

# An Introduction to Systemic Functional Linguistics

2nd Edition

*Suzanne Eggins*



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# An Introduction to Systemic Functional Linguistics

2nd Edition

*Suzanne Eggin*s

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藏书章

To my teachers and my students

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## Foreword to the Second Edition

As with the first edition, this second edition of *An Introduction to Systemic Functional Linguistics* offers an overview of systemic theory and some demonstration of how systemic techniques can be applied in the analysis of texts. Written for students who may have little or no formal knowledge of linguistics, it covers most of the major concepts in systemic linguistics (*semiotic system, genre, register, text, cohesion, grammatical metaphor . . .*). Taking Michael Halliday's *An Introduction to Functional Grammar* as its base, the book presents a functional grammatical description of the simultaneous metafunctional organization of the clause (its MOOD, TRANSITIVITY, THEME and CLAUSE COMPLEX systems) and introduces the basic techniques for analysing cohesive patterns in text (reference, lexical cohesion and conjunction).

In the ten years since the first edition, much has happened to systemic linguistics and to me. Since 1994, systemic functional linguistics (SFL) has moved from 'marginal' to 'mainstream' as an approach to language, at least in Australia. Systemic linguists now hold senior positions at universities in countries around the world, and SFL informs many postgraduate applied linguistics and TESOL programmes in English-language countries.

The past ten years have seen a corresponding outburst of publishing in SFL, from workbooks in the grammar and discourse, such as Martin *et al.* 1997, to major theoretical works, such as Halliday and Matthiessen 1999, and the progressive publication of Halliday's collected works edited by Jonathan Webster (Halliday and Webster 2002a, 2002b, 2003a, 2003b). Much fleshing out of systemic ideas has been published in journal articles and edited collections, and SFL contributions have also been published in many interdisciplinary collections about language.

These changes mean that a student new to SFL now has a wide range of resources to draw on to learn about the theory and its analytical methodologies. A new role for my book is to steer readers towards these other sources whenever possible.

Changes in my own institutional context have also affected how I approach this second edition. For the past dozen years I have held a position not in a Linguistics department but in an English (Literature) department, where I teach students who are majoring in literature, mother-tongue education or media and communication. Exposure to this context has broadened my own experience of texts and forced me to reflect on how systemic linguistics can be made accessible to students who have no prior linguistic training but want ways of talking about how texts work. As I hope I demonstrate in this second edition, I remain

convinced that SFL is one of the most powerful ways of saying 'sensible and useful things about any text, spoken or written, in modern English' (Halliday 1994: xv).

## Summary of changes in the second edition

Michael Halliday's *An Introduction to Functional Grammar* (IFG), first published in 1985 with a second edition in 1994, is the motivating text for this book. The third edition of IFG, substantially revised and extended, appeared as Halliday and Matthiessen 2004, just as this book was in production. Where possible, references have been updated to this third edition. Occasionally I have referenced earlier editions of IFG, as I am attached to the directness of some of Halliday's earlier explanations. The core grammatical chapters on Mood, Transitivity and Theme remain largely as they were in the first edition, but the book now includes one new chapter on the clause complex, positioned directly after Transitivity. All other chapters have been updated with recent references, and some have had new text examples substituted or added.

I have made only one theoretical modification to the first edition: in the 1994 edition I used Martin's (1992a) label of 'discourse-semantics' to refer to the stratum of language above grammar, and I devoted one chapter to Martin's methodology for the analysis of cohesive patterns as discourse-semantic systems. In this edition I have returned to Halliday's model, with the top linguistic stratum called **semantics**, and the cohesive analyses interpreted as non-structural grammatical systems (as in Halliday and Hasan 1976, Halliday 1994). For most students new to SFL, this change will be of no practical import at all. However, it has allowed me to devote one chapter to the fundamental question of *What is (a) text?* and to bring the sections on cohesion in line with Halliday 1994 (itself based on Halliday and Hasan 1976). Readers who wish to go further in theory and description are pointed towards Martin and Rose 2003.

In addition, the contents of some chapters have been substantially revised and chapter order adjusted, as follows:

Chapter 1 'An overview of systemic functional linguistics' has been updated, but is still organized around the three Crying Baby texts.

Chapter 2 'What is (a) text?' contains many new texts (all authentic), both fictional and non-fictional.

Chapter 3 'Genre' contains many new texts as well as some familiar ones.

Chapter 4 'Register' has only a new introductory section.

Chapters 5–8 and 10 on principles of grammatical analysis, systems, Mood, Transitivity and Theme remain largely unchanged.

Chapter 9 is a completely new chapter on 'The Clause Complex'. Positioned straight after its companion on the experiential system of Transitivity, the clause complex chapter presents the SFL understanding of the second, logico-semantic component of ideational meaning.

Chapter 11 discusses the complete analyses of the Crying Baby texts, now incorporating clause complex analyses. The analyses are in the Appendix.

I am indebted to Michael Halliday, whose way of thinking and talking about language captivated me from my first day as an undergraduate student at Sydney University. Special thanks also to Jim Martin and Clare Painter, first my teachers and more recently my colleagues, for encouragement over the years; and to my literature colleagues at the School of English at UNSW, who have helped me to broaden my awareness of texts and ways of talking about them.

Thanks also to the patient, loyal systemic linguistics community which has always welcomed me to conferences, despite my meagre and infrequent contributions. Thankfully, no one ever closed the door on me, and I realize now that the door never will be closed because SFL will forever inform how I think about language and life.

Suzanne Eggins  
March 2004, UNSW, Sydney



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## Chapter 1

### An overview of systemic functional linguistics

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#### **Aim of this book: explaining text**

The aim of this book is to introduce you to the principles and techniques of the systemic functional approach to language, in order that you may begin to analyse and explain how meanings are made in everyday linguistic interactions.

In our ordinary, everyday lives we are constantly using language. We chat to family members, organize children for school, read the paper, speak at meetings, serve customers, follow instructions in a booklet, make appointments, surf the internet, call in a plumber, unburden ourselves to therapists, record our day's thoughts and activities in a journal, chat to our pets, send and read a few emails, sing along to CDs, read aloud to our children, write submissions. All of these are activities which involve language. Only for rare moments, perhaps when totally absorbed in a physical activity, does language drop out of our minds. In contemporary life, we are constantly required to react to and produce bits of language that make sense. In other words, we are required to negotiate *texts*.

The late twentieth century saw theorists from many approaches focus on texts and ask fundamental questions, such as: just how do texts work on us? How do we work to produce them? How can texts apparently mean different things to different readers? How do texts and culture interact? Answers have been suggested from disciplines such as literary theory (where the focus has been on the written texts highly valued, or 'canonized', by a culture) and cultural studies (where the interest has shifted to the written, visual and filmic texts of popular culture). Behind both perspectives lies a vast body of 'critical theory', proposed explanations about how we read texts, what texts are telling us, and how texts are (or should be) valued by the culture.

While the critical understanding of text is a fundamental goal we share with other text analysts, the approach taken in this book has different origins, orientations and methodologies. The systemic functional analysis presented here has been developed on the foundation of work by the social semiotic linguist Michael Halliday, whose extensive writings since the 1960s are currently being edited and re-issued in a ten-volume set of *Collected Works* (see Halliday and Webster 2002a, 2002b, 2003a, 2003b). Through the work of Halliday and his associates, systemic functional linguistics (often abbreviated to SFL) is

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increasingly recognized as a very useful descriptive and interpretive framework for viewing language as a strategic, meaning-making resource.

One of Michael Halliday's major contributions to linguistic analysis is his development of a detailed functional grammar of modern English (Halliday 1994<sup>1</sup>), showing how simultaneous strands of meanings (the ideational, interpersonal and textual metafunctions) are expressed in clause structures. Halliday's (meta)functional grammar is now accessible not only through Halliday's own substantial text (Halliday 1994 and now further extended in Halliday and Matthiessen 2004) but also through the many books which introduce and explore the grammar of the metafunctions and the relation of language to context (e.g. Halliday and Hasan 1985, Bloor and Bloor 1995, Thompson 2004, Martin *et al.* 1997, Halliday and Matthiessen 1999, Butt *et al.* 2001, Droga and Humphrey 2003, Martin and Rose 2003).

Michael Halliday prefaces the 1994 edition of his functional grammar with an open-ended list of 21 possible applications of SFL (Halliday 1994: xxix–xxx). These include theoretical concerns ('to understand the nature and functions of language'), historical ones ('to understand how languages evolve through time'), developmental ones ('to understand how a child develops language, and how language may have evolved in the human species'), and educational ones ('to help people learn their mother tongue . . . foreign languages', etc.). Underlying all these very varied applications is a common focus on the analysis of authentic products of social interaction (*texts*), considered in relation to the cultural and social context in which they are negotiated. Consequently, the most generalizable application of SFL, and the one which will provide the framework for this book, is 'to understand the quality of texts: why a text means what it does, and why it is valued as it is' (Halliday 1994: xxix).

Although Halliday's functional grammar deals in detail with the structural organization of English clauses, phrases and sentences, Halliday's interest has always been with the meanings of language in use in the textual processes of social life, or 'the sociosemantics of text'. As Halliday says of his functional grammar:

The aim has been to construct a grammar for purposes of text analysis: one that would make it possible to say sensible and useful things about any text, spoken or written, in modern English. (Halliday 1994: xv)

Recent years have seen SFL used to say 'sensible and useful things' about texts in fields such as language education (Christie 1999, 2002, Christie and Martin 1997, Unsworth 2000), child language development (Painter 1998), computational linguistics (Teich 1999), media discourse (Iedema *et al.* 1994, White 2002), casual conversation (Egins and Slade 1997), history (Martin and Wodak 2003) and administrative language (Iedema 2003), to name just a few. SFL has also been applied to interpret the 'grammar' of other semiotic modes, such as visuals (Kress and van Leeuwen 1996, 2001), art (O'Toole 1994) and sound (van Leeuwen 1999, Martinec 2000).

The field of SFL is now a substantial international one, as can be seen by the number and range of publications and conferences in SFL around the world. An excellent systemic linguistics website, maintained by Dr Mick O'Donnell, can be found at [http://www/wagsoft.com/Systemics/](http://www.wagsoft.com/Systemics/). The website provides information about systemic discussion groups (the international email list *sysfling* has over 500 subscribers), recent publications in SFL, bibliographies, theses, conferences and journals such as *Functions of Language* which publish work in SFL.



While individual scholars naturally have different research emphases or application contexts, common to all systemic linguists is an interest in *language as social semiotic* (Halliday 1978) – how people use language with each other in accomplishing everyday social life. This interest leads systemic linguists to advance four main theoretical claims about language:

1. that language use is functional
2. that its function is to make meanings
3. that these meanings are influenced by the social and cultural context in which they are exchanged
4. that the process of using language is a *semiotic* process, a process of making meanings by choosing.

These four points, that language use is functional, semantic, contextual and semiotic, can be summarized by describing the systemic approach as a *functional-semantic* approach to language. The purpose of this chapter is to outline and illustrate what this means.

## A functional-semantic approach to language

The systemic approach to language is functional in two main respects:

1. because it asks functional questions about language: systemicists ask **how do people use language?**
2. because it interprets the linguistic system functionally: systemicists ask **how is language structured for use?**

Answering the first question involves a focus on authentic, everyday social interaction. This analysis of **texts** leads systemicists to suggest that people negotiate texts in order to make meanings with each other. In other words, the general function of language is a semantic one.

Reinterpreting the functional questions semantically, then, systemicists ask:

1. Can we differentiate between types of meanings in language?, i.e. **how many different sorts of meanings do we use language to make?**
2. How are texts (and the other linguistic units which make them up, such as sentences or clauses) structured so that meanings can be made?, i.e. **how is language organized to make meanings?**

As will become clear from subsequent discussion, Halliday (e.g. 1985b/1989, 1994) has argued that language is structured to make three main kinds of meanings simultaneously. This semantic complexity, which allows **ideational**, **interpersonal** and **textual** meanings to be fused together in linguistic units, is possible because language is a semiotic system, a conventionalized coding system, organized as sets of choices. The distinctive feature of semiotic systems is that each choice in the system acquires its meanings against the background of the other choices which could have been made. This semiotic interpretation of the system of language allows us to consider the appropriacy or inappropriacy of different linguistic choices in relation to their contexts of use, and to view language as a resource which we use by choosing to make meanings in contexts.

Each of these rather abstract points will now be illustrated in turn with concrete language examples.

**How do people use language?**

As soon as we ask functional questions such as ‘how do people use language?’ (i.e. ‘what do people *do* with language?’), we realize we have to look at real examples of language in use. Intuition does not provide a sufficiently reliable source of data for doing functional linguistics. Thus, systemicists are interested in the authentic speech and writing of people interacting in naturally-occurring social contexts. We are interested, for example, in language events such as Text 1.1 below<sup>2</sup>:

**Text 1.1: Crying Baby (1)**

(1) A baby who won't stop crying can drive anyone to despair. (2i) You feed him, (2ii) you change him, (2iii) you nurse him, (2iv) you try to settle him, (2v) but the minute you put him down (2vi) he starts to howl. (3) Why?

(4) The most common reason baby cries is hunger. (5i) Even if he was just recently fed (5ii) he might still be adapting to the pattern of sucking until his tummy is full and feeling satisfied until it empties again. (6i) When he was in the womb (6ii) nourishment came automatically and constantly. (7i) Offer food first; (7ii) if he turns away from the nipple or teat (7iii) you can assume (7iv) it's something else. (8i) It happens that babies go through grumpy, miserable stages (8ii) when they just want (8iii) to tell everyone (8iv) how unhappy they feel. (9i) Perhaps his digestion feels uncomfortable (9ii) or his limbs are twitching.

(10i) If you can't find any specific source of discomfort such as a wet nappy or strong light in his eyes, (10ii) he could just be having a grizzle. (11) Perhaps he's just lonely. (12i) During the day, a baby sling helps you to deal with your chores (12ii) and keep baby happy. (13i) At night (13ii) when you want (13iii) to sleep (13iv) you will need to take action (13v) to relax and settle him. (14i) Rocking helps, (14ii) but if your baby is in the mood to cry (14iii) you will probably find (14iv) he'll start up again (14v) when you put him back in the cot. (15i) Wrapping baby up snugly helps to make him feel secure (15ii) and stops him from jerking about (15iii) which can unsettle him. (16i) Outside stimulation is cut down (16ii) and he will lose tension. (17i) Gentle noise might soothe him off to sleep – a radio played softly, a recording of a heartbeat, traffic noise – (17ii) even the noise of the washing machine is effective!

(18i) Some parents use dummies – (18ii) it's up to you – (18iii) and you might find (18iv) your baby settles (18v) sucking a dummy. (19i) ‘Sucky’ babies might be able to find their thumbs and fists (19ii) to have a good suck. (20i) Remember (20ii) that babies get bored (20iii) so when he is having a real grizzle (20iv) this could be the reason. (21) Is his cot an interesting place to be? (22) Coloured posters and mobiles give him something to watch. (23i) You could maybe tire him out (23ii) by taking him for a walk . . . or a ride in the car – (23iii) not always practical in the middle of the night. (24i) A change of scene and some fresh air will often work wonders – (24ii) even a walk around the garden may be enough. (25i) As baby gets older (25ii) he will be more able to communicate his feelings (25iii) and you will be better at judging the problem. (26i) Although you might be at your wit's end, (26ii) remember (26iii) that crying is communication with you, his parents. (27) And you are the most important people in your baby's life.

This text, whose source will be disclosed shortly, serves to illustrate a basic premise of systemic linguistics: that language use is purposeful behaviour. The writer of this excerpt did not just produce this text to kill time, or to display her linguistic abilities. She wrote the