

## ON LANGUAGE AS MEANING MAKING RESOURCE\*

This book, edited by A. Sánchez Macarro and R. Carter, is based on a selection of papers presented in Valencia in 1995, at the VIIth International Systemic Functional Workshop. The sixteen papers are presented in two sections, with an introduction by Gunther Kress. For ease of reference the book closes with two indices of subjects and names. The papers collected here under the title *Linguistic Choice across Genres* follow a functional perspective on language, in contrast with the consideration of language as a set of rules of old schools, with the conviction that exploring language functionally is also essential to understand the nature of language itself (M.A.K. Halliday 1978: 36). The notion of “language as resource” —expression coined by Halliday (R. Hasan 13)— is typically presented in the linguistics literature of systemic inspiration as the key notion to understand an interpretation of language in situational and cultural context. Contexts lead to the consideration of language within the broader system of semiotics without implications of overdetermination —in the sense of imposing models, as it has sometimes been erroneously understood (J. Martin 1992: 574)— but with the key concept of interface: mutual influence in which all the elements influence each other in a multilevel space and with multidimensional interpretations. This dynamic relationship can be illustrated by what Halliday himself says about the paradigmatic environment in systemics: “Here the description is based on system; and text is interpreted as the process of continuous movement through the system, a process which both expresses the higher orders of meaning that constitute the “social semiotic,” the meaning systems of the culture, and at the same time changes and modifies the system itself” (M.A.K. Halliday 1978: 137).

The Introduction by G. Kress provides, on the one hand, a natural framework for all the other contributions and, on the other hand, justifies also the title of this review. Here the author stresses in a very creative way the importance of the text as an object with a multiple producership and a multiple readership. Kress, very aptly focusing on material in secondary education classrooms, vindicates the value of mundane texts for the curriculum —an approach that has been long overlooked— and then his reflections take us “from theories of use (*choice* from existing resources) to theories of the transformative action of meaning-making in the context of available semiotic resources” (26), adopting a non-explicitly stated neo-marxist positioning towards linguistics as social action in the educational context.

The first section of the book, *Written Genres*, contributes particularly important new insights to different aspects of the area. This is the case of Geoff Thompson’s article, “Resonance in text,” where he illustrates different ways in which resonance may function in the analysis of two texts. The *dynamic* perspective on lexicogrammatical

choices —he mentions L. Ravelli 1995— demonstrates once more the importance of the consideration of text as resource of meaning. He introduces the new term, “Resonance,” not as an element of the lexicogrammatical system but as a communicative strategy at discourse level (following Martin 1992), an element of the semantic prosody brought in by Louw 1993, expliciting once more the multiplicity of logico-semantic systems in Hasan’s cohesive harmony, impinging on experiential, interpersonal and even textual meanings.

Thomas Bloor explores the conditionals using two genres: economic forecasts and linguistic philosophy research articles. He provides a perceptive analysis even of challenging issues, acknowledging at the time that conditionals remain problematic for English lexicogrammar in connection with use and that there is much work to be done across text-types. Of particular value is his down-to-earth approach. He openly states that if we want to make any progress in describing conditionals, meaning “must constantly inform any discussion of the lexico-grammatical realizations and, for anything approaching a comprehensive treatment, examination of actual occurrence in text is crucial” (61). This reminds us of that well-known passage where Halliday (1985: xvii) insists on the importance of grammar in any linguistic analysis, saying that it is “an illusion” to think that we can work without it.

In the following paper, Michael P. Jordan defines cause-effect relations as one of the most important logical relations in language. He analyses the signals of those relations in texts, including less-recognized methods such as: null indications, propositions, time adverbials, *-ings* and clausal *which* in intraclausal and interclausal relations as well as intersentential relations, connecting the different kinds of realizations not only to lexico-grammatical choices but also to register, level of formality, variety, cohesion, emphasis, presupposition and lexical continuity. The author is also conscious of the difficulty of describing the circumstances which constrain choice within varieties of texts. This paper has some points in common with the collaborative work of Angela Downing and Julia Lavid, where qualitative elements are also to be considered to account for the choices observed in the quantitative analysis of texts. Taking a more strictly Hallidayan approach, Michael P. Jordan refers to pragmatic, grammatical, textual and sociological circumstances of any particular occurrence of the relation (cause-effect), whereas A. Downing and J. Lavid talk of more precise notions of *discourse purpose* (namely: expository or explanatory, procedural, and information-seeking) and its realization into the corresponding text type, and *rhetorical structure* (particularly: contrasts, elaborations, sequences, and disjunctions) as playing a role in the distribution of Thematic Progression patterns in the three languages: English, Italian and German. A. Downing and J. Lavid are also concerned with the mismatches between discourse purpose and its corresponding text type, which they say are probably due to socio-cultural factors such as social distance and social role between text producers and receivers: while British administrative forms reduce the social distance and the hierarchical roles between the Administration and its users, not being intimidating in tone, Italian and German forms sound rather officious and unfriendly.

Vicente López-Folgado addresses the problem of the use of epithets in the written genres: news, fiction and science. The author begins his paper drawing attention to the semantic criteria for the distinction of the varied adjectival category and then, after some considerations about the nature of the nominal group structure, concludes

that that not only genre but also the communicative goals of the speakers can anticipate, to some extent, the uses of premodifying epithets.

The paper presented by Eija Ventola is of particular interest as it raises issues that we all, as readers of the literature, have in mind whenever approaching the excerpts that exemplify the cases in point proposed for analysis. Sociological areas of Consensus/Confrontation are examined in terms of Alignment and Bashing strategies in academic texts. She adopts a systemic-functional perspective, analysing the interpersonal choices explicitly realising these strategies and focusing mainly on Bashing strategies. She invites all linguists to use mechanisms to enhance cooperation rather than confrontation in our research work.

The following paper by Louise J. Ravelli is one of the most important contributions to enhance the value of SFL for analysing all kinds of texts. And, no doubt, in the context of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney (the MCA), the texts under consideration instantiate language in operation, the material site of a plurality of related social discourses. The written texts are brochures and “wall” texts which provide a guide to and explanation of the exhibition for the visitors. The institution also requested advice on potential changes to better serve its public. The author demonstrates how choices in wording imply variation in meaning at multiple levels. As she chooses examples sequenced from the least complex, most concrete, to the most complex, least concrete, she demonstrates that there is no such thing as “simple” variation in language. The typical problems found have to do with *Mode* and are concerned with density: texts exhibiting all the features of highly written language and to thematic signalling: macro and hyperThemes and a lack of clear signalling in exhibition space and orientation point. Other problems have to do with *Field*: Technical terms should be explained through particular grammatical constructions which seem to characterise the technicality of art discourse. Although the problems were easily identified and rectified, apparently “simple” linguistic changes have other consequences, and may not, indeed, be so easy to adopt. When unpacking nominalisations, for example, human agency is immediately foregrounded by bringing the text closer to spoken form, and this accessibility may be institutionally synonymous with the banal or ordinary. In this article, Louise J. Ravelli clearly demonstrates that changes suggested at the lexicogrammatical level revealed and challenged the institution’s “discursive location” in Foucauldian terms, and, in a broader context, also in Bakhtinian terms. As Paul J. Thibault puts it: “... specific texts both instantiate and realize the heteroglossic relations of alliance, conflict, opposition, and co-optation among discursive positioned-practices in the social formation” (Paul J. Thibault 1991: 120).

Meriel Bloor calls our attention to the ways in which the scientific register of English is changing as a result of developments in computer science. She looks at how the context of situation influences the linguistic choices made by writers and speakers, and suggests that contextual change widens the choices available as the language is re-constructed to fit the changing context. She goes so far as to say that rapid changes in computer science have forced linguistic innovation on three counts: “the development of *new communicative events (or genres)*, the development of *new styles of rhetoric* and the development of *new terminology* with its concomitant lexicogrammatical variation” (156). Nowadays, for example, most students write few formal essays, reports and projects being the preferred genres; neologisms in science

traditionally coined from Greek and Latin roots, are either coined from Old English roots or are metaphorical extensions of the general stock of lexical items; scientific English now has features closer to spoken discourse than traditional scientific writing. She concludes her article arguing that, in spite of the apparent accessibility introduced into the language of science, the information in the new genres of computing is controlled by different “in-groups” and so the texts are not necessarily more accessible to uninitiated readers.

Pilar Garcés-Conejos and Antonia Sánchez-Macarro present in collaboration the paper: “Scientific Discourse as Interaction: Scientific Articles vs. Popularizations.” The aim of the paper is “to further develop some points found in two articles by Myers” (190). They make a careful analysis of the different kind of politeness devices used in ten articles on the field of genetics selected from those published by the well known POP *Scientific American* and using Brown and Levinson’s postulates on politeness and Scollon and Scollon’s politeness systems as a framework of reference. They aptly analyse the politeness strategies used by the authors of the articles and describe the differences between those strategies directed towards the exoteric scientific community —audience of POP— and those towards the esoteric one —to which they belong. One of the most important conclusions is perhaps that the main communicative function of popularizations is to make the members of the exoteric community feel a part of the esoteric one; the writers attempt to make science more human, incorporating more feelings and emotions to the aseptic world of the laboratory. These emotions are absent from scientific articles in which impersonalization devices play a central role. The last paragraph with which the authors close the article is very revealing from the standpoint of Halliday’s SFL, since interpersonal realizations of Tenor are at the core of the interpretation of the relations between writer/reader in the text and so at the core of the meaning of politeness strategies.

The final collaborative work of the first section of the book by Katja Pelsmaekers, Chris Braecke and Ronald Geluykens examines business letters and student essays written by Dutch L1 speakers and focuses on subordination devices used to express rhetorical relations. The basic insights from Rhetorical Structure Theory (Mann and Thompson 1988, 1992; and others) are applied to the research and Halliday’s notions of logico-semantic relations, functional-semantic relations and conjunctive relations are mentioned and followed throughout the article. The paper concentrates on two phenomena in particular: a) “integration” of rhetorically related sentences through subordination, and b) “explication” of these rhetorical relations through sentence connectives. It is shown that the writers produce under-integrated and/or under-explicated prose and this may result in what they call “choppy” prose. The interlanguage phenomena observed in the analysis are very important and the conclusion that typically many written choices are not due to transfer from the writers’ L1 but rather from the spoken discourse mode —with which language users are more familiar— to the written one, has far-reaching pedagogical consequences for speakers of languages other than Dutch as well.

The second section of the book, *Spoken Genres*, begins with the article “Quality choice and quality control,” written by Gordon Tucker. What I think most interesting from the point of view of SFL development is Tucker’s insistence on the notion of the system networks as responsible not only for specifying the options available to speak-

ers in communication, but also the syntactic and lexical constraints which are a consequence of them. The lexicogrammar of adjectives, relating choice to consequences and constraints is the proposal of the Cardiff Grammar.

Adrienne Chambon and Daniel Simeoni raise issues related to the interpersonal metafunction in the lexicogrammar of English, reworking notions of the modality system for their better interpretation in the therapeutic dialogue. They align themselves from the outset with those who have explicitly stated that modality does not reduce itself to its grammaticised forms. The “extended modality” system has relevance for clinical studies and “modophorics” are precious language resources which reveal the broad lines and logic behind the speakers’ statements. They define extended modality as “the open set of intersubjective modifiers —whether lexical, grammatical or interclausal— encasing (and permitting) the full deployment of clausal nuclei in discourse.” The propositional core is modalized by one or several modophorics depending on the cognitive-affective and social grounding of the speaker. In the last two sections of the paper, with examples of psychotherapeutic exchange the writers try to illustrate their main hypothesis: that selective language of therapists in practice instantiates special configurations of functions distinct from those of spontaneous spoken language, even though they present themselves as natural and nondescript. This article overall makes clear the all-round success achieved by the application of a dynamic conceptual model of modality within a conception of language as meaning making process.

In the following paper, Luis Pérez-González undertakes an examination of the conversational interaction first tracking down, within the tradition of SFL the earliest key contributions to the subject. He draws upon Halliday’s description of grammatical units and Sinclair and Coulthard’s discourse units for the analysis of classroom interaction. The author then focuses on the central issue of the paper, that is, 999 calls for emergency assistance. It is of special interest the revision that he makes —following Tsui (1994), for example— of Berry’s systems of options available at places in the textual layer of structure. The study foregrounds the conclusion that “the dispute emerges as a result of the interactional asynchrony between the people involved,” and it calls our attention the finding that each move should be examined not only in relation to the semiotic structure of the exchange, but also looking at other instances of that same move-type which could possibly have occurred in the previous generic stages of the negotiating exchange.

The paper by Karen Malcolm deals again with elements for the interpretation of the interpersonal metafunction. This paper compares the casual conversations of two dyads of university women using the descriptive methodology known as phasal analysis. The significant variation in their discourse reveals how the language of strangers differs from the language of friends. The phasal analysis undertaken in the two conversations —usually including more than the adjacency pair of speech act theorists— proves, according to the author, a most valuable approach in capturing the dynamic structuring of casual conversation and in revealing how this structuring is affected by the interlocutors’ interpersonal relationship.

In “Lars Porsena and My Bonk Manager: A Systemic-Functional Study in the Semogenesis of the Language of Swearing,” Robert Veltman takes the opportunity to question the interpersonal characterisation of swearing offered by M.A.K. Halliday and R. Hasan (1976) and M.A.K. Halliday (1979), and argues against those who

avoid serious discussion. Through the *semogenetic* modelling illustrating the abstractness of the semiotic of swearing the author wants to stress the fact that in spite of the fairly obvious interpersonal connotations and their less obvious significant textual role in cohesiveness, the acts of swearing draw on firm ideational bases which contain highly complex networks.

In the last article of the book by Martin Hewings, a detailed study is developed using Brazil's *discourse intonation* model, and comparable recordings of speech produced by native and non-native speakers are studied for prominence, tone unit length and tone choice. Worth pointing out is the author's suggestion that many failures in intonation might be due to be the relatively lower capacity of the non-native speakers to plan ahead. The results show that—English intonation being a relatively neglected area—we should give a higher priority to programmes for teaching intonation, and we need a strong research base to produce teaching procedures which could most effectively help learners.

The articles in this volume apply functional notions to a variety of texts, including art exhibition texts, computing, L2 writing, school texts, therapeutic dialogue, emergency telephone calls, casual conversations, scientific research papers, business letters, and academic essays. Through numerous new insights and analyses covering a wide range of genres, some of the papers foreground the importance of lexicogrammar for the construction of text and some others stress the importance of the situational and cultural context for interpretation. The papers range from modest proposals to suggestions for a complete renewal of the models but all of them offer highly valuable information not only for linguists working within systemic functional linguistics but also for those interested in a functional approach to language. The following paragraph neatly summarises the concerns and perspectives of the contributors to this volume for whom Halliday's work has been so influential:

The ongoing text-creating process continually modifies the system that engenders it, which is the paradigmatic environment of the text. Hence the dynamic, indeterminate nature of meaning, which can be idealized out to the margins if one is considering only the system, or only the text, emerges as the dominant mode of thought as soon as one comes to consider the two together, and to focus on text as actualized meaning potential. (M.A.K. Halliday 1978:139)

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