

# **Systemic Functional Grammar**

A Theory about the Nature and Structure of Language

22. July 2008

Verena Stein

# Systemic Functional Grammar

**Part I**    motivation for a systemic functional understanding of language

**Part II**    systemic functional theory of grammar

**Part III**    systemic functional grammar in contrast to construction grammar

# Systemic Functional Grammar

**Part I** motivation for a systemic functional understanding of language

**Part II** systemic functional theory of grammar

**Part III** systemic functional grammar in contrast to construction grammar

## two views of language

as a set of rules

as a resource

## two views of language

*basic unit*      *sentence*      *linguistic*  
*studied*      *disciplines\**  
*in...*      *studied...*

### as a set of rules

sentence

isolation

seperately

### as a resource

rhetoric

its  
discourse  
environment

in a holistic  
model

\*i.e. grammar, semantics, pragmatics, phonetics, phonology

## four basic assumptions

- (i) Language use is functional.
- (ii) The function of language is to create meaning.
- (iii) These meanings are determined by the context in which they are exchanged.
- (iv) Language use is a semiotic process that is based on choices.

## system = point of choice

systemic option (term)	examples from newspaper headlines
active voice	<i>PC shot boy from 9 inches.</i>
passive voice	<i>Boy shot from 9 inches.</i>

## system = point of choice

systemic option (term)	examples from newspaper headlines
active voice	<b>indicates responsibility of the agent</b>
passive voice	<i>Boy shot from 9 inches.</i>

## system = point of choice

systemic option (term)	examples from newspaper headlines
active voice	<i>PC shot boy from 9 inches.</i>
passive voice	<i>Boy shot from 9 inches.</i>

## system = point of choice

systemic option (term)	examples from newspaper headlines
active voice	<i>PC shot boy from 9 inches.</i>
passive voice	<b>allows deletion of the agent, focuses attention on patient</b>

## system = point of choice

there is a **choice** even though the active and the passive voice have the same propositional meaning and only differ in syntactic ordering

this **availability of choices** indicates that different choices are associated with different viewpoints and unlikely to be chosen arbitrarily

# system = point of choice

entry condition	system name	terms
clause	VOICE	active passive

## **system = point of choice**

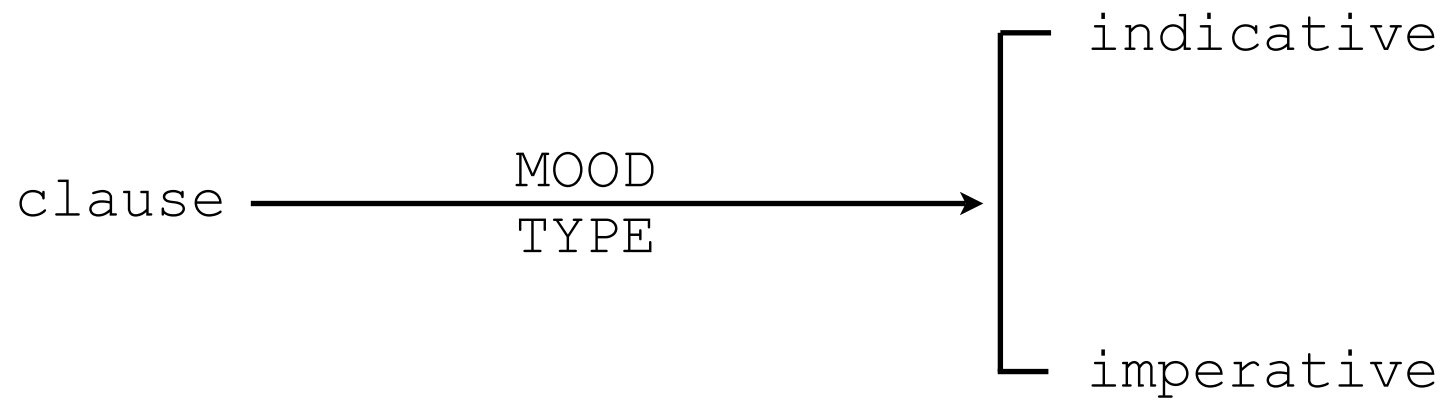
Can you think of a basic system that would include the following two sentences?

1. Who came in from the cold?
2. You come in from the cold!

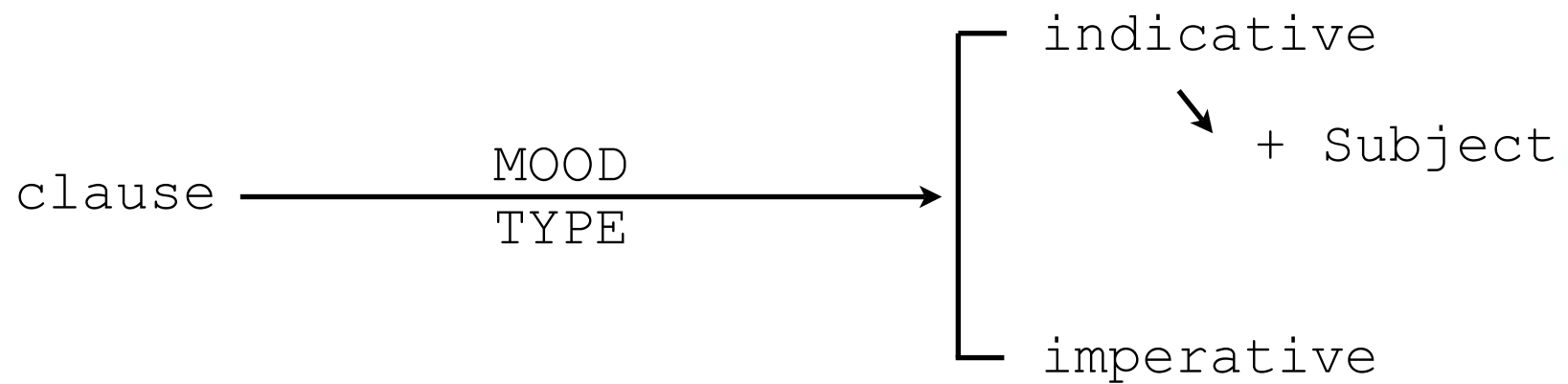
## system = point of choice

systemic option (term)	example sentences
indicative	<i>Who came in from the cold?</i>
imperative	<i>You come in from the cold!</i>

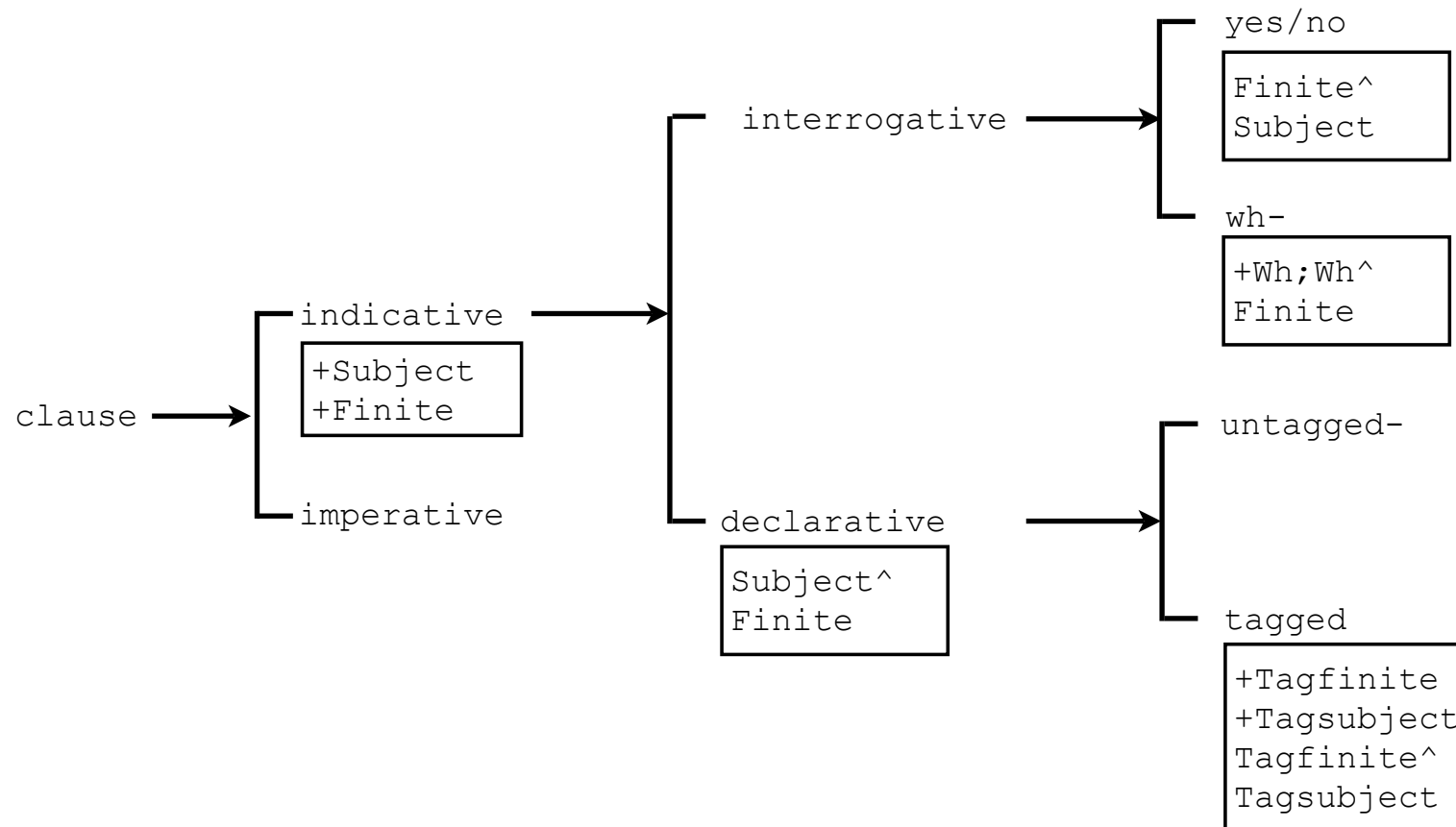
system = point of choice



# a system with associated realisation statement



# fragment of a system network diagram



# Systemic Functional Grammar

**Part I** motivation for a systemic functional understanding of language

**Part II** systemic functional theory of grammar

**Part III** systemic functional grammar in contrast to construction grammar

# systemic functional theory of grammar

the clause

below, above, around, beyond the clause

# systemic functional theory of grammar

## the clause

**metafunctions:** different modes of meaning  
construed by the grammar

## below, above, around, beyond the clause

**below:** groups and phrases

**above:** the clause complex

**around:** cohesion and discourse

**beyond:** metaphors

# systemic functional theory of grammar

## the clause

**metafunctions:** different modes of meaning  
construed by the grammar

## below, above, around, beyond the clause

**below:** groups and phrases

**above:** the clause complex

**around:** cohesion and discourse

**beyond:** metaphors

## three metafunctions

- (i) **ideational**: represent the world
- (ii) **interpersonal**: social relationships
- (iii) **textual**: binding linguistic elements together

## metafunctions: an example

simultaneous metafunctions  
in the structure of the clause

metafunction	system	<i>In the open glade</i>	<i>the wild rabbits</i>	<i>danced</i>	<i>with their shadows.</i>
--------------	--------	--------------------------	-------------------------	---------------	----------------------------

## metafunctions: an example

simultaneous metafunctions  
in the structure of the clause

metafunction	system	<i>In the open glade</i>	<i>the wild rabbits</i>	<i>danced</i>	<i>with their shadows.</i>
<b>ideational</b>	TRANSITIVITY	location	actor	process	accompaniment

# metafunctions: an example

simultaneous metafunctions  
in the structure of the clause

metafunction	system	<i>In the open glade</i>	<i>the wild rabbits</i>	<i>danced</i>	<i>with their shadows.</i>
<b>ideational</b>	TRANSITIVITY	location	actor	process	accompaniment
<b>interpersonal</b>	MOOD	adjunct	subject	finite/ predicator	adjunct

# metafunctions: an example

simultaneous metafunctions  
in the structure of the clause

metafunction	system	<i>In the open glade</i>	<i>the wild rabbits</i>	<i>danced</i>	<i>with their shadows.</i>
<b>ideational</b>	TRANSITIVITY	location	actor	process	accompaniment
<b>interpersonal</b>	MOOD	adjunct	subject	finite/ predicator	adjunct
<b>textual</b>	THEME	theme	rheme		

## dimensions of lexicogrammatical space

**metafunctions:** different modes of meaning construed by the grammar

**rank:** different sizes of the grammatical units (layers of constituency)

**delicacy:** ordering of the systems from the most general to the most specific ones

# rank-based constituency

clause

group

word

morpheme

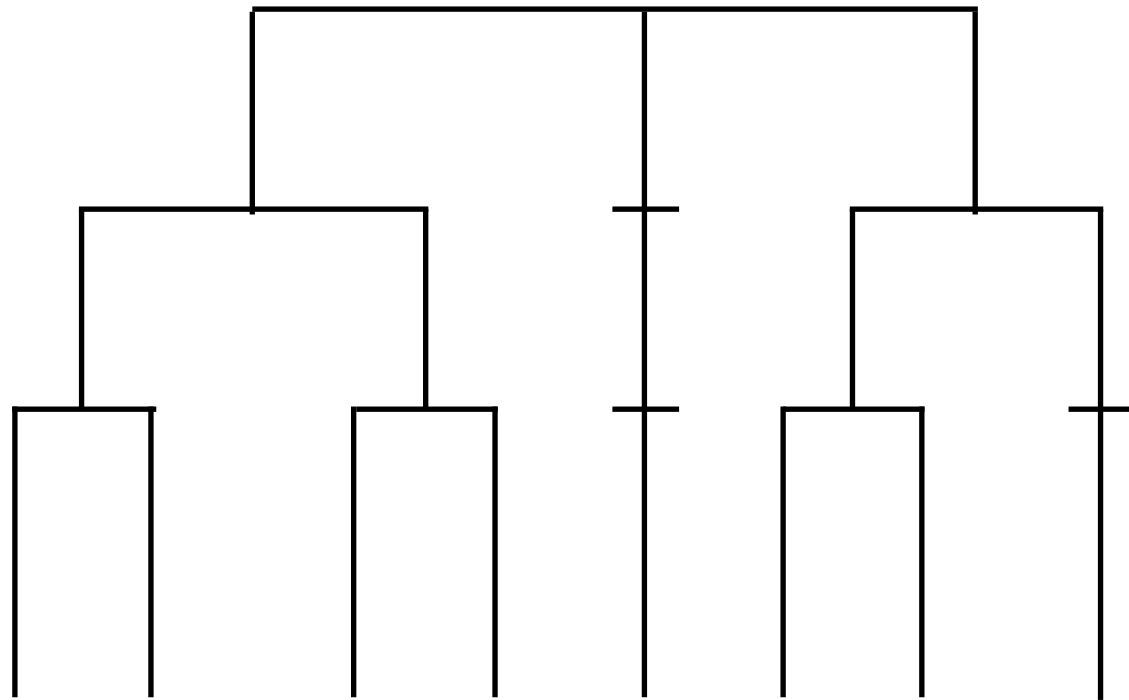
new+born

calv+es

are

eas+y

prey

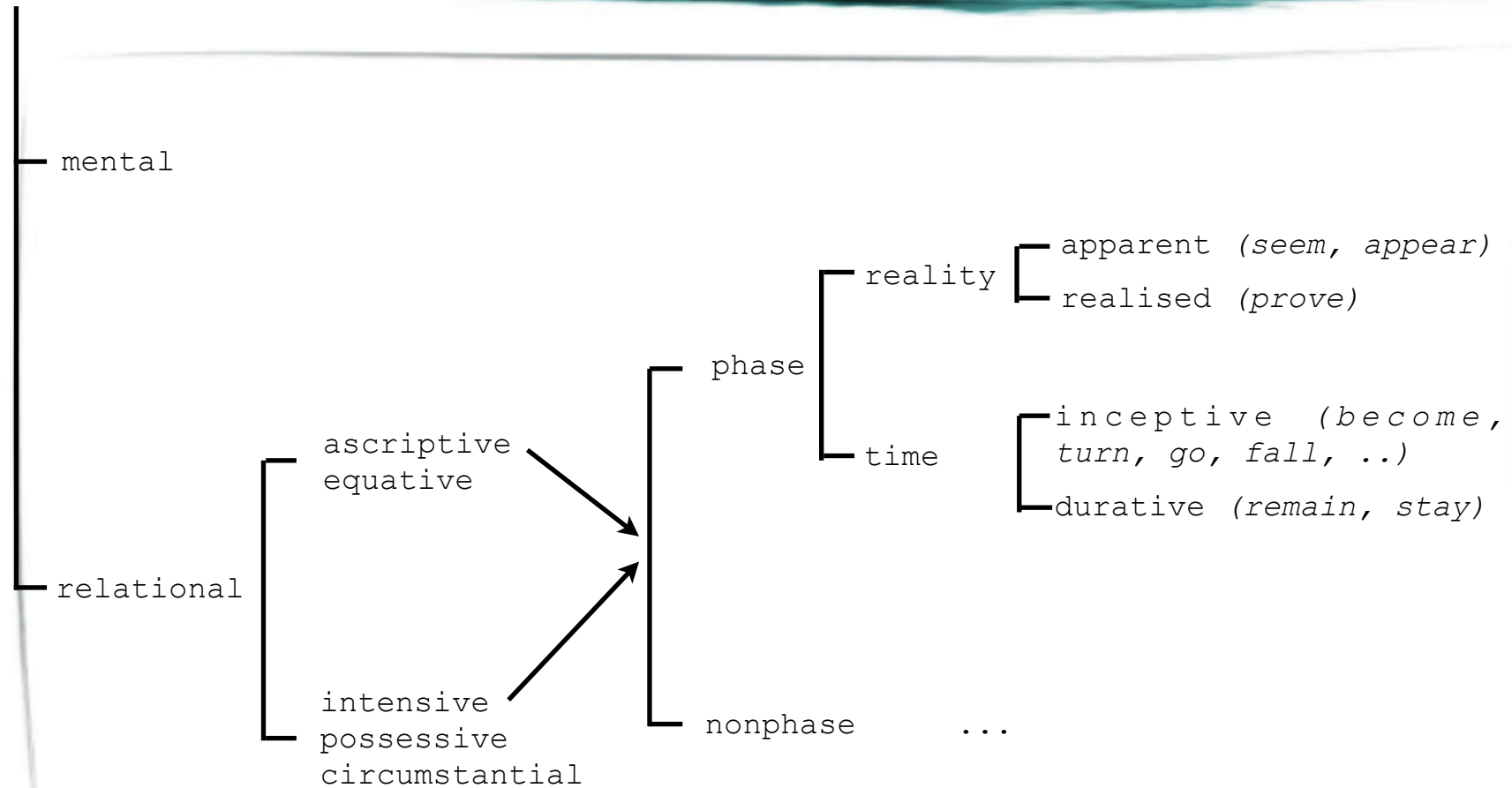


**delicacy**

**general principle  
for organising lexicogrammar**

- ordering of systemic options and their realisation statements
- relates the two parts of lexicogrammar, lexis and grammar

# towards lexical delicacy



**(in intensive ascriptive relational clauses)**

# systemic functional theory of grammar

## the clause

**metafunctions:** different modes of meaning  
construed by the grammar

## below, above, around, beyond the clause

**below:** groups and phrases

**above:** the clause complex

**around:** cohesion and discourse

**beyond:** metaphors

# systemic functional theory of grammar

## the clause

**metafunctions:** different modes of meaning  
construed by the grammar

## below, above, around, beyond the clause

**below:** groups and phrases

**above:** the clause complex

**around:** cohesion and discourse

**beyond:** metaphors

## below the clause: groups and phrases

**English clause:** combination of three different structures deriving from three distinct components (i.e. the three metafunctions)

**group:** combination of words built up on the basis of a particular logical relation

**example:** nominal groups serve as subject or complement

Describing a sentence as a construction of words is like describing a house as a construction of bricks. *Groups* allow to recognise the walls and the rooms as intermediate units.

# below the clause: groups and phrases

## groups and phrase classes in relation to clause function

		modal structure	experiential structure
groups	nominal	Vocative	-
		Subject, Complement	participant role
	verbal	Finite + Predicator	Process
	adverbial	Adjunct (circumstantial)	circumstance role
		Adjunct (modal)	-
conjunction	Adjunct (textual)	-	
phrases	prepositional	Adjunct (circumstantial)	circumstance role
		Adjunct (modal)	-
		Adjunct (textual)	-

## above the clause: the clause complex

**clause complexes:** how clauses are linked to one another by means of some logico-semantic relation

**clause complex**

**representing a sequence in a narrative episode:**

In pain, Kukul pulled out the arrow

**and** [Ø: he] headed for the river

[Ø: in order for him] **to** wash his wound

clauses are related structurally by the grammar

## above the clause: the clause complex

**clause complexes:** how clauses are linked to one another by means of some logico-semantic relation

**clause complex**

**representing a sequence in a narrative episode:**

In pain, Kukul pulled out the arrow

**and** [Ø: he] headed for the river

[Ø: in order for him] **to** wash his wound

clauses are related structurally by the grammar

first link: structural conjunction *and*

second link: the perfective *to wash*

## around the clause: cohesion and discourse

The **organisation of text** is semantic rather than formal. We want to think of text dynamically, as an ongoing process of meaning. We want to characterise text by reference to the system as the selection of systemic options unfolding through time.

Selections are made clause by clause or group/phrase by group/phrase. **Cohesion and Discourse** allows to analyse patterns of these selections as the text unfolds.

## beyond the clause: metaphors

A text is a unit of meaning.

How does this semantic unit relate to the units and unit complexes of grammar?

### non-metaphorical

<i>Mary</i>	<i>saw</i>	<i>something wonderful</i>
participant: senser	process: mental: perceptive	participant: phenomenon

### metaphorical

<i>A wonderful sight</i>	<i>met</i>	<i>Mary's eyes</i>
participant: actor	process: material	participant: actor

# Systemic Functional Grammar

**Part I** motivation for a systemic functional understanding of language

**Part II** systemic functional theory of grammar

**Part III** systemic functional grammar in contrast to construction grammar

# constructions

name	meaning	form	example
ditransitive	X causes Y to receive Z	Subj V Obj1 Obj2	<i>He gave Mary a pencil. I faxed you a letter.</i>

**ditransitive [agt, rec, theme]**

argument  
structure



**ditransitive CAUSE-RECEIVE**

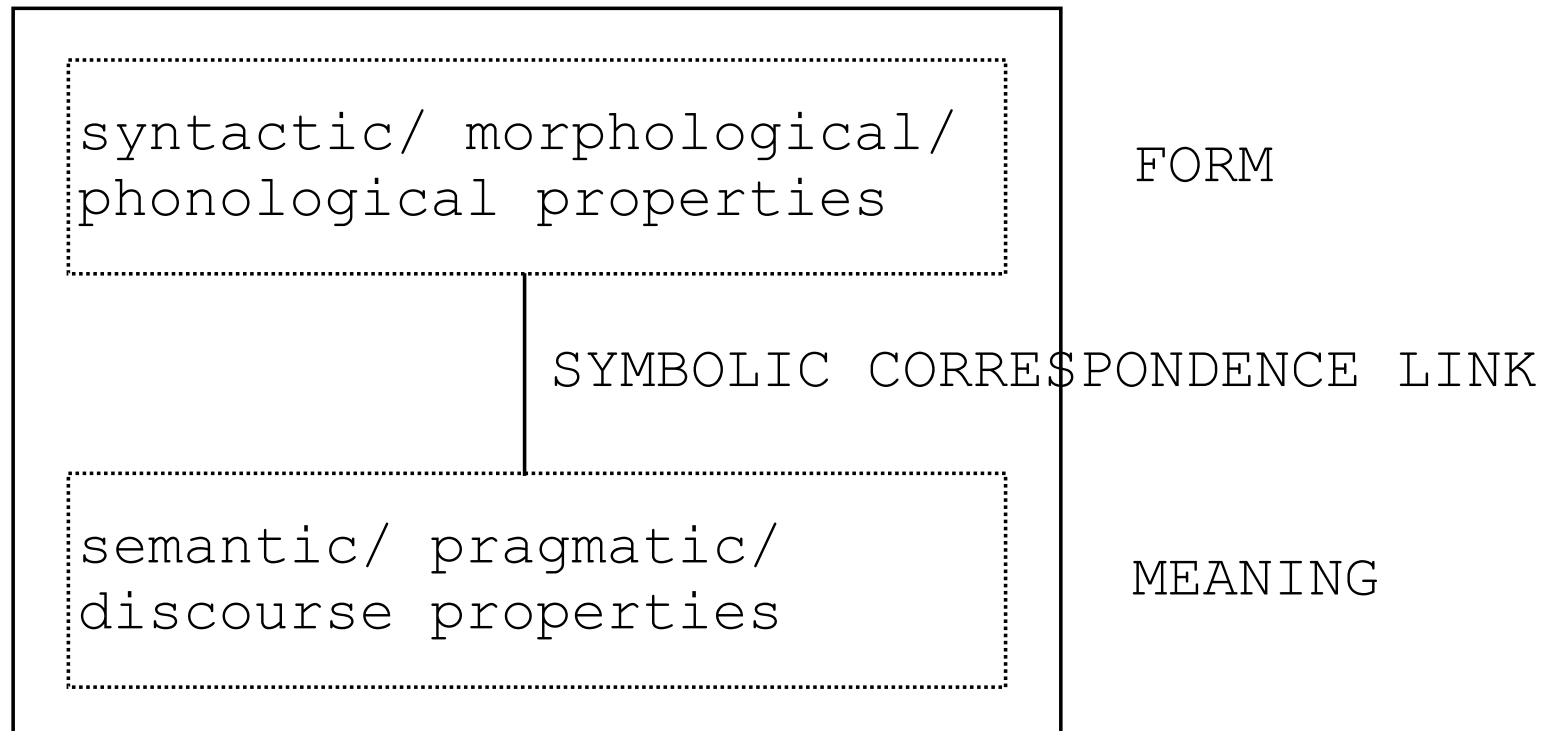
prototype  
(center)

## constructions

- ▶ meaning is derived from a combination of argument structure and verb
- ▶ each argument structure has a specific form and meaning
- ▶ any linguistic pattern iff some aspect of form or function is not predictable from component parts or other constructions
- ▶ vary in size and complexity

## constructions

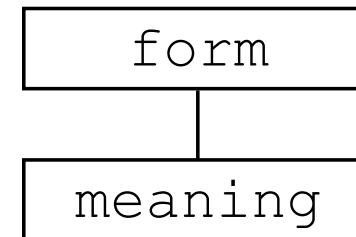
all grammatical knowledge is represented  
as a form/meaning pair



# componential vs. construction grammar

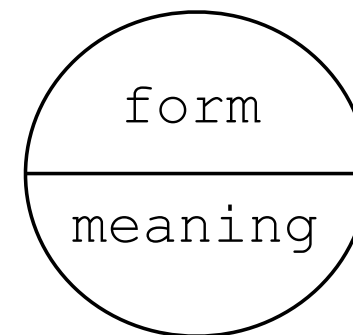
## 1. componential (generative)

form and meaning  
→ independent components



## 2. constructionist (cognitive)

form and meaning  
→ symbolic unit



## systemic functional vs. construction grammar

- ▶ both theories are usage-based models that account for language as a whole
- ▶ they both assume that form and meaning cannot be considered separate phenomena
- ▶ they both significantly differ from componential grammar theories because of that

## systemic functional vs. construction grammar

**Construction Grammar** looks at language entirely in terms of form/meaning pairs. As soon as a linguistic pattern has a different meaning it is considered a form/meaning pair regardless of its linguistic level. Constituency is thus largely ignored.

**Systemic Functional Grammar** also looks at language in terms of form and meaning but pays very close attention to the linguistic level at which the analysis takes place. It then integrates sub-analyses into a semiotic system.