SUPPLEMENTARY READING: CIRCUMSTANCE

I am the very slave of circumstance. (George Gordon, Lord Byron (1821): Sardanapalus)

In section 6.9 of the Functional Analysis of English (FAE), there is a very brief treatment of the function Circumstance, the experiential category that can co-occur at clause rank with Process and Participant and conflates with circumstantial Adjunct, usually realized by an adverbal group or a prepositional phrase. I say ‘usually’ because there are exceptions. For example, a Circumstance: Location: temporal might be realized by a nominal group without a preposition: e.g. Tuesdays; that evening; the following year; the day before you came.

After listing the nine types of Circumstance (Extent, Location, Manner, Cause, Contingency, Accompaniment, Role, Matter and Angle), we copped out by saying: ‘considerations of space preclude further discussion here.’ This was perfectly true, but we now have this space on this website (also limited, alas) to rectify the situation very slightly.

Obviously, there is much more detail in Halliday’s Introduction to Functional Grammar (IFG): Section 5.6, which offers a very extensive treatment that addresses all kinds of difficult issues that we have deliberately avoided, but also provides numerous examples and further explanation that may help to clear up some difficulties. Meanwhile, here is more on the nine types, mainly in the form of examples of each with their sub-types and, in conclusion, a few words of warning. As in IFG, we give some typical lexis associated with the Circumstance listed or an explanatory comment, and then one example of each type or sub-type. Some of the examples may contain other Circumstances besides those that illustrate the subcategory exemplified, but the exemplifying ones are in italics.

Extent

Circumstances of extent express such semantic notions as distance (how far), duration (for how long) and frequency (how often).

- These are scattered throughout the country and include most of the variety of habitats in Japan. (Extent: distance)
- Tom has been a horse dentist for fifteen years. (Extent: duration)
- Uncle Mick had dragged him *time and time again* to see his own beloved New York Giants. (Extent: frequency)

**Location**

Location is concerned with *place* (where) and *time* (when). Events take place in time and space. *IFG* mostly uses the terms *spatial* and *temporal* for these two sub-types.

- He drove *down to the beach*, but did not park *near* Pepe’s. (Location: spatial)
- I forgot to put it out for the birds *yesterday morning*. (Location: temporal)

**Manner**

This type has four sub-types:

- **Means** (how: e.g. with what tools? what methods? e.g. *with a key*, *by magic*, *electronically*)
- **Quality** (how: in what manner or style, e.g. *quietly*, *briskly*, *with some hesitation*)
- **Comparison** (how: like what? e.g. *similarly*, *in a different way*, *as before*, *like an angel*)
- **Degree** (how much: e.g. *greatly*, *considerably*, *a little*, *a bit*, *very much*)

- The ageing Rodin hacked *with a scalpel* at the sensitive, sinewy perfection of his clay figures. (Manner: means)
- The brain has been damaged and has thus lost its ability to control motor movement *in the usual fashion*. (Manner: quality)
- And there, after her warming-up exercises, she leapt *like a gazelle*. (Manner: comparison)
- Fittings should be *completely* removed for cleaning. (Manner: degree)

**Cause**

- **Reason** (why: e.g. *because of*, *thanks to*, *owing to*)
- **Purpose** (why, what for: e.g. *for*, *for the purpose of*, *with the aim of*)
- **Behalf** (who for: e.g. *for*, *on behalf of*)

- *As a result of this*, he was suspended for two years, which of course delayed his entry into first-class cricket. (Cause: reason)

You might object here that the previous example is more like ‘result’ than ‘reason’, but there is no Circumstance of Result in Halliday’s model. As always, the terms are used in a special sense (in this instance a more general sense).

- He had been hanging on at Etten *in hopes of a visit from Mauve*. (Cause: purpose)
In the present context, the question is whether one State can enter into a treaty on behalf of another. (Cause: behalf)

**Contingency**
Condition (under what conditions – in case of, in the event of)
Default (in default of, in the absence of, failing)
Concession (in spite of, despite)

- An interior panic button allows occupants to draw attention in case of attack. (Contingency: condition)
- Let’s call it a compromise for want of a better term. (Contingency: default)
- The hill feels peaceful in spite of tourists. (Contingency: concession)

**Accompaniment**
This term is fairly self-explanatory, but there are two sub-types:
Comitative (who with, what with: with/without)
Additive (as well as, instead of, besides)

- You starred in a film called River of No Return with Marilyn Monroe. (Accompaniment: comitative)
- Again the howl, nearer, more drawn out, chilling the heart as well as the blood. (Accompaniment: additive)

**Role**
Guise (as what, for what: e.g. by way of, in the form of)
Product (into what: e.g. into)

- [...] as a teacher I assume the right to call my students by their first names. (Role: guise)
- You can convert your garden into a butterfly haven. (Role: product)
Matter
No subtypes. Matter as in ‘subject matter’ (about what. This usually occurs in verbal process and is difficult to separate from Verbiage). The expression of men’s ‘sexist’ behaviour in the next example is Circumstance: Matter:

- He spoke of men’s ‘sexist’ behaviour, but laid the responsibility for providing a remedy with women, who must exercise a ‘civilizing influence’ on these infantile people.

However, in the following example, the nominal group men’s sexist behaviour is Verbiage, i.e. not a Circumstance but a Participant:

He described men’s sexist behaviour

Tricky, to say the least!

Angle
Angle is concerned with point of view and relates to Sayer or Senser. There are 2 sub-types:
Source (attribution: according to X, in the words of Y)
Viewpoint (in my opinion, for me)

- According to the great sleuth, the time was 3.17 pm. (Angle: source)
- For me the important thing is the play. (Angle: viewpoint)

Fuzzy edges
Needless to say, the boundaries between the types and sub-types are not always as clear-cut as we might wish. For example, in our earlier example Jake said nothing in the car, the prepositional phrase in the car is a fairly clear example of location in space. It is an answer to the hypothetical question:

Where was Jake situated when he said nothing?

but it could also be construed as answering a hypothetical question about time:

When did Jake say nothing?
Answer: (When he was) in the car.
In fact, it is not likely that you will often need to make the more delicate distinctions among sub-types, and for most purposes it may be enough simply to identify an item as Circumstance without specifying which. However, the details are useful as guidelines to what sort of thing the less delicate, higher category label includes. So you might not need to decide between spatial and temporal in the example above, but knowing that both are included will help you to decide that it is Location.

Sometimes, of course, it is not obvious to which higher Circumstance type a specific instance should be assigned. The line between Extent and Location, for example, is fuzzy. Take the clause:

*Dr Ali had been particularly active during Ramadan.*

In this clause, the Adjunct *during Ramadan* is certainly a Circumstance, but it is open to discussion whether it should be classed as *duration*, which is a sub-type of Extent, or *temporal*, which is a sub-type of Location. A similar query might even be raised with our previous example: *Jake said nothing in the car.* We said that it could be *Location: spatial* or *Location: temporal*, but we might want to argue that it could be *Extent: duration* (= Jake said nothing during the time he was in the car). In fact, it is not a real problem because any of these meanings could be intended.

**Circumstance within the clause versus dependent expansion clause**

It *is* important, though, to make a distinction between examples like the ones we are focusing on here, which are Adjuncts/Circumstances and therefore constituents of the clause, and structures which are clauses in their own right. Confusion may arise because not only do they have a similar semantic load, but they also often have the ‘same word’ functioning as preposition in the case of Adjuncts or binding conjunction in the case of clauses: *in spite of, during, because of, until, before, after,* etc.

Adjunct/Circumstance

- The hill feels peaceful *in spite of tourists*. (Contingency: concession)
- Dr Ali had been particularly active *during Ramadan*. (see discussion above)
- Jake said nothing *in the car*. (see discussion above)
Dependent clause (expansion)

- The hill feels peaceful *in spite of tourists being there*.
- Dr Ali had been particularly active *while Ramadan was being observed*.
- Jake said nothing *when he was in the car*.

The italicized bits in the second set of sentences (constructed by us) are not Circumstances even though each conveys a roughly similar message to its counterpart in the original sentences. In Halliday’s grammar, they are distinguished from the first set because they are clauses in their own right (*aka* ranking clauses) and not constituents of a clause:

- (α) The hill feels peaceful || (β) *in spite of tourists being there*.
- (α) Dr Ali had been particularly active || (β) *while Ramadan was being observed*.
- (α) Jake said nothing || (β) *when he was in the car*.

In other models of grammar, this may not be the case. For example, in the Cardiff Grammar (Fawcett, Tucker, *et al*.), which is another branch of SFL, the second set would be treated as embedded clauses filling an Adjunct slot and hence similar to the other examples. (See also on this website: Supplementary Reading: Cardiff Grammar.)

**Circumstance versus Postmodifier/Qualifier in a nominal group**

Another possible source of confusion is the fact that superficially similar structures may in fact have different functions. For example, a prepositional phrase that at first glance may be thought to resemble an Adjunct conflating with Circumstance may in fact be a Postmodifier/Qualifier in a nominal group:

Circumstance: Location: spatial:

- But *outside China*, sun-dried bricks are used most extensively in the rich south-west of the United States.

Postmodifier/Qualifier (italicized) in a nominal group (underlined):

- The Chinese population *outside China* may play a part in this.
Circumstance: Accompaniment: comitative:

- A Tory Minister was once caught travelling on a train *without a ticket*.

Postmodifier/Qualifier in a nominal group:

- *Anyone without a ticket* will not be allowed in.

**Exercises**

Two relevant exercises can be found on this website in exercises 7 and 8 for Chapter 6.

**References**
