTIAL PROPERTIES OF SYSTEMS

Systems have three essential characteristics:

(i) The terms in a system are mutually exclusive. The selection of one of the terms excludes the selection of any of the others. For instance, the two terms in the system of number are mutually exclusive. If something is singular, it cannot at the same time be plural. The selection of the singular term from the system excludes the selection of the plural term.

(ii) A system is finite. It is possible to fix a limit for a system and to say that it consists of a certain countable number of terms, no more, no less. The limit is set in such a way that all the terms which are mutually exclusive with each other are included in the system, while any terms not mutually exclusive with those in the system are excluded from the system. The system of polarity is finite. It consists of the two terms negative and positive and no others. The term negative is the only term which is mutually exclusive with the term positive.

(iii) The meaning of each term in a system depends on the meaning of the other terms in the system. If the meaning of one of the terms in a system is changed, the meaning of other terms in the system will also change. If a term is added to a system or subtracted from a system, the meaning of other terms in the system will change.

8.3 THE ENTRY CONDITIONS FOR SYSTEMS

As well as having a common area of meaning, the terms in a system must have a common grammatical environment. Not only must the terms contrast with each other in a common framework of meaning; they must

be seen to contrast with each other in a common framework provided by the more surface aspects of grammar. For each system there is a particular set of circumstances in which the terms of the system, all the terms of the system, are available as choices. This particular set of circumstances must apply before it is possible to make a choice between the terms of the system. Once the particular set of circumstances does apply then it is not only possible to make a choice between the terms of the system, it is in fact obligatory. These circumstances are known as the *entry conditions* for the system.

1. The first stage in specifying the entry conditions of a system is to state the rank of unit to which the system is applicable. For instance, in English the system of mood is applicable to the clause. Whenever a new clause occurs, a new choice from the system of mood is made. Any stretch of language which is not a clause is unable to make a choice from the mood system. In the sentence

Ex. 8.1 *Shut the window or the house will be freezing by the evening*

The clause *Shut the window* has chosen the imperative term from the system. The clause *or the house will be freezing by the evening* is a new clause quite separate from the earlier one and it has therefore made a new and quite separate choice from the system of mood. This second clause has in fact chosen the declarative term. Stretches of language such as *the window* and *by the evening* cannot make choices from the mood system as they are not clauses.

2. The system is applicable only to clauses which are acting as the α elements of sentences. In the sentence

Ex. 8.2 *Shut the window before you go out or the house will be freezing when we come home*

The two α clauses have chosen respectively the imperative and the declarative, but the two β clauses *before you go out* and *when we come home* have made no choice from the system of mood.

3. In English, it is only possible to make a choice from the system of mood if finite has been chosen in preference to non-finite from the system of finiteness. In the clauses

Ex. 8.3 *Theodore cut me this morning at the supermarket*

Ex. 8.4 *Have you seen Peter anywhere?*

Ex. 8.5 *Close the doors, please*

The term finite has been chosen by the verbal groups and therefore all three clauses have been able to select a term from the mood system, their choices being declarative, interrogative and imperative respectively. However, in the clauses

Ex. 8.6 *Turning to the next point*

Ex. 8.7 *To finish the task*

Ex. 8.8 *When completed*

The verbal groups have chosen the term non-finite and therefore the clauses have not been able to choose from the system of mood.

In sum, the terms in a system are meanings; they are meanings between which the grammar of a language makes it possible to choose; they contrast with each other within the framework of a common area of meaning and they contrast with each other within the framework of a common grammatical environment; the mutually exclusive characteristic of a system enables a boundary to be set for the meaning of each term; the finite characteristic of a system enables a boundary to be set for the common area of meaning. By arranging meanings in systems, we are able to pinpoint more precisely each particular meaning and we are able to show relationships between meanings within the semantic structure of a language.