

# Unit 4 Functions

## What is a function?

A **function** is a reason why we communicate. Every time we speak or write, we do so for a purpose or function. Here are some examples of functions:

apologising	greeting	clarifying	inviting
advising	agreeing	disagreeing	refusing
thanking	interrupting	expressing obligation	expressing preferences

Functions are a way of describing language use. We can also describe language grammatically or lexically (through vocabulary). When we describe language through functions we emphasise the use of the language and its meaning for the people who are in the **context** where it is used.

## Key concepts

Look at this table. What do you think an 'exponent' is?

Context	Exponent (in speech marks)	Function
A boy wants to go to the cinema with his friend tonight.	The boy says to his friend: 'Let's go to the cinema tonight.'	<u>Suggesting/making a suggestion</u> about going to the cinema
A girl meets some people for the first time. She wants to get to know them.	The girl says to the group: 'Hello. My name's Emilia.'	<u>Introducing yourself</u>
A customer doesn't understand what a shop assistant has just said.	The customer says to the shop assistant: 'Sorry, what do you mean?'	<u>Asking for clarification</u> (i.e. asking someone to explain something)
A girl writes a letter to a relative thanking her for a birthday present.	The girl writes 'Thank you so much for my lovely ...'	<u>Thanking someone for a present</u>

The language we use to express a function is called an **exponent**. The pieces of direct speech in the middle column in the table above are all examples of exponents. In the third column, the functions are underlined. You can see from the table that we use the *ing* forms of verbs (e.g. *suggesting*, *asking*) to name functions. The words after the function in the third column are not the function. They are the specific topics that the functions refer to in these contexts.

An exponent can express several different functions. It all depends on the context it is used in. For example, think of the exponent 'I'm so tired'. This could be an exponent of the function of describing feelings. But who is saying it? Who is he/she saying it to? Where is he/she saying it? i.e. what is the context in which it is being said? Imagine saying 'I'm so tired' in these different contexts:



Context	Function
A boy talking to his mother while he does his homework	Requesting to stop doing homework
A patient talking to her doctor	Describing feelings

One exponent can express several different functions because its function depends on the context. One function can also be expressed through different exponents.

Here are five different exponents of inviting someone to lunch. How are they different from one another?

Coming for lunch?

Come for lunch with us?

Would you like to come to lunch with us?

Why don't you come for lunch with us?

We would be very pleased if you could join us for lunch.

These exponents express different **levels of formality**, i.e. more or less relaxed ways of saying things. Generally speaking, **formal** (serious and careful) exponents are used in formal situations, **informal** (relaxed) exponents in informal situations and **neutral** (between formal and informal) exponents in neutral situations. It is important to use the level of formality that suits a situation. This is called **appropriacy**. A teacher who greets a class by saying 'I'd like to wish you all a very good morning' is probably using an exponent of the function of greeting that is too formal. A teacher who greets a class by saying 'Hi, guys!' might be using language that is too informal. Both of these could be examples of **inappropriate** use of language. It would probably be **appropriate** for the teacher to say 'Good morning, everyone' or something similar.

## ■ Key concepts and the language teaching classroom

- In language teaching, coursebooks are often organised around functions.
- For example, the map of the book in a coursebook could list functions and language like this:

Functions	Language
Expressing likes	First and third person present simple affirmative: <i>I like ...</i> , <i>he/she likes ...</i>
Expressing dislikes	First and third person present simple negative: <i>I don't like ...</i> , <i>he/she doesn't like ...</i>

- Functions are often taught in coursebooks together with the grammar of their main exponents. There is an example of this in the map of the book above. You can see that the language in the second column includes 'present simple affirmative', which is a grammatical term, while '*I like ...*, *he/she likes ...*' are exponents of the function 'Expressing likes'.
- Combining functions and grammar helps to give grammar a meaning for learners and helps them to learn functions with **grammatical structures** that they can then use in other contexts.
- A functional approach to teaching language helps teachers find real-world contexts in which to present and practise grammar, and helps learners to see the real-world uses of the grammar they learn.

See Units 15 and 16 for teaching activities for functions; Units 18 and 20 for lesson planning and Units 26–27 for classroom functions.