RESOURCES OF THE POTENTIAL MEANING OF LANGUAGE

The potential meaning of language is conceived as the historico-cultural and sociolinguistic heritage inherent in the meaning of the fixed units of a language as part of their semantic content. The question would be what units of meaning embody the historical heritage of the speaking community as their semantic content and how it affects usage. The potential meaning of language is treated, in the present paper, as an aspect of the total potential of language explained in functional linguistics as all the available options to the speaker of the language that its system offers.

In his functional theory of language (Halliday 1973, 1976, 1978), Halliday defines language as meaning potential (Halliday 1973: 51–55, 1976: 8, 9, 25, 31). This definition means primarily the possibilities language offers to mean. In Halliday's terms, this appears in the chain of what the speaker can do, in the behaviourial potential, what the speaker can mean, in the sociosemiotic potential, and, finally, what the speaker can say, in the sociolinguistic potential (Halliday 1973: 51). In this theory, which proclaims the functional nature of language and interprets the system of language as a system of meaning, the subordination of the units of meaning is downgrading. Its basic concept is the function of language as an abstract macro category of meaning covering a certain sector in the system of language. These macro sectors of meaning such as ideation (experience and logic), interpersonality (mood, modality, social relations and attitudes) and textuality (theme, voice, deixis, coherence, etc) project down on to definite structures in a language, which carry their general grammatical meaning. Down the line of delicacy, the above mentioned meaningful structures project on to smaller structures and to the word. In his summary of thus subordinated

1 In traditional linguistics, the concept of the potential meaning of language had been preceded by such notions as the idiom of a language or idiomatic usage (cf. Pei 1969: 119–120). Reviewing the works in semantics and beginning with the nineteenth century, "the Golden Age of modern philological science", the British linguist J.R. Firth laid a stress on such notions as the contextual meaning of the word, contextualisation (Firth 1957: 7–10) and "the sociological background of the usage of words in typical contexts" (Firth 1957: 28), without which, he maintained, the meaning of the word is inconceivable. These concepts will appear further in the present article as I attempt to explicate the meaning components of the fixed major units of meaning of English which bring about restrictions in usage. Such applicability of the old concepts in an explanation of the potential meaning of verbal units in within the framework of functional linguistics may mean that the cultural and sociolinguistic aspects of meaning often incorporated in the semantic structure of the verbal units of a language as contextual meaning are time tested notions and that their role in usage was so important as to be bypassed by the linguists whose works testify to the breadth of their vision. It has been only functional linguistics which introduced an all-embracing concept of language to enable a researcher to explain the nature and significance of all aspects of verbal meaning in a systemic way.
units of meaning Halliday maintained the word and the lexical item as the ultimate concrete units of meaning in his early work (Halliday 1973) and had an entry for the word specifically in the tables.

In his later work Halliday, pointed out lexical differentiation at the farthest end of delicacy and stated that grammar ends where lexis takes over (Halliday 1976: 70–72). The problem is that at the point at which lexical units and lexical meaning become prominent in syntactical structures, the determining role of the general grammatical meaning of the structures, which is directly related to the abstract meaning of the functional components in the system, (on which the conception of language system is based in functional linguistics), diminishes. This realignment of the potentialities of the units of meaning causes difficulties in usage and requires an explanation in theory. It may be seen as the immediate effect of the potential meaning of language, but it cannot be explained and interpreted drawing on the abstract categories of meaning in functional linguistics. Indeed, Halliday considered that lexical items had to be treated separately and lexical relations established in their own right. Since the aim of the present paper is to identify the units which embody resources of the historically inherited meaning, viz., of the potential meaning of language, the meaning and function of the word and those of the fixed units of meaning merit attention. The analysis is to be limited to the meaning of the concrete units as they happen to function in the uses of a language. That is why what has been conceived in functional linguistics as relevant to the problem of the present paper should be accurately outlined.

Arguing further on lexical relations, Halliday found that even when grammatical and lexical patterns were recognised, they represented "different properties of the total phenomenon of language, not properties of different parts of the phenomenon" (Halliday 1976: 77). Such an idea of grammatical and lexical patterns puts forward the notion that grammatical items can be described as entering into closed systems and ordered structures, while lexical items can be described as entering into open sets and linear collocations. At this point, he tended to relegate the study of lexis to semantics and to recommend that lexical patterns could be described either externally (denotatively or contextually) or internally (structurally and lexically) (Halliday 1976: 79–82). Thus Halliday opened up prospective research areas for further study in the field, which lay beyond his own interest. But he had unambiguously stated in the same work that "the words of the language ... represent the most delicate distinctions that the system embodies" (Halliday 1976: 21). This means that the focus in the present task has to be on the meaning of the word, whether as a single unit or as a component of fixed and recurrent structures in the English language. For meaning in speech is inconceivable as divided into lexical and grammatical, while it is fixed major

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2 Cf. "Semantics is grammar and lexicon, or grammar and lexicon are semantics" (Firth 1957: 15).
units of meaning that are most likely to incorporate the cultural and sociolinguistic aspects of meaning.

In his still more recent work, Halliday mentioned vocabulary and lexicogrammatical features with respect to a description of experiential (ideational) and interpersonal meaning in language (Halliday/Hasan 1990: 25–27). When Halliday interpreted features of the context of situation as field (experience and logic), tenor (interpersonality) and mode (textuality), he could not bypass the fact that the field of discourse was partly reflected in the vocabulary. Similarly, when he attempted to explain mode as textuality, he had to bear in mind that the linguistic context or co-text, in his terms, narrowed down contextual features to specify the meaning of concrete words and make the text comprehensible. But he emphasised the significance of the textual meanings and cohesive patterns (Halliday/Hasan 1986: 28). This again specified the sphere of Halliday’s interest.

The question of the present paper requires an investigation of the units incorporating the historically inherited sociolinguistic and cultural components of meaning because only such units represent the genuine character or the idiom of a concrete language and only such units can exercise restrictions in its use. The researcher therefore has to be conscious of both the permitting resources or the options that the system of a language offers to its speaker (language as meaning potential) and of the restricting capacity of the language, which resides in the historical content of the major and ultimate independent units of the language (the potential meaning of the language). The concept of language as meaning potential introduced by Halliday also implies restricting factors in the use of language (cf. Halliday 1978: 136), and this was explicitly stated by the author at the Ninth World Congress of Applied Linguistics in Thessaloniki in 1990. However, Halliday has not focused on the restricting potential of language for the reasons mentioned in my further statements, and, consequently, has not interpreted the meaning of the units exercising restrictions in usage. This would have required a study of the semantics of a concrete language and specifically of its lexis because linguistic restrictions derive from the historical content of the stable minor and of the fixed major lexicogrammatical units, and are conceivable only in a concrete language, while Halliday’s interest has been confined to the system of language, its functional nature and the respective relations in the broadest context.³ The present paper

³ Since Halliday is interested mainly in the nature of language system and in how it developed determined by the functions language had evolved to serve (Halliday 1973: 35, 1976: 29), he is not concerned with the concrete lexical and lexicogrammatical units and their meaning. Since he interprets only systemic relations mainly on the level of abstract categories, he again does not have to take into consideration the meaning of concrete units even though he interprets the system of language in semantic categories. Moreover, the functional basis of language system is derived by Halliday from an investigation of the child’s language development and, consequently, his conception encompasses the idiom or the restricting potentialities of language only in theory. This limitation has been pointed out by researchers into literary genre,
is a modest attempt to interpret the potential meaning of language as its restricting power in usage within Halliday's general concept of language. The problematic question is what units realise the restricting potential of language and how it happens to be exercised. The focus, consequently, is limited to only one language, viz., the English of the native adult speakers.

To identify and interpret the potential meaning of language which is the source of restricting factors in usage, because it is historical in character and is made up of units the structure and semantics of which is genuine and singular as pertaining to the linguistic tradition and culture of the speaking community, it is relevant to resort to Halliday's concept of language as meaning potential. But when the concept of potential meaning (cf. Drazdauskiene 1983) is singled out in the total meaning potential of language, analysis on the level of the abstract categories of meaning requires extension. Moreover, abstract categories by themselves do not point to the presence of any significant restrictions in the use of language. For instance, transitivity expressed by the present indefinite tense form, by an object and attending modifiers does no more than state regular or habitual process in which the subject performs an action which involves the object in certain circumstances. If the linguistic context or co-text limits the use of transitivity pattern to the past tense forms, the use of the present indefinite would violate the contextual requirements and be confusing in actual communication. Its meaning would cause doubt in comprehension at best or an assessment of a downright error in usage at worst. When the linguistic context does not limit the choice of the tense forms in transitivity patterns, which is the case in poetry and imaginative literature, the reader has no right to question the meaning of the tense form. He has only to identify and interpret it in the given poetic text and thus discover the implied meaning and figurative associations (cf. Widdowson 1992, 39–44). That is why modern authors have gone to great lengths in mixing up the regular grammatical patterns and words to create unexpected and new meanings not rarely through chaos and absurdity. Therefore it has to be assumed that the restricting potential of the grammatical patterns of a language as they appear with an endlessly new lexical content is virtually impalpable or at least vague. But the grammatical patterns can complicate understanding by confirming an error in routine usage or by presenting a challenge in a novel context.

who questioned whether it was "a matter of either principle or convenient practice" that Hallidayans "confine themselves to a synchronic approach" (Sell 1991: 1). In my reasoning above, I meant something like this aspect of "convenient practice" rather than limitation in its narrow sense because Halliday's theoretical conception is philosophically complete. Besides, the functional theory of language represents modern linguistics which, following Ferdinand de Saussure, has extricated itself from historical questions of semantics and language's change by definition, of which were yet very conscious Emil Benveniste, J.R. Firth and other scholars of their generation.
It is not so with grammatical patterns which have become fixed structurally and semantically in certain uses of a concrete language and in certain texts. One can consider the meaning of such units in English. For example: *It's been years since we last met. I haven't seen anything more beautiful...*. One has to admit that the two sentences present simple transitive constructions on the level of grammar. On the level of the logical content and semantics, the first is a statement of someone having not met someone for a long time, while the second states a person's highest appreciation of something. However, neither grammar nor semantics fully exhaust the meaning of the above utterances. What they convey on the superior levels of meaning, which would involve contextual and associative meanings and would conventionally be termed style, is that both the sentences have been extracted from spoken English, or more specifically, from social conversation or small talk. This is very significant in their sense. If these utterances were used in narrative, the meaning of the colloquial register would be prominent with respective implications. This meaning of such and similar utterances may occasionally be obtrusive, but it can also be used to advantage in imaginative literature. This is how colloquial utterances have been used in the narrative of the story *The Dead* by James Joyce and in other works employing the stream-of-consciousness technique to render reflections of actual conversation by a convergence of the units of different forms of discourse and to imply, ultimately, tumultuous thoughts and emotions.

These have been only a few instances of the simplest fixed non-idiomatic units of English, the colloquial sense of which is prominent so as to allow or reject their employment in contexts other than conversation. But these are not single units in the English language. One can increase their number at will. For example: *It's very kind of you. I'm delighted to see you. I'm so glad you like it. That would be lovely. That sounds like a very good idea. Do you mind if I sit with those people over there? I can fix it, if you don't mind. It may interest you to know that... I wanted you to be the first to know. May I have the honour of your company at dinner? Thank you for your letter of..., etc. Although non-idiomatic, all the units given above indicate the contexts of their use and this is part of their meaning. The implication of the context limits their use or becomes so prominent as to restrict their meaning. It is their potential meaning.

The restricting context-related sense of the units considered above derives from the grammatical patterns in conjunction with the vocabulary the grammatical patterns in conjunction with the vocabulary, which has come about as a result of their invariable recurrence historically. Thus it may be assumed that even the simplest fixed non-idiomatic units in English may realise potential meaning which restricts their choices. These simplest units have been known as verbal stereotypes. But there are more major units in English, some idiomatic and some not, which embody the potential meaning of this language. The potential
meaning of English may therefore be called a historically inherited corpus of meaning, sociolinguistic and sociocultural in character, actually existent in all fixed major units of this language and, to an extent, in the word (Drazdauskiene 1992: 63). A problematic question is to what extent different fixed major units of English embody the potential meaning of this language. Thus the idea of the present paper has been conceived to review resources of the potential meaning of English and analyse it specifically with respect to such fixed major units as stereotypes, formulae, response utterances, clichés and forms of address, including idioms and the word. will be considered with respect to macro units, idioms and words in this paper.

Verbal stereotypes the meaning of which has been considered above, is only one group of the fixed major units in English. The other fixed major units in this language are response utterances, clichés, formulae and forms of address. In this enumeration they have been given in the order of their growing potential meaning. Except for the idiomatic response utterances (for example: By all means, You don’t say so, Never mind and a few others), response utterances function like verbal stereotypes. Their potential meaning is sociolinguistic in character because it derives mainly from the meaning reflecting the sphere of their currency, which is additional to their thematic and logical appropriateness. (Cf. That would be lovely. That sounds like a very good idea. Nothing much. Thanks ever so.). Although the logic and topical content of the idiomatic response utterances in English may challenge the user, especially if he is a foreigner, and confuse the listener, if he is a native speaker, their potential meaning is limited to their thematic relevance and situational appropriateness. Some response utterances, however, may have the potential meaning of social character. Cf., for instance, the stressed Rather as a response to a suggestion, which moves young Americans to boisterous laughter.

The potential meaning of the English formulae is very subtle and accumulates from the typical contexts of their use as well as from their literal meaning (Drazdauskiene 1990). The potential meaning of formulae is therefore sociolinguistic and partly sociocultural in character and more powerful than that of verbal stereotypes. But stereotypes, response utterances and formulae are always used in their fixed form, virtually never paraphrased and do not have their emotive sense enhanced in any way, if only by intonation. The sociolinguistic and cultural components in their meaning, which would include social status as implied by intonation and pronunciation, sex differences, implied mainly by the choice of

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4 The fixed macro units of meaning, which essentially realise the potential meaning of language, had been singled out in an original research into the phatic use of English and, to some extent, into other uses of this language, the results of which have been reflected in two dissertations and several articles of the author of the present paper.
concrete units or gender marked words in them and which are latent until these units are appropriately used, become activated if they are misplaced in context. Therefore their sociolinguistic and cultural sense is only potential. When these units are used in narrative, they point to conversational contexts by virtue of their sociolinguistic and cultural sense. It is significant meaning, developed historically, which restricts their use, and, in its totality, manifests the power of the language in its own right.

Clichés and forms of address are marked groups of the fixed major units of meaning. Clichés are not only hackneyed expressions but units with considerable potential meaning which derives from two sources - the context of their origin, which, owing to its diachronic aspect, is sociolinguistic and sociocultural in character, and evaluative meaning which is sociocultural in character. When a cliché, as, for instance, *a thing of beauty is a joy for ever* is used in a literary study, it is most likely to be a quotation. But when the same quotation appears in a speech or a classical essay, it is a cliché, as a rule. At least it is recorded in *A Dictionary of Clichés* by Eric Partridge. Its meaning, however, is many-sided. By using it, the speaker does not only express an appreciation of singular qualities but also alludes to its original context, which is *Endymion* by John Keats and in which it is further related to the concept of increasing loveliness. Anyone who fails to grasp the extended meaning of the phrase can imply his ignorance. Whoever perceives that the user implies his own ignorance of the original context, appears to mastermind the situation. To such a person, the phrase is not only a verbal unit but also a sign which indicates the speaker's lack of knowledge and therefore, probably, taste denying one's subtlety of expression. The speaker's ignorance is thus obvious to the listener. What is more, is that a speaker may sound all the more ignorant if he emphasises the evaluative meaning of the phrase, which additionally implies his lack of taste. Since the potentiality to imply the speaker's knowledge or ignorance and his taste is built in in the above expression but is latent when the speaker refrains from any emphasis on evaluation, one can postulate it as potential meaning. Since this potential meaning is related to literature, man's knowledge *qua* taste and linguistic usage, it is sociocultural and sociolinguistic in character. Since the sociocultural aspect of the potential meaning of the unit is built up as a result of literary, historical and social heritage, it is more powerful than the sociolinguistic aspect of its meaning, which was also found prominent in verbal stereotypes, response utterances and formulae. Similar potential meaning could be traced in the use of the clichés *blissful ignorance* or *rooted in dishonour*. However, clichés, the literary source of which is not known or is less famous, have far less stronger potential meaning and even their hackneyed sense is less obvious.

To illustrate the subdued potential meaning of clichés, the meaning and use of such phrases as *a labour of love* and *to hand on the torch* might be considered. The first means an engagement which one really likes, while the second means the handling to the next in
office or to a younger generation of the tradition of freedom and enlightenment. As *A Dictionary of Clichés* by Eric Partridge attests (Partridge 1978: 126, 99), the first is no longer associated with the original Biblical sources, while the second is only a rendering of the Greek phrase of handing on a torch, not a baton, in the Greek torch-race, a glorified relay-race (λαμπάδα παραδίδοναι) (Partridge 1978: 99). Therefore when the phrase *It's a labour of love* appears in the context which actually builds up to this meaning in the novel *California Gold* by John Jakes, it looses its trite character and is only vaguely reminiscent of its hackneyed evaluation. Similarly, when the phrase *the torch has been passed to a new generation of Americans* appears in the Inaugural Address of J. F. Kennedy, it is no longer a cliché because the context builds up to its meaning, because its meaning is noble enough and because it is paraphrased. In both cases the phrases attest the intelligence of the author and the speaker and in both cases the clichés are reborn. But it is the potential meaning of the clichés and the intelligence of the users that build up to the appreciative response to these phrases from the reader and listener in the respective contexts. The potential meaning of the clichés, though significant, obviously does not affect the users' dignity when they are handled with insight and knowledge.

The potential meaning of forms of address is still more powerful because their meaning is peculiar. The meaning of the form of address *Your Excellency*, for instance, like the meaning of any other form of address, virtually has no meaning which might be called denotative. The meaning of the form of address consists of the social status of a person and of the components of the context of situation to which it applies. Thus, *Your Excellency* is a title given to a high ranking official, such as an Ambassador or High Commissioner and a Governor. This title is to be used on official occasions, at receptions and in letter writing. The title, however, should not be ceaselessly used. In a longer conversation and in a letter, "it is usual to mention 'Your Excellency' in the opening paragraph" and further use only the pronoun 'You' or 'Your' (Montague-Smith 1992: 158). This title belongs to British Ambassadors to foreign countries, both men and women, and to Ambassadors and High Commissioners to Britain as they take up their duties in London. The title is not extended to the wife of an Ambassador, who sometimes may be called "'Her Excellency' by courtesy, if coupled with her husband's name or on a list of Ambassadors' wives" (Montague-Smith 1992: 157).

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5 Cf. an authoritative author’s evaluation of the same phrase in J. F. Kennedy’s Inaugural Address: "As a symbol of freedom, of any light we use to hold back the dark, be it physical or spiritual, torch has a traditional value. To some it may even be a cliche, however honored by the wind and weather of time, like the Statue of Liberty. Perhaps the listener will recall Olympic runners bringing the divine flame from Mt. Olympus to the meeting of the competitors. Torch is surely correct enough here, for the parallel is clear; whether or not it is wholly successful depends on the degree of literary sophistication of the audience" (Carter 1969: 249).
The denotative meaning of *Your Excellency* is that it is a title or an appellation. All the other components in its meaning refer to the context of situation: the person of a high ranking official, an Ambassador or a Governor, and formal situations, both in Britain and abroad. What is more, the title should not be applied too frequently. If a speaker uses the title correctly but too frequently, he somewhat depreciates it, which equals its abuse. Thus, by missing the point of frequency the speaker exposes his ignorance and the title misses the point. By this error the speaker misses the whole unit. But what is most important is that the speaker cannot conceal his error and suffer all by himself. By virtue of being constituents of the context of situation, the components of meaning of this form of address are overtly shared, *i.e.* known, to all the participants and they can appreciate the erroneous usage. For the same reasons, all forms of address can betray the speaker in any situation and testify to his knowledge or ignorance, elicit a reaction for or against his usage. Therefore it may be assumed that the contextual components of meaning are very sensitive in the form of address as a major unit of meaning. The contextual meaning is potential because it is not activated until the form of address is correctly used. But when the speaker errs at least in one point of its contextual components, he loses the whole unit which, in addition, exposes his ignorance. So powerful potential meaning is also characteristic of formulae. Therefore it may be said that the more fixed major units of meaning a language possesses and the more standardised it is, the greater its potential meaning is.

Idioms is another group of fixed major units of meaning in English. Unlike the fixed major units of meaning analysed above, idioms possess substantial denotative meaning which does not derive from their constituent components. That is why idioms challenge the speaker primarily by their denotative meaning. Native English speakers even happen to think that there is no way of telling a foreigner from the Scandinavian countries, for instance, who knows English above criticism. However, idioms like *to be off to* or *to have on* betray even the Scandinavian by confusing him. When one is familiar with the meaning of idioms, one can use them without a flaw and sometimes without fear to be betrayed by their potential meaning. For example: *I know this song but I can't call the title to mind,* meaning 'I can't remember its title'. However, it is not always that idioms are so safe to use. A sentence *The party went on with all the courtesies and honorifics until his wife raised the roof,* would normally evoke laughter or at least a smile because the idiom in it not only means 'made noise because she was angry' but does so in an informal way. The first half of the sentence thus disagrees in style with the second and the result is a collision of the senses, which stirs the listeners to laughter or confusion at the speaker having used the idiom incongruously. Mainly because most English idioms express colloquial tone, informality, humour or derogatory attitude over and above their encoded denotative meaning, their potential meaning may be pronounced. The potentiality of idioms to express the attitude
that is inherent in their meaning but that the speaker might not have implied, makes them mean something else than the speaker intended and thus be dangerous in usage. Idioms are fixed units of meaning which have considerable potential meaning that limits their use. That is why idioms proper are not very frequent in English speech and are sparsely used even in fiction.6

It is true, idioms are often paraphrased, especially in fiction. This sometimes helps to neutralise their potential meaning and gain expressiveness. For example, when in the novel *The Razor’s Edge* William S. Maugham has his character Gray say, "'Gosh, it'll be great to get into harness again' ... 'I'm feeling my oats already'", he paraphrases the idiom *to sow one’s (wild) oats* not only to use it expressively, but also to neutralise its potential meaning, which is colloquial tone, in direct speech. Used in the narrative, the idiom would have markedly betrayed its colloquial sense and would have produced an unexpected effect if the author had not been wholly committed to a style or a technique combining different forms of discourse. The periphrasis of idioms like this renovates their meaning but it no way increases their potential meaning. It often makes their potential meaning ineffective but not because of alterations in the structure of the idiom. The potential meaning of the idiom becomes ineffective because of the equivalent context.

The potential meaning of English is similarly revealed in the sphere of the English word. The potential meaning of the English word is close to that of the idiom and different from that of the fixed macro unit. The decisive factor is the denotative or referential meaning of the word, which is substantial in conventional notional words (for example, *weather, a dress, a book, to look, to wear, to say, exciting, lovely, terrible*, etc.). Although the denotative meaning is substantial in notional words, its functional weight is inconspicuous because this meaning performs merely the sign function in usage. For instance, when somebody says in small talk *What lovely dress you’re wearing*, the meaning of the words is taken for granted and the utterance is almost always perceived as a compliment. However, and this is most important, there are no clues in the above utterance to check the actual equivalence of the meaning of the words to the referent. The reference may be true or false and the words have no power to indicate it (cf. Russell 1965: 24–25). The speaker, for instance, may be paying a superficial compliment and thinking quite the opposite of it. The words function in their literal meaning and the speaker’s actual idea is concealed. Even when there is an obvious disagreement between the meaning of the words and the referent,

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6 This generalisation has been based on the study of the texts of several novels by William Somerset Maugham, John Jakes, John Fowles and Margaret Drabble and a manual recording of the use of idioms in the works of these authors by the author of the present article. This study has also confirmed the known dictum that prose means the langauge of similes.
there is still a possibility in the meaning of the words to convey an individual opinion or impression and for the utterance to remain a compliment. The conventional meaning of the word in its sign function is a solid cover of the actual experience or truth value behind every utterance. Every speaker may go on using English words in their meaning opposite to his actual knowledge or experience, if he can unconditionally stand the loss of his meaning. Many speakers, in fact, do this, in the first instance when they are using English for socialising purposes. That is why the use of language in phatic communion is known to function in the transferred sense rather than literally (cf. Drazdauskiene 1992: 30–31).

In the referential use of language, however, the speakers normally use words in accord with their literal meaning. It is possible therefore to consider how the referential meaning differs and how different words function to activate the potential meaning of language. There are many English words, known as neutral, which conventionally denote a quality, an object or subject, a process or other referents and their significance is limited to the denotation. For example: The little girl was wearing a bright blue dress. You have heard Mr. X who is an expert in psychology. The police have excluded robbery as a motive for the murder. Mainly because the singled out words are limited to the mere denotation, it is considered safest to use words of this category. The neutral words in no way commit the speaker, nor the language in which neutral words occur exercises any power of its own through its potential meaning. Such words are mere signs and what matters in communication is the propositional contents of the utterances.

English, however, is not that mute when words of a different category appear in usage. For example: when the speaker means the official taking away of somebody's property for public use without payment and says The new regime expropriated his estate for military purposes or when he means that somebody was arrested and says He was nicked for stealing, he expresses more than mere propositional meaning. He states one idea formally and the other informally. Formality and informality are also senses but what is more important still is that the sense of formality in the case of expropriated and that of informality in the case of nicked do not depend on the speaker's will. This meaning is part of the meaning of the respective words but is not as innocuous as their conventional meaning. Formality and informality are contextual senses which have been historically associated with and become permanent in the meaning of the respective words. Because of their contextual origin, formality and informality are overtly signified by the respective words and are so prominent that any participant can witness it. In other words, formality and informality in the meaning of the concrete words are independently active and can be unobtrusive only when the words are used in the equivalent contexts. Otherwise, the words themselves signal their inappropriateness against the speaker's will and intention. Any participant who witnesses it perceives it and reacts with a smile or confused expression at the speaker, simultaneously
questioning his meaning and his knowledge of the language. Therefore the words with formal or informal, literary, archaic or derogatory meaning oblige their user to mind the contexts in which he intends to use the words. When the contextual meaning of the words is in agreement with the immediate context of usage, their potentialities to signal the context are neutralised. When, however, the contextual meaning of the words disagrees with the immediate context of usage, it is the words themselves rather than the speaker that signal their inappropriateness. This happens because some words have the potential meaning expressed by contextual semes which become activated and mean of their own when such words appear in contexts which disagree with the contextual semes in their meaning. The speaker cannot conceal or ignore his choice of words. The words speak for themselves. The word's power depends on the contextual components of its meaning and on how well one can handle the word to neutralise the word's expository potential (cf. Jackson 1991: 142–156).

The meaning of the words described as contextual is potential meaning because it has to appear in contrary contexts to become activated. It is not all English words that possess potential meaning. Most of the English words are mere signs conventionally denoting some referent or contributing to reference. Their meaning does not extend beyond the innocuous conventional signification. It is only for the words the meaning of which is limited to the conventional meaning of the sign that the theories of the speaker rather than the word determining the meaning of the word (cf. Ogden/Richards 1923: 9–10; Hayakawa 1962: viii–ix; Hayakawa 1964: 314; Salomon 1966: 1–2; Quirk 1968: 133, 208; McAuley 1968: 127; Shipley 1977: 95; Pinckert 1981: 15) are true. For all other words which possess potential meaning and which are sometimes called stylistically marked words the conception that the speaker means rather than the word does hold no ground. The English words which possess potential meaning in the form of contextually marked semes mean by themselves over and above what the speaker means by them. Therefore these words are dangerous to the user. They can potentially expose the lameness of the speaker's intention, his downright error and ignorance. That is why so small a unit of language as the word can exercise its restrictive power over and above the speaker's intention.

Now that the potential meaning of all the fixed units of English, i.e. that of the major units of meaning – verbal stereotypes, response utterances, clichés, formulae and forms of address, idioms and words has been reviewed, some generalisations are required in terms of the functional theory of language. In accord with the original conception of the problem of this paper, the idea has been to view the potential meaning of English focusing on the semantic rather than the grammatical component. The structural component, however, was not ignored entirely because units of the fixed structure have been considered. The point is that the structural component of language does not fix potential meaning in itself and by itself. Although functionally developed, the structural component of English means pat-
terned uses which had been contextually marked since their origin. Such contextual patterning can be easily traced in letter closing formulae, such as *Yours sincerely* or *Yours faithfully*, which originated from the extended closing statement which could have been the following: “*Written at W., ..., second day of May ... by your true and faithful friends...*” (cf. Drazdauskiene 1990: 75). Similarly, *Good bye* had originated from *God be with you* and meant it or *Good morning* had been and meant *I wish you a good morning*.

Like in all other cases of contextual patterning in English, grammatical structures in letter closing formulae have been generalised so much in the history of English as to become and mark only the most general categories of meaning. These categories may be transitivity, modality, qualification and others. The concrete grammatical patterns no longer bear any concrete meaning by themselves to confirm or overrule their application. It is true, some grammatical patterns may be more typical of some contexts than others. For example, cause clauses, especially those joined by the conjunction *because*, are not typical of phatic communion or small talk in English. The currency of cause clauses would distort the otherwise light paratactic syntax of small talk if they were frequent. They would become noticeable and objectionable in the community of the native speakers.

However, grammatical patterns themselves do not have the power to signal or forewarn usage as unacceptable or markedly limited to singular contexts. One can consider, for instance, the pattern *X requests the ... of ... of ....* This pattern as it stands has only the permitting potential and nothing limiting its use. As one fills in the pattern with concrete words, one can contemplate its restricting potentialities. If the above pattern were completed as *X requests the consent of the Company of the United Brothers for the deal as confirmed by the attached documents*, it would be only as more or less restricted expression applicable in or implying written business correspondence. But if the above pattern were completed as *X requests the honour our of the company of Mr and Mrs B. ...*, it would be a definitely formal expression applicable in a formal invitation. In both cases the use of the two sentences would be limited to the two kinds of concrete contexts and to one medium, i. e. writing. Moreover, the expression in the first case might have variant patterns and lexical content, while, in the second case, the pattern and the lexical content would remain fixed if formal social relations were to be satisfied. This means that the meaning of grammatical patterns is too general to confirm their restricting potential which is always realised as contextual meaning accumulated through their recurrence (cf. Halliday 1976: 59) and associates with sociocultural and sociolinguistic components in the contents of the concrete lexicogrammatical units. Therefore the theory which focuses only on the abstract or general meaning of the grammatical structures leaves the reality of the potential meaning of language out of its focus. When the theoretical focus is on the use of language, which is a concrete major category of meaning in speech, the investigation narrows down to concrete
actual utterances rather than to abstract categories of meaning and never leaves the meaning of the lexical items out of its focus.

But the potential meaning of language is not limited to the meaning of the concrete lexical units. It is related to the general meaning of the patterns in the language. That sector of the functional theory of language which focuses on the use of language does not exclude the concept of the function of language because the use of language is only an instance of the reality of the function of language. Therefore it is credible to conceive that the lexicogrammatical structures of a language, which are subsumed by and subjected to the general meaning of the function of language, (for instance, ideation, transitivity, object and adverbial clauses, collocation, etc.), are formed and turn into patterns in the uses of the language. Otherwise stated, grammatical patterning begins as contextual patterning. Owing to its recurrence, the meaning of the grammatical structure becomes so general at a certain point in the functioning of language that it ceases to be contextually marked. For instance, X asks/wants/desires A to ... B. Depending on its lexical content, this structure may be acceptable in numerous contexts with various degrees of formality. This is so because the logic of the grammatical patterning as its most general meaning issues from the meaning of the function of language and is essentially permitting in usage. If it were not, language could not function because it would be obstacles to instead of the potentialities of meaning.

It is the concrete semantic components related to the culture and the sociolinguistic tradition of the speaking community, and intrinsic in fixed lexicogrammatical units that make up a body of meaning, which thus encodes the historico-cultural tradition of the speaking community transformed into the units of meaning and has been termed the potential meaning of language here because it has the potentiality to act as the restricting power in usage. The most general and flexible component of the potential meaning of language is contextual meaning. But contextual meaning comprises various constituents and itself is realised through structural patterns partly determined by the meaning of the words of the language. If one considers the meaning of such a major unit in English as the form of address, for instance, one has to admit that its restricting sense is realised through contextual components of generic meaning, such as the social status of the participants, their age and education, their relations and other contextual components, rather than a concrete name of a concrete person and a concrete situation on a concrete day. The role of a concrete person in a concrete situation is that of a witness who, by his very presence, actually confirms how accurately the speaker has chosen the form of address. This is how the accuracy in the realignment of the contextual components of meaning in the fixed lexicogrammatical units of a language with reality is tested. If the choice of the form of address is accurate, acceptability is the result of this test. If it is not, the speaker's cultural, educational and ethnic identity is exposed. This expository potential of the language derives from the conventionally used words in the fixed structures, or from the potential
words in the fixed structures, or from the potential meaning of language, in terms used in the present paper.

However, part of the words of a concrete language, English in the present case, the semantic structure of which includes contextual semes, have the power to activate the potential meaning of the language in their own right. The contextual meaning of concrete words (for example: to have a repute of a connoisseur, to be an ace and to be an expert) derives from their etymology and their recurrence in identical contexts, which becomes the shared knowledge of the speaking community and is consequently marked as formal, informal and neutral values to their meaning. The potential meaning of a language is also related to the ultimate semes in the semantic structure of the word, which are culture-bound. When the potential meaning accumulates in the English word, it determines or at least limits what is permissible in collocations. Most of the collocations in English depend on the proximity of the words in a phrase or a clause and are determined by the tightness of the internal semantic bonds, which may be motivated or not, rather than by flexion agreement. But this does not mean the freedom of word order in the clause or collocation. The intricacy of the syntactical bonds in synthetic languages, which owes to the inflexions, is replaced by far tighter syntactic bonds, often precisely semantically motivated, which are more intricate than the inflectional bonds because they are covert in the analytical language. When analytically motivated, the internal semantic bonds draw on the semes from the deep semantic structure of the word, simultaneously embodying the word’s potential meaning because, although contextual by nature, it appears to be a seme in the semantic structure of the word.

The potential meaning of language exercises its power on all levels of meaning in speech. As has been explained in the preceding consideration, the potential meaning of language derives from the fixed major units of meaning of English, including the word. These units of meaning become fixed and accumulate in language owing to their historical and contextual recurrence, and are preserved and perfected in the language owing to its uses and functions. The units that foster the potential meaning of language are lexico-grammatical units in which both the structural and lexical meaning interrelate. It would not be too incredible to suppose that the restricting power of the potential meaning of language has its inception at the meeting point of two kinds of patterning, structural and se-

7 This notion might be a warning to the purists' attempts to protect minority languages. In the purists' practice, exertion is rarely in proportion to what is required, i.e. much energy is often wasted in correcting the ways of single minor units, such as concrete words, which may be undesirable because of their supposed etymology, or the spread of some accidental structures because of their analogies with those in undesirable languages. A far more productive practice might be to foster the uses of language which contribute significantly to the potential meaning of language by polishing the fixed major units of meaning and simultaneously standardise the language. This, however, requires communication of the Western tradition, whether it takes the form of the Great Conversation or only of small talk.
mantic, and is realised when concrete words appear in concrete structural patterns. The role of the concrete words is that of a test on the other lexical members within a phrase or a clause exercised by attraction or rejection of other lexical choices by way of the semantic and logical analysis of the activated components of meaning within them. Therefore language is both a premising and a restricting potential. Since the meaning of lexical units is more flexible or they can satisfy more patterns than there are contextual conditions which the structural patterns can satisfy, it is lexical units that are ultimately at issue when the restricting power of the potential meaning of language is to be managed. It is, however, lexical units in the fixed structural patterns rather than lexical units by themselves that ultimately neutralise restrictions arising from the potential meaning of language. But a single word comprising contextual semes in its semantic structure may suffice to activate the potential meaning of language and to expose the speaker's proficiency and culture. Therefore the focus in this paper has been on the fixed major units of meaning in English, both non-idiomatic and idiomatic, on the idioms and words.

As the historical and cultural heritage of a speaking community semantically encoded in the language spoken, the potential meaning of language is a concrete phenomenon. It is possible to speak credibly only of the potential meaning of a definite language, because the uniqueness of any language is essentially determined by its potential meaning. The general statements in the present paper refer only to the basic concepts and principles pertaining to culture and the transformation of the extralinguistic into the semantic, in the development of the language in use. In these generalisations, I have attempted to observe the conceptual integrity of the functional theory of language, although my references to it have been contextual rather than developmental.

The potential meaning of English and its resources have been analysed in the present paper. It has been shown that the resources of the potential meaning of English owe most significantly to the respective meaning in fixed major units of meaning, such as verbal stereotypes, response utterances, formulae, forms of address and clichés, and to the word as to the stable ultimate unit of meaning. These units are marked by contextual meaning in their content, which is patterned on both sides, the structural and the lexical, because the contexts of their recurrence and, to an extent, their etymology, build up their semantic structure by a stratified overlap of the contexts to which some of the semes in their meaning refer. The abstract grammatical meaning of the structures in the fixed units of meaning is a reflection of their invariant recurrence in identical contexts, but this meaning is not solely determining limitations to the speakers' options from the system because it is not isolated in speech. In the fixed non-idiomatic units of meaning, their structural meaning is overtly related to the concrete words, the meaning of some of which also reflects their belonging, which is usually marked by the conventional lexicographic categories of sense.
have a different structural meaning but a similar contextual identity, not without relevance of the meaning of the words that make them up. Otherwise stated, with only some words excluded, these units contain contextual semes, owing to which, these semes make a body of sense overtly shared by the speakers of the language. That is to say that the historico-cultural meaning of these semes, identify these units as sensitive mediators between the converging contexts of culture and situation, on the one hand, and the actual speakers, on the other. These units can therefore test their equivalence to the context of situation or their own stylistic appropriateness in a given linguistic context (or co-text) per se. What is more, is that their overt contextual meaning extends their potential to expose the verbal inaccuracies of the speakers much to the speakers' depreciation and inconvenience. It is the fixed major units of meaning and the contextually significant words in a language that determine the idiom of the language and exercise the language's power over the speaker's mind. This potential of the language has been called potential meaning in the present paper, and its phenomenal role had been envisaged in Halliday's concept of language as meaning potential. The present paper has only offered an explanation of its resources in English.

With the principal uses of English, viz., the phatic and the referential, both incorporating the emotive use, highly developed in Anglo-Saxon culture, the analysed units of meaning which make the resources of the potential meaning of this language, remain in active currency, are polished and enriched, while the dictionaries contribute to their standardisation and to the potentialities of the language thereof. With the resources of the potential meaning of English voluminous, recorded in the dictionaries and alive in current usage, it would not be an exaggeration to say that the potential meaning of this language is so powerful that this language functions as a servant to the speaking community, for it can expose any outsider, and as a power, for it can protect itself as a living body on its own.

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