

Systemic Functional Linguistics and the Arabic MT Learner: An Analytical Study

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Abstract

This study critically examines the application of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) to the analysis of Arabic language, discourse, and pedagogy in earlier research. Previous research has shown that Arabic can be analyzed as a meaning-oriented linguistic system organized around ideational, interpersonal and textual metafunctions, with necessary adaptations to account for its typological features (Bardi, 2008; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004). Research on Arabic discourse has further linked SFL to the analysis of Theme-Rheme organization, register variation and textual meaning across a range of genres, including religious, media, and academic texts (Alamiri, 2018, 2020; Aziz, 1988; Potter, 2016). This review synthesizes research on pedagogical applications of SFL, particularly genre-based pedagogy with applications in English-Arabic translation education in sight. Analyses indicate that explicit, meaning-focused instruction grounded in SFL can enhance learners' understanding of how texts construct meaning and can lead to improved outcomes and literacy in translation contexts (Alshalan & Alyousef, 2025; Alshalan & Alyousef, 2020; Feez, 2002; Rose & Martin, 2012). However, despite extensive descriptive and pedagogical research, relatively little work has integrated systemic functional description of Arabic with pedagogical practices in Arabic-medium language education. This review therefore, highlights the need for further research that connects SFL theory with teaching practices that make genre, register, and metafunctions explicit for Arabic-speaking learners.

INTRODUCTION

Systemic functional linguistics (SFL) has had a profound influence on discourse analysis, language education, and genre-based pedagogy, most notably through the development of the Sydney School. Within applied linguistics, genre is a central concept because it explains how texts operate on meaningful social actions, not only how sentences are formed. Further, genre explains how texts operate in real social contexts, rather than focusing only on sentence-level structure. The term *genre*, originally derived from French, refers to categories of spoken or written texts that share common patterns of form and meaning and that emerge in response to recurring social situations (Bawarshi & Reiff, 2010; Hyon, 2018; Ryan, 2022; Rahman et al., 2024). As a result, the genre theory has become a key area of inquiry across applied linguistics, discourse studies, composition, and education (Bawarshi & Reiff, 2010; Bhatia, 2014; Swales, 2004).

A wide range of definitions of genre has been proposed in linguistics research, reflecting different theoretical orientations. Cope and Kalantzis (2014), for instance, define genre as “a category that relates the social purpose of a text to its linguistic structure” (p.2). Johns et al. (2006) view genre as a reflection of how writers use language to produce suitable contextual texts. Similarly, Hyland (2004) defines genre as “a term for grouping texts together,

representing how writers typically use language to respond to recurring situations” (P4). Likewise, Hyland (2002) characterizes genre as “abstract, socially recognized ways of using language” (p114). Despite differences in emphasis, these definitions are united by the view that genres are purposeful, socially situated linguistic practices through which meaning is constructed. In this sense, genre analysis extends beyond the level of individual sentences to examine the broader organization of discourse (Biber et al., 2007; Rosa et al., 2024.).

The growing importance of genre in applied linguistics has led to the development of three major genre traditions by Hyon (1996): Rhetorical Genre Studies (RGS), often referred to as the New Rhetoric (NR) approach; second, the Sydney School, grounded in SFL; and third, the English for Specific Purposes (ESP) approach (L. Flowerdew, 2013; Hyon, 1996; Abaalkhail, 2022). While these traditions share the view that genres are socially meaningful and purpose-driven, they differ in analytical focus and pedagogical orientation. The SFL and ESP traditions place primary emphasis on the text itself, using systematic linguistic analysis to examine how meaning are realized, whereas the RGS tradition prioritizes the social and contextual dimensions of genre, often with less attention to detailed linguistic description (Hyland, 2002; Luzón & Pérez-Llantada, 2022). These approaches can be viewed along a continuum, ranging from text-centered analysis to context-centered analysis and are best understood as complementary perspectives that together enrich the study of genre (Flowerdew, 2002).

Despite their shared theoretical foundation, the three genre traditions also differ in their pedagogical assumptions. Bawarshi and Reiff (2010) note that all genre approaches recognize the close relationship between genre and context, yet they diverge in how genre should be taught. Both SFL and the ESP traditions advocate “visible pedagogy” emphasizing explicit and systematic instruction in genre features within educational settings (Hyland, 2004; Hamman-Ortiz et al., 2023). In contrast, the RGS tradition is more cautious about explicit genre teaching, arguing that genres are deeply embedded in authentic social practices and cannot be fully reproduced in classrooms (Flowerdew, 2013; Hyon, 2018; Darvin, 2023). As a result, the RGS pedagogy tends to focus on raising learners’ general awareness rather than providing detailed linguistic models for instruction (Flowerdew, 2013).

The three traditions emerged from different educational needs. The SFL approach was developed mainly for first-language education, particularly in school settings and adult migrant education program, while the RGS is rooted in first-language university composition studies (Hyon, 2018). The ESP tradition, by contrast, developed to support non-native English-speaking students in academic and professional settings, especially graduate students in British and American universities who face challenges in mastering academic and professional genres (Bawarshi & Reiff, 2010). Consequently, ESP research has focused on genres such as research articles, abstracts, and grant proposals, with attention to communicative purposes, disciplinary conventions and recurring lexicogrammatical patterns (Flowerdew, 2013; Hyon, 2017; Wang et al., 2025).

Within the broader landscape, SFL offers a particularly productive framework for examining language as a meaning-making resource and for linking linguistic description with pedagogy (Troyan et al., 2022; Schleppegrell & Oteíza, 2023.). This has led to increasing interest in applying SFL to languages beyond English, including Arabic. However, while descriptive and discourse-oriented studies of Arabic within SFL have expanded, pedagogical applications of these insights remain relatively limited, particularly in Arabic-medium contexts.

The purpose of this literature review is to examine how SFL has been applied to the study of Arabic language discourse and pedagogy. The review synthesizes research on systemic

functional descriptions of Arabic grammar, Theme-Rheme organization, register, and metafunctions in Arabic texts, and pedagogical applications of SFL in Arabic and English-Arabic context. By bringing together this body of work, the review aims to identify key patterns, methodological approaches, and limitations in existing research, as well as gaps in the integration of SFL theory with Arabic language education.

To achieve this purpose, the review is guided by the following questions:

1. How has SFL been used to describe Arabic grammar and discourse, particularly in relation to metafunctions, Theme-Rheme organization, and register?
2. What adaptations to SFL frameworks have been proposed to account for the typological and structural features of Arabic?
3. How has SFL been applied pedagogically in Arabic, English, and English-Arabic contexts, particularly in genre-based instruction and translation education?
4. What gaps remain in linking systemic functional descriptions of Arabic with pedagogical practices in Arabic language education?

This review is organized into four main sections. The first section outlines the major genre traditions in applied linguistics, namely RGS, ESP, and the Sydney School, in order to situate SFL within the broader field of genre research. The second section reviews systemic functional descriptions of Arabic grammar and discourse, with particular attention to Theme-Rheme organization and the textual metafunction. The third section examines research on register and metafunctions in Arabic texts across different genre and contexts. The last section focuses on pedagogical applications of SFL, including genre-based pedagogy and English-Arabic translation education. Together, these sections provide a coherent framework for identifying key findings and gaps in the existing literature and for motivating further research on SFL-informed approaches to Arabic-medium language education.

The Rhetorical Genre Studies (RGS) Approach

From the perspective of RGS, genre is conceptualized primarily as a social action rather than as a fixed linguistic or textual structure (Johns, 2002; Flores & Rosa, 2023). Scholars within this tradition argue that the ESP and Sydney School approaches, despite their differences, share a common linguistic orientation that emphasizes schematic structure and form-function relations at the clause or text level (Flowerdew, 2011).

A defining feature of RGS tradition is its prioritization of situational context over linguistic form (Hyon, 1996). From this perspective, genre analysis is concerned less with formal characteristics of texts and more with the social actions they perform (Miller, 1984). Genre is thus examined in terms of the social purposes it fulfills and the actions they enable within particular rhetorical situations (Miller, 1984; Ranade et al., 2025).

As a result, RGS-oriented genre analysis often adopts an ethnographic approach, examining the practices, values, and activities of discourse communities rather than relying solely on textual analysis (Flowerdew, 2013). This perspective encourages researchers to move beyond text-external descriptions of context and instead examine how genres actively construct situations, communities and participant roles through use. Further, from an RGS viewpoint, genres are not merely text types but social actions that shape and are shaped by writers, readers and disciplinary practices (Coe, 2002; Luke, 1994).

Within this framework, genre knowledge is understood as inseparable from procedural and disciplinary knowledge. Berkenkotter and Huckin (1995) argue that knowing a genre involves knowing how to act within a community, including how to frame questions, recognize problems, and apply disciplinary tools appropriately. Genre knowledge thus enables

individuals not only to communicate effectively but also, to participate in and produce a community's norms and ideology (Flowerdew, 2013).

Pedagogically, the RGS tradition adopts an apprenticeship-based orientation to genre learning and remains cautious about explicit genre instruction. It emphasizes that genres are most effectively acquired through sustained participation in authentic social and disciplinary contexts, where learners engage in real communicative practices, with and as audiences, and purposes rather than through decontextualized classroom instruction (Freadman, 1994).

Overall, while RGS shares with ESP and Sydney School traditions a rejection of a purely formalist view of genre, it differs in privileging action, context, and social practice over linguistic form. The differences between these approaches are often most visible in their pedagogical orientations, with RGS offering valuable insights into the dynamic and socially embedded nature of genre

(Flowerdew, 2013).

The English for Specific Purposes (ESP) Approach

In the ESP approach, genre analysis focuses on examining the discourse structure or organizational pattern of texts typically described in terms of moves and steps (Swales, 1990; Al-Ahdal & Alharbi, 2021), or alternative strategies (Bhatia, 1993). This analytical framework, often referred to as Rhetorical Moves Approach or Move Analysis, includes the Swalesian Tradition, move-step analysis, macro-microstructure analysis, schematic structure, and discourse organization. Among these, Move Analysis is the most widely used term.

A 'move' is a segment of discourse that carries out specific communicative purpose within a written or spoken text (Swales, 2004, p.228). It represents a mini communicative purpose of a particular text segment (Hyon, 2018). Moves can be realized through a single clause, a stretch of text, or several sentences (Swales, 2004). However, the identification of moves has varied considerably across different studies. Some researchers, such as Nwogu (1997), determine moves by linguistic signals, for example, changes in tense, while others, including Paltridge (1994), rely more on discourse content or non-linguistic cues to identify functional boundaries within texts.

Texts within the same genre (e.g., research article introductions, lectures, textbooks, or even wedding invitations) typically share a recognizable move structure, with each move serving a distinct communicative purpose. Within this framework, a step is viewed as a sub-unit of a move, providing further detail on the rhetorical choices a writer can employ in realizing the move (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998, p.89). Moves and steps may be obligatory (i.e., occurring in all texts of a genre) or optional (i.e., appearing in some), and they may vary in sequence, recurrence, or embedding within a text.

Hyon (2018) offers an insightful metaphor by comparing rhetorical moves in ESP genre analysis to dance to clarify the concepts of moves and steps. In this analogy, different genres, such as research articles, textbooks, or letters, resemble different dances, each defined by its own characteristic patterns (Hyon, 2018; Al-Ahdal & Algouzi, 2021). Just as the waltz is identified by its three-step sequence, which is considerably essential to the form, genres also contain obligatory moves that appear in all examples of that genre. In contrast, optional moves may vary across texts and reflect the writer's personal style or communicative choices (Hyon, 2018, pp. 27-28). Similarly, the ways in which a move is realized, referred to as steps (Swales, 1990) or strategies (Bhatia, 1993), can differ among writers within the same genre.

The ESP approach to genre analysis gained prominence with the introduction of Swales's (1990) CARS model (Create a Research Space), a pioneering framework that outlines the rhetorical organization and linguistic features of research article introductions. As Bawarshi

& Reiff (2010) note, this model connects rhetorical actions with rhetorical structures, offering a powerful tool for exploring how writers' communicative intentions are realized through textual form (pp.182-183). Its pedagogical purpose is to help non-native English learners master the writing of research articles by linking communicative goals with textual conventions. Swales's work was groundbreaking in that it provided a replicable framework later extended to the analysis of numerous academic and professional genres.

According to Swales (1990), the primary communicative goal of a research article introduction is to establish a research space, which constitutes the core idea of the CARS model. Each rhetorical move and step contributes to this goal. Move 1, establishing a territory, represents a smaller-scale communicative act within the larger purpose of constructing a research space. Its corresponding steps specify how this move is linguistically realized and what options are available to writers to do so. Graduate students, for example, can apply the CARS model as a writing framework to effectively organize their research article introductions. Furthermore, Swales identifies specific lexicogrammatical choices (i.e., the characteristic vocabulary and grammatical patterns used to express genre) associated with specific moves (Hyon, 2018, p. 51). These linguistic features signal the rhetorical function of each move and guide readers through the communicative structure of the genre.

The Sydney School grounded in Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL)

The Sydney School is grounded SFL, which was developed by M.A.K. Halliday in the 1960s and 1970s to explain how language functions as a resource for making meaning in social contexts, particularly in educational settings (Halliday, 1978; Halliday & Hasan, 1985). Unlike Chomsky's generative grammar which conceptualizes language as an abstract, rule-governed system, SFL adopts a socially oriented perspective, viewing language as having a meaning potential shaped by use, context, and purpose (Chomsky, 2014; Halliday, 1978).

In SFL, the term "systemic" refers to the idea that language consists of networks of interrelated choices available to speakers and writers, while "functional" highlights what language does and how it operates to construct meaning in context (Flowerdew, 2013). Language is therefore understood not merely as a formal code, but as a social semiotic system through which individuals carry out social roles, represent experience, and organize discourse (Flowerdew, 2013).

A central principle of SFL is that language simultaneously performs three metafunctions: ideational, interpersonal, and textual. The ideational metafunction is concerned with representing experience and logical relations in the world. The interpersonal metafunction manages social relationships, attitudes, and interaction between participants. The textual metafunction enables the organization of discourse in coherent and cohesive texts suitable for particular contexts (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004).

These metafunctions are systematically related to three contextual parameters known as field, tenor, and mode, which together define the register of a situation. Field refers to the nature of the social activity and the subject matter, tenor to the roles of the relationships between participants, and mode refers to the role of language in the interaction, including whether it is spoken or written (Flowerdew, 2013). Through this model, SFL provides a principled framework for linking linguistic choices to context.

SFL has had a profound influence on discourse analysis, language education, and genre studies, particularly through the development of the Sydney School of Genre. Developed initially in Australian primary school system and later extended to other educational contexts, this tradition has informed a systemic genre-based pedagogy (Martin & Rose, 2012). School genres were classified into a small number of major genre families, each characterized by recurring

schematic structures and typical lexical and grammatical patterns (Martin & Rose, 2012; Rothery, 1996). This work was further developed into a language-based approach to teaching and learning aimed at providing learners with explicit access to socially valued genres, operationalized through the Teaching-Learning Cycle, which emphasizes explicit instruction, scaffolding, and guided participation and text construction (Martin & Rose, 2012).

Development of Genre Theory

The Genre Theory has evolved through several key stages, reflecting changing perspectives on the relationship between language, text, and context. While early treatments of genre focused largely on literary classification and typology, subsequent work, especially in applied and educational linguistics, shifted toward viewing genre as socially situated communication, grounded in recurrent contexts, purposes, and institutional practices (Flowerdew, 2013).

During the 1980s and 1990s, the genre theory became consolidated through the emergence of three major traditions. One, RGS, drawing on Miller's 1984 conception of genre as social action, foregrounded context, activity, and disciplinary practice. Two, in contrast, ESP developed genre analysis as a pedagogically motivated approach to examining the rhetorical organization of academic and professional texts particularly through move analysis (Swales, 1990). At the same time, three, the Sydney School, grounded in SFL, conceptualized genre as a staged, goal-oriented social process closely linked to literacy development and classroom pedagogy (J-Flowerdew, 2013; Hyon, 1996).

Arabic context research (SFL, ESP and RGS)

Researchers have used the SFL framework to explore how Arabic texts, such as religious sermons, academic writing and media discourse, realize different functions and reflect culturally embedded communicative practices. Previous studies have also examined how field, tenor and mode influence the organization of Arabic texts, and how genre conventions vary between Arabic and English (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004).

SFL has been employed to provide a principled, meaning-oriented description of Arabic grammar, demonstrating that Arabic can be analyzed as a system of choices organized around metafunctional meanings. The most comprehensive contribution in this area is Bardi (2008), a systemic functional description of Arabic grammar, which establishes Arabic as a fully describable linguistic system within Halliday's framework. Drawing on authentic Arabic texts from a wide range of registers, Bardi (2008) conceptualizes Arabic grammar not as a set of formal rules, but as a resource for constructing experience, enacting social relations, and organizing discourse.

Bardi's (2008) analysis offers detailed accounts of core grammatical systems in Arabic, including transitivity, mood, modality, clause complexing, and Theme-Rheme structure, and maps these systems onto systemic networks across the ideational, interpersonal, and textual metafunctions. A key strength of this work lies in its refusal to uncritically impose English-based categories on Arabic. Instead, Arabic grammatical patterns are described in ways that reflect the language's unique typological properties, such as the prominence of nominal clauses, agreement patterns, and the realization of interpersonal meanings. By engaging critically with the Arabic grammatical tradition, Bardi (2008) further demonstrates important convergences between traditional Arabic grammar and SFL, particularly in their shared concern with meaning, function, and text.

At the level of the nominal group, Moalla (2018) extends the systemic functional description of Arabic by focusing on the experiential organization of nominal structures in Arabic and English. Using the SFL framework, the study demonstrates that Arabic nominal groups are highly structured and meaning-dense units that play a central role in constructing experiential

meaning. While SFL categories such as Deictic, Epithet and Qualifier remain analytically relevant, Moalla (2018) shows that Arabic realizes these meanings through hieratical and predominantly post-modifying structures, which differ markedly from English patterns of premodification.

Moalla's analysis highlights the functional motivation underlying Arabic nominal constructions, emphasizing that meaning in Arabic is frequently expanded through annexation, qualification, and embedding, rather than linear modification. This finding reinforces the applicability of SFL to Arabic grammar while simultaneously underscoring the need for language-specific adaptations in describing how experiential meanings are realized. Together with Bardi (2008), this study provides strong empirical evidence that Arabic lexicogrammar can be systematically modeled within an SFL framework without reducing it to formal equivalence with English.

Additional support for the relevance of SFL concepts to Arabic related context can be found in studies of ideational meaning in Saudi EFL writing. Research on ideational metaphor in Saudi undergraduate students' academic writing suggests that limited control over grammatical metaphor is associated with reduced grammatical density and less advanced academic discourse (Alhusaiyan, 2023). Although based on English EFL data rather than Arabic texts, it offers theoretical support for the centrality of ideational meaning and grammatical metaphor within the SFL framework these findings indirectly reinforce the importance of systemic functional descriptions of Arabic grammar in understanding how meaning potential is developed, constrained or expanded across languages and educational contexts.

Taken together, these studies demonstrate that Arabic grammar can be described as meaning-oriented systems within SFL, while also highlighting the necessity of adapting systemic categories to accommodate Arabic-specific grammatical features. This emphasis on grammatical description provides a foundation for examining how textual meanings, particularly Theme–Rheme organization are realized in Arabic discourse, which is the focus of the following section.

Theme-Rheme and the Textual Metafunction in Arabic Discourse

Research on Theme-Rheme and the textual metafunction in Arabic has focused on how Arabic clauses organize information and guide readers through discourse. A central issue in this body of research is the extent to which Halliday's Theme Model, originally developed based on English clause structure, can be applied to Arabic, given important typological differences that exist between the two languages.

Within broader systemic descriptions of Arabic grammar, Theme-Rheme has been recognized as a key resource for textual meaning. Bardi (2008) includes Theme-Rheme as part of a comprehensive systemic functional description of Arabic lexicogrammar, treating theme as a clause-level system that interacts with transitivity and mood. Although Theme-Rheme is not the main focus of Bardi's study, it provides an essential foundation by showing that Arabic clauses can be systematically analyzed as messages within an SFL framework.

Adapting Halliday's Theme Model to Arabic clause structure presents challenges due to structural differences between Arabic and English. Unlike English, Arabic has two types of clauses: verbal and nominal (Aziz, 1988). Because Arabic verbal clauses typically begin with a verb, identifying Theme solely on positional grounds can be problematic. To address this issue, studies have proposed treating the initial verb together with the following noun as the unmarked Theme in Arabic verbal clauses, while nominal clauses are treated as marked thematic structures. This adaptation allows for a more comprehensive and systematic analysis of Theme-Rheme organization across both verbal and nominal clause types (Potter, 2016).

Early discussion on thematic organization at the discourse level can be found in Aziz (1988) who examines Theme-Rheme patterns in relation to paragraph structure in Standard Arabic. Aziz argues that textual coherence in Arabic is achieved through patterns of thematic progression across clauses rather than through isolated sentence-level choices. This work highlights the need for approaches that go beyond surface-level word order when analyzing textual organization in Arabic.

More recent studies grounded explicitly in SFL have applied Theme-Rheme analysis to authentic Arabic discourse. Potter (2016) analyzes English and Arabic news reports and demonstrates that thematic choices play a significant role in constructing ideological representations. The study shows that Arabic news texts frequently employ marked thematic structures, including verb-initial and nominal clauses, to foreground particular social actors and evaluations. Potter's analysis further supports the need for adapting Theme-Rheme analysis to Arabic clause structure rather than relying on English-based findings.

Further evidence for a flexible and functional approach to theme in Arabic is provided by Alfraidi (2021) who examines theme realization in Modern Standard Arabic across different genres. The study shows that Theme in Arabic functions as a point of departure for the clause but is not restricted to a single grammatical category. Due to Arabic's relatively flexible word order, both noun phrases and verbs can function as Theme. Alfraidi (2021) also demonstrates that Theme does not necessarily coincide with Topic or Given Information, reinforcing Halliday's distinction between textual and informational systems.

Quranic discourse has offered an important context for refining SFL-based Theme-Rheme analysis. Alamiri (2018) focuses on the thematic structure of Quran 19:41-50 and identifies different types of themes, including textual interpersonal and topical themes. A key contribution of this study is the proposal to extend the Theme boundary in Arabic verb-initial clauses to include the verbal process together with bound pronominal markers that encode participant information. This refinement provides a more accurate account of how textual meaning is organized in Arabic clauses and avoids the uncritical transfer of English-based models.

Taken together, these studies demonstrate that SFL provides a robust framework for analyzing Theme-Rheme organization in Arabic discourse, while also highlighting the need for language-specific adaptations. Existing research has successfully applied Theme-Rheme analysis to Arabic grammar, news discourse, and Quranic narrative. However, much of this work remains focused on clause-level analysis, with limited attention to how Theme-Rheme patterns interact with register and genre across extended texts. Addressing this gap motivates further research that integrates textual metafunction analysis with broader contextual variables and Arabic discourse.

Register and Metafunctions in Arabic Texts

Within Systemic Functional Linguistics, register provides a framework for explaining how language choices vary according to context. Register is commonly described through three interrelated variables: field, which refers to the nature of the social activity; tenor, which concerns the social relationships between participants; and mode, which relates to the role language plays in the interaction. These variables are linked to the three metafunctions of language: ideational, interpersonal, and textual, and together explain how texts are shaped by the situations of use.

One of the most explicit applications of register analysis to Arabic discourse is found in Alamiri (2020) which examines Quranic narrative instances of particular register. Focusing on Quran 19:41-50, the study treats the text as part of a broader narrative register rather than as

an isolated or exceptional case. The level of field, the analysis shows that the narrative is organized around acts such as calling, reasoning, and warning, which are realized through specific transitivity patterns. These patterns constitute a field concerned with belief, argumentation, and moral guidance.

In terms of tenor, Alamiri's analysis highlights the interpersonal relations between participants in the narrative, particularly the unequal relationship between Abraham and his father. These relations are constructed through choice and speech functions, modality, forms of address, and pronoun use, which together express authority, persuasion, and social distance. At the level of mode, the narrative displays features typically associated with spoken interaction, such as dialogue and projection, even though it is realized in written form. This combination suggests that Quranic narratives are oriented toward interpersonal engagement and audience involvement.

Further insight into the role of the textual metafunction in Arabic register is provided by Alamiri (2020) in his study of Quranic textuality. Drawing on Halliday and Hasan's model of cohesion, this study demonstrates how reference, conjunction, repetition, and lexical relations contribute to coherence in Quranic discourse. Importantly, the analysis argues that Quranic texts rely on the same semantic resources identified in SFL descriptions of other texts, rather than on exceptional mechanisms. This finding supports the view that Arabic texts are shaped by register-specific choices across metafunctions.

Registers and metafunctions have also been examined in applied contexts involving Arabic multimodal discourse. Al-Kenani and Banda (2018) analyze Yemeni political cartoons and their English translations using an SFL framework. Their study shows how variable and visual resources interact to realize ideational, interpersonal, and textual meanings, and how register variables shape meaning construction across modes. Although the primary focus of this work is translation and multimodality, it demonstrates the usefulness of register analysis for capturing the contextual complexity of Arabic discourse beyond purely linguistic texts.

Related work in media discourse further illustrates the interaction between register and textual choices. Potter (2016), in a comparative analysis of English and Arabic news reports, shows that thematic and informational choices are influenced by contextual factors such as audience, institutional roles, and communicative purpose. While this study focuses mainly on Theme-Rheme organization, it provides supporting evidence that register variables play an important role in shaping how meanings are foregrounded in Arabic media discourse.

Taken together, these studies demonstrate that register analysis offers a powerful tool for understanding how Arabic texts vary according to context and social purpose. Research has shown that field, tenor, and mode systematically shape ideational, interpersonal and textual meanings in Arabic discourse across genres such as religious narratives, media texts and multimodal communication. However, much of the existing work has focused on descriptive or analytical accounts, with limited attention to how register-based insights can inform language teaching and learning. This gap points to the need for further research that connects register and metafunctions analysis with pedagogical applications of SFL, which is the focus of the following section.

Pedagogical applications of systemic functional Linguistics

SFL has been a widely applied pedagogical framework for teaching language, literacy, and translation. Its main strength lies in its explicit focus on meaning-making, which enables learners to understand how texts function in relation to their social purposes, contexts, and audiences. Rather than treating languages as a set of formal rules, SFL-based pedagogy

presents language as a resource for constructing ideational, interpersonal, and textual meanings.

Foundational work on SFL pedagogy is closely associated with genre-based approaches developed within the Sydney School. In this tradition, genre is viewed as a multi-stage, goal-oriented social process, and instruction focuses on making the linguistic pattern of socially valued genres explicit to learners. Feez (2002) explains that SFL-informed genre pedagogy supports learners through the Teaching-Learning Cycle, which typically involves stages of modelling, joint construction, and independent construction. This approach emphasizes explicit instruction and scaffolding and aims to reduce inequality in educational outcomes by providing all learners with access to the language resources required for academic success.

Building on this pedagogical tradition, later research has extended SFL-based instruction to higher education and professional contexts. Rose and Martin (2012) show that explicit attention to genre, register, and grammatical metaphor can support learners in developing advanced literacy skills across disciplines. Their work highlights the importance of integrating linguistic knowledge with pedagogy, allowing learners to gain conscious control over increasingly complex text rather than relying solely on intuition.

Systemic Functional Linguistics in English-Arabic translation education

In the Arabic and English-Arabic contexts, several studies have demonstrated the pedagogical value of SFL, particularly in translation education. Research has shown that SFL can be effectively used as a pedagogical tool for analyzing source text and improving translation quality (Alshalan & Alyousef, 2025). In their study, Alshalan and Alyousef (2025) implemented an instructional intervention that trained to analyze text at three interrelated levels: register, which examines field, tenor and mode; semantics, which focuses on ideational, interpersonal, and textual metafunctions; and lexicogrammar, which investigates transitivity, mood, modality and Theme in order to show how meaning is realized through grammatical choices. This multilayered approach aimed to deepen students' understanding of sources and enhance the accuracy and justification of their translation decisions. The findings indicated that SFL-based instruction helps students reduce errors in meaning transfer and improve overall translation competence.

Earlier work by Alshalan and Alyousef (2020) also highlight the pedagogical relevance of the textual metafunction in translation education. Their analysis of cohesive devices in business texts demonstrates that explicit instruction in cohesion can support students in selecting appropriate source texts and producing more coherent translations. Together, these studies provide strong evidence that SFL offers a systemic and effective framework for translator training by linking linguistic analysis directly to meaning and communicative purpose.

Ideational metaphor and pedagogical implications for academic writing

Pedagogical insights related to SFL are also evident in research on ideational metaphor in academic writing. A study of Saudi undergraduate students' academic essays found limited use of ideational metaphor (Alhusaiyan, 2023). The analysis identifies 408 sentences containing ideational metaphor in a corpus of 8482 words with material processes occurring most frequently, followed by mental, relational, behavioral, and existential processes. This relatively low frequency of ideational metaphor suggests that students' essays may lack the grammatical complexity typically associated with higher-quality academic writing.

Although this study was based on English EFL data rather than Arabic text, it highlights an important pedagogical implication for SFL: learners may benefit from explicit instruction and meaning-oriented grammatical resources particularly grammatical metaphor, to develop more

advanced academic discourse. These findings reinforce the pedagogical value of SFL and support learners' control over ideational meaning across educational contexts.

These studies demonstrate that SFL based pedagogy is effective in supporting learners' development of meaning-making skills in literacy and translation education. However, despite the growing application of SFL-based pedagogy in English and English-Arabic settings, relatively little research has explored how such approaches can be systematically adapted to Arabic language education itself. This gap highlights the need for further research that connects systemic-functional descriptions of Arabic with the pedagogical practices that make genre, register, and metafunctions explicit for Arabic-speaking learners.

CONCLUSION

This review has shown that systemic functional linguistics provides a powerful and coherent framework for analyzing Arabic language and discourse at multiple levels, including grammar, textual organization, register, and genre. Previous research has demonstrated that Arabic can be systematically described within an SFL framework with necessary adaptations to account for its typological features and that SFL based analysis have been successfully applied to a range of Arabic texts including religious, media and academic discourse. In parallel, pedagogical studies have shown that SFL-based approaches support learners' understanding of how meaning is constructed in texts, and offer clear benefits in literacy development and English-Arabic translation education. However, despite these advances, relatively little research has integrated systemic functional description of Arabic with pedagogical applications that explicitly address genre, register, and metafunctions in Arabic-medium language education. This gap highlights the need for further research that connects SFL theory with classroom practice and Arabic context which the present study seeks to address.

Recommendations

Based on the findings the following are recommended:

- The SFL framework should be introduced in Arabic and English-Arabic contexts as important convergences between traditional Arabic grammar and SFL exist.
- Theme-Rheme organization, register variation and textual meaning in a range of Arabic texts including religious, media, and academic texts should be integrated in translation curriculum to enhance the quality of learning in the background of SFL.
- Results obtained in EFL context should be examined to find parallels or contrasts in Arabic-medium language educational contexts.
- Linguistic theories that have been examined against the backdrop of other languages especially English should also be applied to consider best learning outcomes in the Arabic and English-Arabic language environments.

Limitations

Though a unique study, the current research was limited by the number of previous studies that could be analyzed: this was a limitation imposed by the scope of the study. It is hoped that replications will include a denser corpus of literature for review. Moreover, similar studies across languages other than English were not included here, limiting the variety of findings utilized here.

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