

“The term ‘function’ has no place outside mathematics”: is this even coherent?

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Abstract. This paper argues that a criticism attributed to Gregory Bateson – that the term ‘function’ is from mathematics and has no place in social science – looks incoherent, when subject to clarification.

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Hoping for some fun

Orbiting this Sun

Thomas Hylland Eriksen reports a criticism of functionalism made decades ago:

Already in 1936, Gregory Bateson had written that the term ‘function’ is an expression from mathematics that has no place in social science.

(Bateson 1958 [1936]). (Eriksen 2015: 108)

Perhaps this is not quite the same as saying, “The concept of function has no place outside of mathematics.” Anyway, let’s work with that simplification to introduce an objection. Place is metaphor. How do we clarify that metaphor? Here is a way:

(Clarification) The concept of function has no function outside of mathematics.

But on the surface at least, the second appearance of the word “function” is a non-mathematical use. So an objection is that the criticism is self-defeating. We cannot clarify it without accepting legitimate non-mathematical uses.

Reference. Eriksen, T.H. 2015 (fourth edition). *Small Places, Large Issues: An Introduction to Social and Cultural Anthropology*. London: Pluto Press.