

The Notion of Clause Complex in Systemic Functional Linguistics

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Abstract: In this paper, an attempt is made to explore the notion of clause complex in systemic functional linguistics. Conducted in the light of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), the exploration is aimed at three dimensions: the composition of a clause complex, the location of the clause complex in the overall linguistic system, and the functional organization of the clause complex.

Keywords: Clause, clause complex, taxis, univariate, multivariate, paratactic relation, hypotactic relation, expansion, projection.

1. Introduction

Clause complex is the notion introduced by Halliday [1] in his *An Introduction to Functional Grammar*. The notion of clause complex was suggested to be used in place of the traditional notion of sentence when referring to the logico-semantic unit above the clause because, to some extent, it seems to enable further analysis of the spoken speech in addition to the traditional study on written language. *What is a clause complex? Where is the clause complex located in the overall linguistic system? And how is the clause complex organized functionally?* These

questions will be addressed in some detail in this paper.

2. What is a clause complex?

As the name suggests, a clause complex is made up of clauses. In order to answer the question: what makes the clause complex, some attempt is made to examine the notion of clause, the combination of clauses to make up the clause complex, and a brief distinction between the notion of clause complex and the traditional notion of sentence as well.

2.1. The notion of clause in the light of SFL

As the highest unit in the grammatical rank, the clause is viewed in the light of systemic

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functional linguistics as a grammatical resource for all the three language metafunctions: construing the world, enacting social roles, and presenting information. Halliday [1] points out that there are 3 lines of meaning in a clause: the textual meaning, the interpersonal meaning, and

the ideational meaning, or to put it differently, the clause has three metafunctions: textual, interpersonal, and ideational metafunctions as can be illustrated through figure 1 and figure 2 below.

The professor	was	analyzing	the functions that a clause can perform.	<i>CLAUSE MEANING</i>
Theme	Rheme			<i>Textual</i>
Mood		Residue		<i>Interpersonal</i>
Actor	Process (material)		Goal	<i>Ideational</i>

Fig. 1. Three lines of meaning in a clause – 1.

Jim	wondered		how the analysis would help.	<i>CLAUSE MEANING</i>
	<i>did</i>	<i>wonder</i>		
Theme	Rheme			<i>Textual</i>
Mood (Jim + did)		Residue (wonder + how the analysis would help)		<i>Interpersonal</i>
senser	Process (mental)		Phenomenon	<i>Ideational</i>

Fig. 2. Three lines of meaning in a clause – 2.

As can be seen, a clause has meaning as a message, a quantum of information which is the complex of at least two constituents of Theme and Rheme in its THEMATIC structure. Traditionally, Theme is taken as what is going to be discussed in the message and Rheme as the discussion while SFL sees Theme as the departure of the message –the ground from which the clause is taking off [1]. In the finite clause, in which the verb element is conjugated in number and person with the subject, Theme is explicit but in the non-finite clause, in which the verb is not conjugated in number and person with the subject, Theme is hidden, and can be recovered in the context.

A clause also has meaning as an exchange, or a move. Through the system of MOOD, it is organized as an interactive event involving speaker, or writer, and audience. MOOD is, in general terms, the function of the clause, which is realized through Mood (Subject and Finite)

and Modality [1]. In speaking, the speaker adopts for himself a particular role, and in doing so, assigns the listener a complementary role which he wishes him to adopt in his turn. As regards speech role, either the speaker is giving something to the listener, or demanding something from him. In the clause the subject is the guarantee of the exchange. In the finite clause, mood is explicit whereas in the non-finite clause, mood is non-explicit.

A clause has meaning as a representation, or a figure, a construal of the going-ons in human experience, with the actor as the active participant in that process. The clause represents a pattern of experience through the system of TRANSITIVITY: processes, participants, and circumstances. This embodies the principle for modeling experience – “the principle that reality is made up of processes” [1:106]. In the clause, participants are decided by the process, and circumstances are what

surrounds the process. Process is the indispensable part in both finite and non-finite clauses.

It is no exaggeration to accept clause as the central unit of language which can manifest all the three metafunctions of the language; and there seems to be, consequently, no actual need for any further function to be realized by a higher grammatical unit than the clause. However, when classifying clauses into major clauses and minor clauses, only major clauses can demonstrate all the systems of MOOD, TRANSITIVITY, and THEME; minor clauses, including calls and exclamations, have no such systems.

2.2. What makes a clause complex?

In their use of language, people in many cases tend to expand their arguments outwards by combining, or complexing the original clause with other related clauses into series of clauses with the main clause as the core of the message and the coordinate or subordinate clauses as the peripheral information added to reinforce the message. People in many other

cases use language to describe not only the non-linguistic phenomena but to report or quote the linguistic phenomena as well, allowing the reported or quoted clauses to enter into a combination of clauses as the projected part in the whole combination - the secondary use of language. That is how clause complexes are constructed from clauses. As the single independent clause can be thought of as the linguistic expression of a situation, the combination of several clauses together to form a larger unit – a complex of clauses or a clause complex - can be thought of as the linguistic expression of a complex situation. While a simplex of clause or a clause simplex is a clause itself, a clause complex can be built up from more than one clause linked together in certain systematic and meaningful ways.

A question to be answered is: “Is the clause complex the grammatical unit above the clause?” The illustration can be seen from the following combination of the two clauses analyzed in the previous part into a clause complex:

While	the professor	was	analyzing	the functions that a clause can perform,	Jim	wondered	how the analysis would help.	CLAUSE
						<i>did wonder</i>		MEANING
Con-junctive	Theme	Rheme			Theme	Rheme		textual interpersonal
	Mood	Residue			Mood	Residue		
		Actor	Process material	Goal	Senser	Process mental	phenomenon	ideational

Fig. 3. Combining clauses into clause complex

It is demonstrated from the analysis of the clause complex above that the clause complex is a *univariate* structure, not a *multivariate* structure. Any grammatical unit in the grammatical rank scale is a multivariate unit in

that it can realize the immediate unit above it and is realized by the immediate unit below it, viz. a word is realized by different morphemes, free and bound, which functions differently in the words, different words of different parts of

speech and different functions. The fact that the constituents of a unit structure are different in realization and functions means that the structure of a unit on the rank scale is always multivariate. Combining the clauses into clause complex is just like assembling the details to make a new structure in which the details coexist but each works in its own way. In the clause complex, one clause is put next to the other, so the clause complex is still at the same rank as the clause.

The exemplifying clause complex is seen as univariate structure as it is composed of two clauses, which are two independent realization patterns of two different systems of MOOD, THEME, and TRANSITIVITY. Grammatically, when attaching the clauses together into a clause complex, no new system is created. The clause complex is actually the plain combination of separate units, no units change themselves to fit the others. The more clauses are involved in the clause complex, the more systems of MOOD, THEME, and TRANSITIVITY are, mechanically, added to the complex structure while the MOOD, THEME, and TRANSITIVITY of each clause are still reserved and not affected by one

another. This means that, in theory, the clause complex can be extended as much as the speaker / writer wants. In other words, what distinguishes the clause complex from the grammatical units in the rank scale is its open-endedness because it is not a pre-defined whole.

As can be seen in the complex above, there is no difference in MOOD, THEME, and TRANSITIVITY when the two clauses stand independently as two clause simplexes, and when they combine into the structure of a clause complex. The relation between the clauses cannot be read from the forms, but from a close look at the meaning of the clauses. The speaker / writer conveys some certain intended meaning of coordination or subordination through the way s/he combines the clauses, and the original clause from which the complex is extended can be traced by the listener / reader basing on the semantic relations between the clauses. The clause complex is accordingly more of a semantic unit rather than a grammatical unit. The answer to the question posed above is: a clause complex is not a grammatical unit above the clause. It is at the same rank as the clause, just as other univariate units do

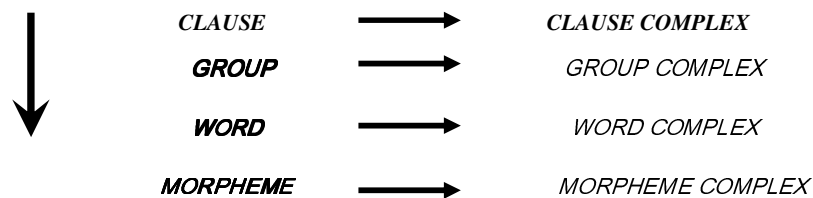


Fig. 4. The rank of the clause complex

The complex manifests the same three metafunctions of language as each of its constituent clauses does. If the clause is a single move, the clause complex is a sequence of

moves. If the clause is a single message, the clause complex is a sequence of messages, with more than one thematic structure. If a clause represents a single linguistic phenomenon, a

clause complex represents a sequence of linguistic phenomena logically connected by semantic relations; therefore clause complex is a logical combination of clauses. The definition of clause complex to be arrived at here is: ***a clause complex is a logical combination of clauses; it is a logico-semantic unit above the clause.***

If each clause in a clause complex manifests the representational function of the language, the combination of clauses into the clause complex manifests the logical function of the language, which means how the messages, the exchanges, or the representations in the language are meaningfully linked. It is an ongoing development constructed through semantic relations. The clause complex structure is therefore emergent; its impressive intricacy emerges as the speaker expands the clause complex.

2.3. Clause Complex vs. Sentence

As clause complex is a combination of clauses, and the traditional sentence is also made up from clauses, there is a need for differentiating the two notions to see why the notion of clause complex is proposed while the notion of sentence has long been of widespread use.

Sentence is a traditional notion that has been discussed in depth and at length in plenty of linguistic studies. There are different ways to classify sentences and different ways to name the subtypes. Sentences can be classified into just simple sentence and complex sentence [2], or simple sentence, complex sentence, and compound sentence [3], [4], or into simple sentence, coordinate sentence, and complex sentence [5], or into simple sentence and non-simple sentence [6], [7], [8], [9]. The further

classification of non-simple sentence is also varied as well. The non-simple sentences can be divided basing on either semantic relations (coordinate or subordinate [6], [7]) or syntactic relations (*complex sentence, compound sentences using conjunctives, compound sentences using correlative structures, compound sentences using juxtaposition* [3], [6], [10]).

An obvious distinction between sentence and clause complex is that a sentence is not always higher than the clause while a clause complex is always a complex of more than one clause. A sentence can consist of only one clause – a simple sentence (in this case a sentence coincides with the clause and, therefore, cannot be considered a unit higher the clause) or a group of clauses: (i) an independent clause with one (or more than one) embedded clause(s) – also called a simple sentence, (ii) an independent clause with one (or more than one) subordinate clause(s) acting as elements of the independent clauses – called a complex sentence, and (iii) two (or more) coordinated independent clauses of equal footing – called a compound sentence. In this case, where a sentence is a group of clauses, it is the unit higher than the clause. A sentence can, accordingly, adequately be accounted for by introducing the concepts of ***clause simplex: a unit with only one element clause*** and ***clause complex: a combination of two or more clauses into a larger unit.*** Without rejecting the use of the term “sentence”, since this would involve practical difficulties, given its long-standing use in studies of grammar, SFL therefore usually prefers the term *clause complex* for the logico-semantic combination of clauses.

Another difference between a sentence and a clause complex is: a sentence is only a constituent of writing, while a clause complex is a constituent of lexicogrammar. The use of

the traditional term sentence as the unit above the clause poses the observable obstacle of hindering researchers from going further into the study of spoken speech. To make it clearer, for most native speakers of any language, a sentence is something that starts with a capital letter and comes between full stops, leading to the fact that sentence is an idealization of written language, but it is difficult to impose this “sentence” rank on spoken language. Sentence is therefore a category associated primarily with the written language and can be described as an orthographical and rhetorical unit. In fact, a wide variety of units, from a rhetorical-orthographical point of view, can constitute a sentence. The sentences in the passage below are good demonstration of this variety.

Fueled: big rise in hospital visits due to mixing energy drinks with drugs. And the energy drink lobby appears surprised at the numbers. [...] **Fair enough.** But it's worth noting that the drinks the ABA represents (Red Bull, Monster, Rockstar) have ushered in popularity of mixing caffeine and alcohol.

(*The Atlantic magazine Nov. 23rd, 2011*)

Structurally, a sentence is composed of clauses but rhetorically and orthographically it need not be. The examples are the two sentences “**Fueled: big rise in hospital visits due to mixing energy drinks with drugs**” and “**Fair enough**” in the passage above. What marks them as sentences here is merely the punctuation – the full stops. However, in spontaneous speech it is often difficult to determine where one sentence ends and another begins [1]. The term sentence is appropriate for a prosodic unit where the identification of a sentence can be aided by the orthographical rules of punctuation and capitalization. When a spontaneous conversation is transcribed into writing, there could be disagreement as to

where sentence divisions lie, as in the following extract used by Matthiessen [10] from a casual conversation during a tea break at a workplace demonstrates how clause complex happens across turns:

||| M: I'm about to throw Joanne out the window. ||| F: *Joanne who?* ||| M: Latimer. ||| F: *Why?* ||| ⁽¹⁾M: She gets really pushy. ||| I'm looking for a file for Adam, || Kerry handed me three others || and I was in the middle of finding the third one for her. ||| ⁽ⁱⁱ⁾A: *Kerry gave you three, did she?* ||| M: Yeah, || you know, they had to be done. ||| → ⁽²⁾And Joanne came up || and she said, || "Oh, can you do this?" || and I said, || "Look you're at the end of a very long line: || be prepared to wait || and she said, || "Well, she's at the Oncology clinic right now." || and I said, || "But these have to be done as well; || I can't help || and sort of smiled all the way through it || and she went,... || I said, || "Look, it's three minutes to three; || these should be done in a minute || if you want to wait till then || and she went || (sigh) ahhh. || then she went away || and I thought || "Oh yeah, * end of story" ||| ⁽ⁱⁱⁱ⁾A: * *She gets very worried.* ||| M: → ⁽³⁾And then she came back in again || and um she said, || "Are those files there; || did Kerry give you those files there?" || and I knew || what she was going to say next || and I said, || "Ah, among others," || and um, she went, || "Oh, oh they can wait until after this one, || 'cause they're not needed, okay." || and I said * ... ||| ⁽ⁱⁱⁱ⁾F: * *Why couldn't she grab someone else?* ||| M: Because Liz and I are the only ones doing them || and they don't know that Ann can do them. ||| → ⁽⁴⁾But um, I said, || "Look Liz is going" || I said, || "Look, you know it's nearly three o'clock now; || Liz should be back any second now." || I said, || "Anyway, I've got afternoon tea now || and I've got to go to taping." |||

(* marks the overlapping in the conversation,

→ marks where the narrative is picked up again) corpus) [10]

The whole narrative of M is the thread linking 4 separate but logically connected parts: (1), (2), (3), and (4). The narrative gets suspended three times: (i) the first time, A asks M a question as a reaction to information from the narrative, and M answers the question before she returns to the narrative; (ii) the second time, A makes a statement (which overlaps with M's *end of story*), commenting on Joanne's behaviour, but M does not reply to this and continues her narrative; and (iii) the third time, F asks M a question arising out of the narrative, which M answers before picking up the narrative thread again. These exchanges are possible partly because of the serial nature of the structure of clause complexing. On the one hand, the series can be suspended — and even aborted — when local conditions so demand. On the other hand, the series can be resumed after each suspension: notice that each time M has suspended, she picks up again with either *and* or *but*. In fact, the whole narrative sequence can be interpreted as a single complex, extended serially across three turns, which evidently locates the clause complex under the system of logical function.

The term clause complex, as illustrated in the example, seems to help to recover the phenomenon of clause combining from the constraints of written language and open the way to observe clause combination in the spoken speech. It enables us to describe both the structural relations holding between the clauses and the logico-semantic relations which unite them. The clause complex is also distinct

from the sentence in that it can, simultaneously, happen cross-turn while the sentence cannot.

Without denying the traditional term of sentence, the term **clause complex** used to denote all subtypes of sentences except the one-clause sentences — the clause simplexes, appears to be of some more assistance than term sentence in linguistic analyses.

3. Where is the Clause Complex Located in the Overall Linguistic System?

3.1. The Position of Clause Complex in the System of Metafunctions

As mentioned in 2.2, a clause is a multifunctional construct; it is a textual **message**, an **exchange**, and a **representation**. A clause complex is thus a sequence of messages, exchanges, and representations.

As regards the textual metafunction, the systems of THEME, conjunctions, and ellipsis all appear in the clause complex. While the system of theme is a resource for assigning textual prominence to constituent clause in the clause complex, the textual system of conjunction is concerned with the transition from one clause to another in the complex, providing the resources for indicating rhetoric relations between clauses. In addition, in the clause complex of subordination, ellipsis is allowed in subordinate clause, not in super-ordinate clause because no independent major clause can work without Thematic Structure and the super-ordinate clause in the clause complex is always a major clause.

As regards the interpersonal metafunction, the MOOD system is somehow constrained in that: mood is open to free clauses but not to bound clauses. The contrast of “free” and

“bound” is thus the contrast in interpersonal status in the development of clause complex. In the clause complex of coordination, the system of MOOD is explicit in all constituent clauses. In the clause complex with subordinate relation, the super-ordinate clause is prioritized as the focal message, while the subordinate clause(s) is just the expanding message. The MOOD system of the super-ordinate clause therefore needs be explicit, the clause must be finite. Meanwhile, as the expanding part of the clause complex, the subordinate clause(s) is either finite, or non-finite.

When it is interpreted metafunctionally, clause complex turns out to be engendered by the ideational metafunction: the experiential metafunction and the logical metafunction, but more specifically, by the **logical** mode of the ideational metafunction.

As regards the experiential metafunction, the clause complex is the resource for construing the speaker’s experience. The clause complex represents the flow of events in the world as sequence of quanta of changes. The system of TRANSITIVITY, in turn, is the resource for construing each quantum of change as a configuration of processes, participants directly involved in the process, and more indirectly involved circumstances. In the clause complex, different processes (typically involving different participants and different circumstances) are chained in a meaningful way.

All complexes are structured as **series** of related elements: each relation represents a new expansion of the complex. The complexes are developed link by link; each pair of linked elements is called a **nexus** [1]. The nature of these links is determined by *taxis* and *logico-semantic relation* which concerns with the

logic of the relation forming the nexus: expansion or projection, and the option of stopping or of expanding the complex further by opening up another nexus through systemic: stop or go on. Theoretically, the logical function enables a clause complex to “go on” linearly as much as the speaker wants, even cross-turn in conversation as the speakers can still keep the thread of logic between clauses across turns and the listeners can trace the link of the suspended chunk of the clause complex thanks to the logico-semantic relations between them.

3.2. *The Position of Clause Complex in the System of Stratification*

Clause complex is located within the lexicogrammatical stratum and, it realizes certain areas in the semantics stratum - the semantic relations, and is realized from elements in the stratum of phonology.

With reference to the realization of clause complex from units in phonology, there is a natural relationship between the complexing of clauses in the grammar and the sequencing of tone group in phonology [11]. As elements of an informational unity, the constituent clauses in clause complexes may be spoken on the same intonation contour, or on the sequence of tone groups for the sake of communication emphasis.

Regarding the stratum of semantics, Matthiessen and Thompson propose that clause complexes can be interpreted as the grammaticalization of rhetorical-relational patterning in text [12]. At the semantic stratum, texts are organized as rhetorical complexes – passages are linked through rhetorical relations, which are marked explicitly by cohesive conjunction or implicitly through

lexicogrammatical patterns. Clause complexing in the lexicogrammar level is like rhetorical complexing at semantic level.

The position of clause complex in the system of stratification is suggested as in Fig 6 below

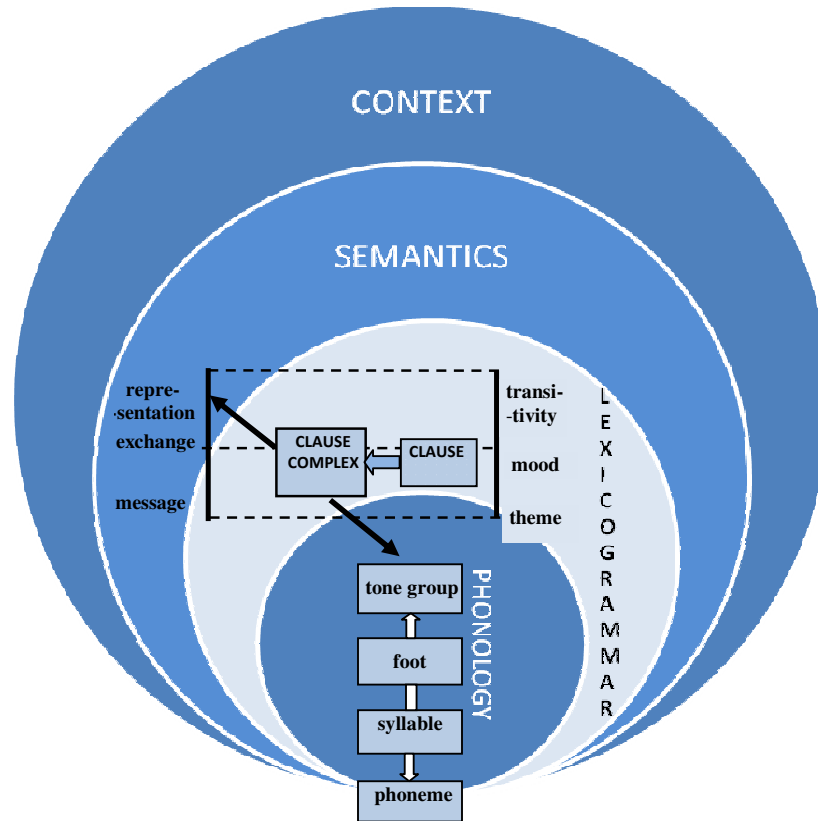


Fig. 6. The Location of Clause Complex in the Overall Linguistic System.

4. How is the clause complex organized?

According to Halliday [1] the interrelation between constituent clauses in clause complexes can be interpreted in terms of logical components of the linguistics system: the functional-semantic relations that make up the logic of natural language. There are two systemic dimensions in the organization of the clause complex: one is in the syntactic dimension - the system of interdependency, or *taxis* system which is general to all complexes,

and the other is the semantic dimension – the *logico-semantic* system, specifically an inter-clausal relationship. These two together provide the functional framework for describing the organization of clause complex.

4.1. The Syntactic Dimension – the Taxis System

The syntactic properties of clause complexes are realized through the interdependency relations between element

clauses in the clause complexes, which consist of independency (paratactic) and dependency (hypotactic). Parataxis relationship in clause complex is the linking of clauses of equal status. Both the initiating and the continuing

clauses are free, in the sense that each could stand as a functioning whole. Hypotactic relationship is the binding of clauses of unequal status, the dominant clause is free, but the dependent clause is not.

	Primary	Secondary
Parataxis	1 (initiating)	2 (continuing)
Hypotaxis	α (dominant)	β (dependent)

Fig. 7. Clauses in paratactic and hypotactic clause complexes [13]

Taxis works on a univariate principle: the reiteration of units of the same functional role. Taxis thus contrasts with embedding, also called rank-shift. In embedding phenomenon, the embedded clause functions as immediate constituents of what is called the superordinate clause. The embedded clause is a rank-shifted clause, which means it operates in the whole as though they were member of the lower rank. Therefore, embedding relation seems to relate more to complementation, not complexing, so it is not considered an interdependency relation.

In principle, the paratactic relationship is logically (i) symmetrical and (ii) transitive, thus can be exemplified by the “and” relation. The hypotactic relationship is logically (i) non-symmetrical and “non-transitive”.

4.2. The Semantic Dimension – the Logico-semantic Relations

The system of logico-semantic relationship specifies what its name suggests: the particular kind of logical interconnection. This is, of course, the ultimate source of logic in its formal and symbolic sense; but since such systems of logic are derived from natural language, not the other way round, it is not very profitable to try and interpret natural-language logic as an imperfect copy of a logic that has been designed. The basic distinction in the language system, in the logical-semantic relationship in the clause complex, is between the two types: **expansion** and **projection**, which function in very different ways. Both these types of relationship can be construed between equal and unequal clauses. The table below shows various possibilities.

	Expanding	Projecting
Paratactic	Lectures are in the morning, office hours are in the afternoon.	I said: “Well, I love the games.”
Hypotactic	If you start trouble, we’ll finish it.	We believe that he will accept.

Fig. 8. The Logico-semantic Relations.

The nature of projection is quite simple: we use language to talk about phenomena in the world, but one group of phenomena that can be talked about is stretches of language. If we

include in our message the wording or the meaning of the original language event, we are not directly representing non-linguistic experience but giving a representation of a

linguistic representation. In the view of Thompson [14], “*the effect of projection comes from this double layer of representation; on the one hand, the language is signaled as, in some sense, not our own, but on the other hand it clearly differs from the original utterance (even if we quote it verbatim) in that it is now incorporated into our present message rather than coming straight from the original source*”. The two modes of projection are quoting and reporting.

The system of expansion allows us to develop on the experiential meanings of a clause in three main ways: through elaboration, extension and enhancement of its meaning. In clause combining by elaboration, one clause expands another by elaborating on it in greater detail, by exemplifying it or by clarifying it in other words. In clause combining by extension one clause expands another by adding something new, giving an alternative or an exception. In clause combining by enhancement, clauses of time, place, condition, purpose, cause or concession expand the primary clause by contributing these circumstantial features.

The relationships of projection and expansion are different in that projection is an essential part of the meaning of the projected clause and therefore the meaning of the projected clause will change radically if the projection is taken away, whereas typically an expanded clause would not change its meaning radically if the expansion were taken away. Therefore, expansion is a macrophenomenon and projection is a metaphenomenon [1].

6. Conclusion

The paper has been concerned with the notion of clause complex as seen in the point of

view of SFL in an endeavor to answer three questions (i) *what is a clause complex?* (ii) *where is it in the overall linguistic systems?* and (iii) *how is it organized?* The points to be arrived at are: a clause complex is a logico-semantic unit above the clause; it is metafunctionally engendered by the logical metafunction; it is located in the lexicogrammar stratum; and it can be functionally organized through the taxis system and logico-semantic relations. The notion of clause complex can be used to account in full for the functional organization of non-simple sentences. The use of the term clause complex instead of sentence allows the analysis from getting out of the constraints of written language, and opens the way to observe clause combination in spoken speech.

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Khái niệm tổ hợp cú trong ngữ pháp chức năng hệ thống

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Tóm tắt: Bài viết khảo sát khái niệm cú phức dưới ánh sáng của ngôn ngữ học chức năng hệ thống. Dựa trên quan điểm của trường phái ngôn ngữ học này, bài viết xem xét lại khái niệm cú phức và vị trí của nó trong hệ thống ngôn ngữ nói chung. Tiếp đó, bài viết nghiên cứu cấu trúc chức năng của cú phức từ hai bình diện cú pháp và ngữ nghĩa.

Từ khóa: Cú phức, thứ bậc, đơn biến, đa biến, quan hệ đồng đẳng, quan hệ phụ thuộc, bành trướng, phóng chiếu.