

Systemic Perspectives
on Discourse,
Volume 1

Selected Theoretical Papers
from the
9th
International Systemic Workshop

edited by

James D. Benson
and
William S. Greaves

Glendon College, York University
Toronto, Canada

Volume XV in the Series
ADVANCES IN DISCOURSE PROCESSES
Roy O. Freedle, editor



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Preface to the Series

Roy O. Freedle
Series Editor

This series of volumes provides a forum for the cross-fertilization of ideas from a diverse number of disciplines, all of which share a common interest in discourse—be it prose comprehension and recall, dialogue analysis, text grammar construction, computer simulation of natural language, cross-cultural comparisons of communicative competence, or other related topics. The problems posed by multisentence contexts and the methods required to investigate them, while not always unique to discourse, are still sufficiently distinct as to benefit from the organized mode of scientific interaction made possible by this series.

Scholars working in the discourse area from the perspective of sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics, ethnomethodology and the sociology of language, educational psychology (e.g., teacher-student interaction), the philosophy of language, computational linguistics, and related subareas are invited to submit manuscripts of monograph or book length to the series editor. Edited collections of original papers resulting from conferences will also be considered.

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- Vol. XVI. Systemic Perspectives on Discourse, Volume 2: Selected Applied Papers from the 9th International Systemic Workshop. James D. Benson & William S. Greaves (Eds.), 1985.

Introduction

The articles in this volume have been selected from papers delivered at the 9th International Systemic Workshop, held at York University in Toronto, in August 1982. These workshops are held annually to bring together linguists working in the neo-Firthian tradition. The 9th ISW was the first held outside Great Britain, and the articles in the volume reflect the growing North American interest in Systemic Linguistics.

The tone of the workshop is established in the remarks of the two keynote speakers: M. A. K. Halliday gives a personal account of the background of Systemic Linguistics, and Ruqaiya Hasan discusses the centrality of context, deriving from Malinowski, in systemic work. Indeed, the keynote speakers make clear the way in which an orientation towards discourse is integral to systemic theory.

Although this volume contains theoretical articles (the companion volume being *Systemic Perspectives on Discourse: Selected Applied Papers from the 9th International Systemic Workshop*), as Halliday observes, "applied" and "theoretical" are not wholly adequate disciplinary divisions. A case in point is the computerized systemic grammar being developed by Mann and Matthiessen, reported on in this volume, which puts the fundamental principle of networks to an operational test.

The articles in this volume range from grammatical questions such as transitivity to more explicit considerations of discourse, including discussions of register, genre, and intertextuality. The volume concludes with a series of articles on phonology, which reflects the importance of the spoken mode for practitioners of systemic linguistics. All the articles have in common an underlying concern with the way in which language can be described in terms of systemic semantic choice, and show in a comprehensive way the contribution that systemic linguistics continues to make to the study of text and discourse.

This volume is the end product of a long process, and the editors wish to acknowledge the generous support of many individuals and institutions. The Workshop could not have been held outside Great Britain without the help from The British Council, The British Academy, The Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, the York University Dean of Research, Dean of Graduate Studies, Ad Hoc Fund, Master of Winters College, Principal of Glendon College, and Applied Linguistics Research Working Group. Manuscript preparation was supported by Glendon College and we were fortunate in the assistance we received from Elissa Asp, and especially Karen Malcolm who prepared the index and skillfully contributed to the process of editing the volume. We are also indebted to our colleague Michael Gregory for valuable advice at several stages.

James D. Benson
William S. Greaves

Systemic Background

1

M. A. K. Halliday

University of Sydney
Australia

The Ninth Systemic Workshop is the first one to bear the title 'International'. It is, of course, the first to be held outside Britain; but I take it that it is not the crossing of the Atlantic Ocean that makes this occasion distinctively international—Canadian participants, after all, have been crossing in the other direction from the very beginning—nor is it, by the same token, the fact that more than one nation is represented. What the label 'international' conveys is perhaps more a difference of orientation. The Systemic Workshop has never been an exclusive affair; but it grew up as a forum to which people came in order to exchange ideas with those who were closest to them. This is a very rational form of behaviour, common among all human groups; and it is particularly valuable in intellectual activities, where the community of outlook, and the shared goals and assumptions, preclude any need for posturing or protesting one's right to exist, and encourage a real dialogue in which ideas flow freely and mental jams can be unblocked. But there is a time, also, for talking and listening to others; and this year's more heterogeneous gathering brings together 'systemicists', both theoretical and applied (and most systemicists are in fact both, this being one of the main reasons for adopting this approach), with others who would not think of themselves as systemicists but who have influenced systemic theory and perhaps been influenced by it.

The theme of the workshop is "Applications of Systemic Theory", and this suggests to me that it is in the context of what can be done with the theory that we shall be seeking to exchange ideas. The theory has evolved in use; it has no existence apart from the practice of those who use it. Systemic theory is a way of doing things. If the English language permitted such extravagances I would name it not with a noun but with an adverb; I would call it 'Systemically'. I have never found it possible, in my own work, to distinguish between the activities of working on the theory and using the theory to work on something else. The interesting diversification of ideas that shows up when systemicists get together is not so much a taking of different positions on abstract theoretical issues as a diversity in the kinds of activities in which they are engaged. The debate that arises from these differences of perspective is very much more positive and fruitful than the rather sterile confrontation that takes place when people take a stand on some theoretical point largely as a means of establishing their individual identity.

There are a lot of different doings represented at this Workshop, and enumerating some of these will perhaps give a flavour of what systemic theory is about:

- interpreting the nature, the functions and the development of language
- understanding the role of language in expressing, maintaining and transmitting the social system, in home, neighbourhood, school and other domains of the context of culture
- helping people to learn language, whether mother tongue or other languages, whether children or adults; and to use language effectively as a means of learning and in a variety of contexts of situation
- helping people to overcome language disorders, educational or clinical: 'slow learners', 'backward readers', aphasics, the mentally handicapped &c.
- understanding the nature of discourse, and of functional variation in language ('register'); studying particular types of discourse (classroom, medical &c.) for practical purposes such as the training of teachers and of specialists in the field
- understanding the nature of 'value' in a text, and the concepts of verbal art, rhetoric, and literary genres; gaining access to literature through the careful study of such texts
- using computers to analyse and generate discourse; developing a grammar for decoding and encoding, and a semantic representation to direct and interpret the grammar
- exploring a range of practical activities where language is involved: forensic issues, readability and complexity measures, communication in institutional settings and so on
- relating language to other semiotic systems and to the ideological patterns of the culture

This is a rather broad spectrum of doings, and it reflects the broad foundation on which systemic theory is built. The workshop brochure refers to the theory as being 'neo-Firthian'; and although I have never used that label myself, I have always made it clear that the most important influence on my own thinking came from my teacher J. R. Firth. Those who know Yorkshire—once described by Mary Abercrombie as 'the Texas of England'—will recognize the significance of the fact that we are both Yorkshiremen, and indeed grew up in the same home town (but in fact you do not need to have heard of Wharfedale in order to take this point—you only need to have heard of Whorf). It is from Firth, of course, that the concept of 'system' is derived, from which systemic theory gets its name; and unlike most of the other fundamental concepts, which were common to many groups of post-Saussurean linguists, particularly in Europe, the system in this sense is found only in Firth's theoretical framework.

Firth himself always emphasized his debt to the work of others. Among his predecessors and contemporaries, he held Hjelmslev in particularly high regard (though he thought Saussure overrated); he spoke admiringly of Trubetzkoy, Ben-

veniste, Whitehead, Wittgenstein; but above all he acknowledged what he owed to Malinowski. Dr. Hasan's paper traces the genesis of the Malinowskian element in Firth's thinking, especially the origins of contextual theory, which was the foundation of Firth's functional analysis of meaning as 'serial contextualization'. I would like to take the story a little further by referring to the work of my own seniors and immediate precursors, who obviously were not part of Firth's inheritance but from whom I have learnt the greater part of whatever I have been able to apply. I feel I should apologize for expressing this in personal terms as a kind of catalogue of 'these have influenced me'; this is done partly to keep it short, but also because to represent it in third person language as 'the origins of systemic theory' would be to impute a questionable objectivity to something that is inevitably more in the nature of autobiography.

First, then, I would like to mention Firth's own younger colleagues, especially W. S. Allen, R. H. Robins, Eugenie Henderson and Eileen Whitley. Eugenie Henderson's work showed what it meant to be 'polysystemic', and demonstrated how to describe the phonology of a language in prosodic terms. Allen showed how to describe grammar, as well as phonology, in a Firthian way, and how to compare systems across languages. Robins built up a coherent picture of system-structure theory and—uniquely at that time—placed it in another contextual dimension, that of the history of linguistics. Eileen Whitley developed a deep insight into prosodic analysis; and also, very importantly, into Firth's conception of a text.

Of those on the western side of the Atlantic, the names that were most familiar to us were those of Sapir, Bloomfield and Fries: Sapir as the leading exponent of anthropological linguistics, Bloomfield mainly for his descriptive work, especially his Menomini studies, and Fries for his clearly stated methodology and for his interest in, and influence on, language education. The more immediate impact, however, came from their successors: from Hockett, who examined the foundations of structuralist linguistics, questioned them and was thus prepared for the developments to come; from Harris, who showed just how far one could go with these assumptions and where they could lead no further; from Gleason, who presented a systematic overall model for students and teachers, and then developed his own stratal viewpoint and his theory of narrative; and from Pike, who provided a solid foundation in phonetics, a functional theory of grammar and an explicit commitment to the cultural context of language.

One other scholar who had a profound effect on my own thinking was a linguist whom of course I never met, Benjamin Lee Whorf. Whorf, developing concepts derived from Sapir and before him Franz Boas, showed how it is that human beings do not all mean alike, and how their unconscious ways of meaning are among the most significant manifestations of their culture. Whorf's notion of the cryptotype, and his conception of how grammar models reality, have hardly yet begun to be taken seriously; in my opinion they will eventually turn out to be among the major contributions of twentieth century linguistics.

Next I would like to mention five other scholars from whom I gained rich and, to me, new and exciting insights into language. Walter Simon, Professor of Chinese at

London University, taught me what linguistic scholarship meant: to focus on language as an object of study, to take the text seriously, and to combine honesty with imagination in the construction of a theory. In China, Luo Changpei gave me a diachronic perspective and an insight into a language family other than Indo-European; and Wang Li taught me many things, including research methods in dialectology, the semantic basis of grammar, and the history of linguistics in China. When I first tried to teach linguistics, in a very disorganized way, David Abercrombie provided a model of how it should be done; he also provided a lucid and totally unbiased account of the principles of speech and of writing, and placed these studies in their historical perspective. Angus McIntosh demonstrated the scope and direction of a humanist linguistics, one that neutralized the opposition between arts and sciences; this he backed up in his own work by a farsighted commitment to a longterm programme of structured research (something I have never been able to achieve), which is now coming to a notable culmination.

At the risk of turning this into too much of a personal statement, I would like to round this part off by referring to some of my own contemporaries. I shall not try to make reference to those with whom I have been most closely associated in the work on systemic theory; it would take far too long to give even a remotely adequate account, and most are, happily for me, present on this occasion. But there have been a few other special acquaintances with whom I have interacted over the years, exchanging ideas when possible and always learning from them in the process.

Jeffrey Ellis was my first trackmate in exploring the (to me) unknown terrain of linguistics. Many years ago we wrote an article together, on temporal categories in the Chinese verb, which would have been my first academic publication; but the journal editor who had accepted it died suddenly, and it was rejected by his successor and so never appeared. Through Ellis I knew the late Denis Berg, who worked on 'conceptual-functional grammar' when no one else would hear of it; and Jean Ure, who introduced the notion of register and has subsequently developed it in a systemic framework in the teaching of English to speakers of other languages. Trevor Hill initiated me into what would now be called socio-linguistics, and Kenneth Albrow worked with me on intonation and rhythm; both Hill and Albrow mastered Firth's prosodic phonology and wrote simple introductions to it, a thing which none of Firth's own colleagues ever felt the necessity to do. Peter Strevens organized the field of applied linguistics into a coherent and powerful domain of language study, in which we have continued to collaborate at a distance. And Ian Catford provided a unique understanding of human speech production, as well as a broad comparative knowledge of languages of different parts of the world.

Further afield, I came to know Sydney Lamb; at our first talk, in a Georgetown bar masquerading as a pub, where we drank the beer from his home state, it became obvious that our ideas were compatible, and we have maintained the intertranslatability of systemic and stratificational theory ever since. He reawakened my interest in the computer as a research tool in linguistics, which had been aroused when I had worked with Margaret Masterman and Frederick Parker-Rhodes in the Cambridge Language Research Unit in the late fifties. Sydney Lamb was the first to

show that it is possible to make grammar explicit and computable without discarding the achievements of descriptive linguistics and the understanding of language that grew out of them.

At about the same time I came to know Basil Bernstein, philosopher and thinker, and the first social theorist to build language into his explanatory scheme. From him we have learnt just what it is that is achieved through language—the transmission, maintenance and modification of the patterns of a culture—and hence what we, as linguists, have to be able to explain by means of our own theories. From Bernstein I learnt also, for the second time in my life, that linguistics cannot be other than an ideologically committed form of social action.

Thirdly during the nineteen sixties, I began working closely with language educators; and at University College London, in the Programme in Linguistics and English Teaching, a team of primary and secondary teachers combined with linguists to work on problems of language development in school, from initial literacy through to multifunctional English in the upper forms of high school. There were two of the team who participated from start to finish: David Mackay, and Peter Doughty. Peter Doughty brought a conception of English in secondary education which was so far ahead of his time that now, twenty years later, we are at last seeing some of his ideas introduced as innovations. David Mackay transformed an impoverished notion of 'reading' into a rich conception of language development in the infant and junior school; his work was followed up by the creation of the 'Centre for Language in Primary Education' of the Inner London Education Authority, an institution which might justly have been named after him.

My concern here is with the systemic background; it would be impossible in this space to review work in systemic theory itself, which in any case is the substance of most of the present volume. But in order to bring the background up-to-date, let me refer briefly to three of the salient motifs of the past fifteen years which have provided part of the context for recent systemic work. These are: language and social reality, language and human development, and language in the machine.

George Herbert Mead (1934) regarded talk as one of the two forms of social action—the other one was play—by which an individual built up his identity; and in a series of penetrating and sympathetic studies Erving Goffman described the regulation and maintenance of this identity, under both normal and pathological conditions. Harvey Sacks came nearer to showing how language actually served these functions in a number of brilliant (but unpublished) *explications de texte*, which still however made no reference to the language system. Meanwhile Berger and Luckman (1966) had described what they called the 'reality-generating power of conversation'. The work of Gunther Kress and his collaborators, in language and ideology (Kress and Hodge 1979; Fowler, Hodge, Kress and Trew 1979), and of Benjamin N. and Lore M. Colby (1981), in the study of culturally pregnant texts such as religious narrative, have shown the potential of systemic theory as a theory of text and system for interpreting texts as ideological documents, bringing out their significance for the construction of the social semiotic.

Advances in developmental linguistics have introduced a new dimension into

language education, especially in the early and middle childhood years. Educators such as Kenneth and Yetta Goodman, Jerome Harste and Martha King have been focussing explicitly on language development in their approach to reading and writing and to all aspects of the learning process, and Sinclair and Coulthard (1975) have shown how the linguistic analysis of the classroom throws light on educational practice. In Britain, Canada, the United States and Australia there is ongoing collaboration between linguists and educators using systemic theory, for the study of classroom discourse and of children's conversation, oral narrative and writing. Jay Lemke's (1982) work on science education uses a close linguistic analysis to reveal the underlying ideological structures of the education process.

The main contribution from linguistics to these activities is the study of discourse, and what makes systemic linguistics particularly relevant is its orientation towards the text. From the start it has been used in text analysis projects, such as the coding of the Nuffield Foreign Languages Teaching Materials Project Child Language Survey (Hasan 1965, Handscombe 1966), the O.S.T.I. Programme in the Linguistic Properties of Scientific English (Huddleston, Hudson, Winter & Henrici 1968), as well as in stylistic and literary studies (see especially Hasan 1964, Spencer & Gregory 1964), and studies of register variation (eg. Benson & Greaves, 1973). A recent extension is its use in text generation by computer. Systemic theory had been employed before in artificial intelligence research (Winograd 1972, Davey 1979); but to use a systemic grammar as the basis of a text generation program would be uneconomical (since it is difficult to write systemic minigrammars) unless such a program was intended to become an exportable system that could be adapted to the needs of any user. This however is what William Mann set out to achieve, in the 'Penman' project at the Information Sciences Institute of the University of Southern California; and there for the first time a comprehensive systemic grammar of English is being implemented on a computer. This is reported on in another paper in this volume, by Mann and Matthiessen (see also Mann 1983, Mann & Matthiessen 1983). Eventually it should be possible to test the thesis that such a grammar is invertible, by constructing a systemic parsing program on the lines first sketched out by B. N. Colby and Mark James.

These very sketchy references will perhaps serve to bring out what I think is a salient feature in the evolution of systemic theory: its permeability from outside. By 'outside' I mean not only outside itself, from other theories of language such as tagmemics and stratification theory, but also from outside linguistics, from disciplines for which language is not the object of study but rather an instrument for some other purpose—where this other purpose may be, in turn, either the study of some other object, such as human development or culture, or a body of praxis such as the teaching of foreign languages. Systemic theory has never been walled in by disciplinary boundaries; this is not to imply that the concept of a discipline is vacuous, but that a discipline is defined not by what it studies but by the questions it seeks to answer, so that in order to understand language, which is what the questions of linguistics are about (the noun 'language' is of course a grammatical metaphor—Peter Doughty preferred to talk about 'linguaging' to show that our

object of study is more process than entity), we have to study many other things besides, and hence a linguistic theory has to be a means of intersemiotic translation, interfacing with other theories of social meaning and so facilitating the input of findings from elsewhere.

The value of a theory lies in the use that can be made of it, and I have always considered a theory of language to be essentially consumer-oriented. In many instances the theorist is himself also and at the same time a consumer, designing a theory for application to his own task; in others he may be working together with a group of consumers, designing a theory for their particular needs. (Sometimes he may set up as 'pure' theorist on his own, without any particular consumers in mind; or thinking of a particular target group but without actually consulting them—the fate of 'contrastive linguistics' is a good example of how this tends to limit the usefulness of the work.) Since there are so many tasks for which one needs a theory of language, any particular theory is likely to be, or very quickly to become, a family of theories—still on speaking terms, one hopes, and with a personal rather than positional family role system. This is why there is no orthodox or 'received' version of systemic theory, such as may arise with self-contained systems that are impervious to influences from outside, when some sort of 'standard' version comes to be defined by the stance adopted vis-à-vis certain issues that are identified from within.

Systemic theory is more like language itself—a system whose stability lies in its variation. A language is a 'metastable' system; it persists because it is constantly in flux. This does not mean that we cannot characterize a particular language, but that our characterization of it has to incorporate this feature. Similarly we can state certain essential characteristics of systemic theory (cf. Fawcett 1983). Let me try to enumerate some of those that are most central to our present theme.

1) A language is not a well-defined system, and cannot be equated with 'the set of all grammatical sentences', whether that set is conceived of as finite or infinite. Hence a language cannot be interpreted by rules defining such a set. A language is a semiotic system; not in the sense of a system of signs, but a systematic resource for meaning—what I have often called a 'meaning potential' (Halliday 1971). Linguistics is about how people exchange meanings by 'linguaging'.

Part of the synoptic representation of a semiotic system is an account of its structure, the organic part-whole relationships that are known in linguistics as constituency. Because of the historical association of linguistics with writing—linguistics begins when a language is written down, and so made accessible to conscious attention; so grammar evolved as a grammar of written language—constituency has tended to occupy the centre of attention; so much so that my early (1961) paper 'Categories of the theory of grammar' was entirely misread (by Paul Postal 1967) as a theory of constituent structure, and the same mistake was made by Terence Langendoen in his book *The London School of Linguistics* (1968), which makes no reference at all to Firth's concept of 'system'. In systemic theory, constituency is treated as a small, though essential, part of the total picture; and it is treated in a specific way, using ranks (which are the folk-linguistic notion of constituency,

incidentally, and also that which is embodied in writing systems) instead of immediate constituents for the bracketing, and functions instead of classes for the labelling. These are not arbitrary choices; there are good reasons why philosophical theories of language, which tend to be formal and sentence-oriented, use maximal bracketing and class labels, whereas ethnographic theories, which tend to be functional and discourse-oriented, use minimal bracketing and functional labels.

What distinguishes systemic theory is that its basic form of synoptic representation is not syntagmatic but paradigmatic; the organizing concept is not structure, but system (hence the name). Since language is a semiotic potential, the description of a language is a description of choice. The various levels, or strata, of the semiotic 'code' are interrelated networks of options. The constituent structure is the realization of these options, and hence plays a derivative role in the overall interpretation.

2) Closely allied to this is the fact that constituent structure at the 'content' level is part of an integrated lexicogrammar (as distinct from a syntax with lexicon attached) seen as natural, i.e. non-arbitrary. There are two distinct, though related, aspects to this non-arbitrariness, one functional the other metafunctional. (i) Every structural feature has its origin in the semantics; that is, it has some function in the expression of meaning. (This is unaffected by whether semantics and lexicogrammar are treated as one stratum or as two.) (ii) The different types of structure tend to express different kinds of meaning, as embodied in the metafunctional hypothesis; and constituency is simply one type of structure, that which typically represents the experiential metafunction—the reflective component in our meaning potential. But whereas our experience is largely organized into particulate forms of representation, our interpersonal meanings—the active component—are expressed more prosodically, as field-like structures, and the texture is provided by the periodic, wave-like pattern of discourse, in which prominence is achieved by beginnings and endings (of clauses, paragraphs and so on). Like the water I was contemplating at Niagara Falls, language is at once particle, wave and field (cf. Pike 1959); and depending on which kind of meaning we want to be foregrounded, so our representation of its structure needs to adapt to the appropriate mode.

3) The heart of language is the abstract level of coding that is the lexicogrammar. (I see no reason why we should not retain the term 'grammar' in this, its traditional sense in linguistics; the purpose of introducing the more cumbersome term 'lexicogrammar' is simply to make explicit the point that vocabulary is also a part of it, along with syntax and morphology.) A lexicogrammar is not a closed, determinate system; and this fact has three consequences for systemic theory and practice. First, grammar cannot be modelled as new sentences made out of old words—a fixed stock of vocabulary in never-to-be-repeated combinations. On the one hand, we process and store entire groups, phrases, clauses, clause complexes and even texts; this is a crucial element in a child's language development. On the other hand, we constantly create new words, and even now and again new morphemes. The higher the rank, the more likely a given instance is to be in some sense a first occurrence; but there is nothing remarkable about that. Secondly, and closely related to the last point, the lexicogrammatical system of a language is inherently

✓ probabilistic. It has been readily accepted that the relative frequency of words is a systematic feature of language, but this principle has not generally been extended to grammatical systems; yet it is a fundamental property of grammar that, at least in some systems, the options are not equiprobable, and this can be built in to the representation of a grammatical network. The principle is an important one because it is likely that one of the significant differences between one register and another is a difference of probabilities in the grammar (this again is to be expected, since it is clearly true of the vocabulary—different registers display different lexical probabilities). Thirdly, grammar is indeterminate in the sense that there are often two or more possible grammatical interpretations of an item, each of which relates it to a different set of other items, thus making a particular generalization of a paradigmatic kind. This may affect anything from an entire system—transitive and ergative interpretations of English transitivity would be a case in point—to a single instance, where alternative analyses can be suggested for some item in a particular text.

4) A fourth assumption of systemic theory is that language is functionally variable; any text belongs to some register or other. (Dialect variation is also functional, of course, as the symbolic vehicle of social structure; but the term 'functional variety' refers to register). The different kinds of situation that collectively constitute a culture engender different kinds of text; but if we understand the semiotic properties of a situation we can make predictions about the meanings that are likely to be exchanged, in the same way that the interactants make predictions, and in so doing facilitate their own participation. The notions of field, mode and tenor, together with the subsequent distinction into personal and functional tenor, provided an initial conceptual framework for characterizing the situation and moving from the situation to the text; and much current work in systemic theory is directed towards the construction of an adequate model of register and genre, taking into account the context of situation, the rhetorical structure of the text and the higher-level semiotics that make up the context of culture. This is an essential step in any adequate interpretation of language as a social semiotic, within the tradition that I referred to above as 'ethnographic' as opposed to 'philosophical' linguistics; but it also has important educational applications, for example in the development of children's writing (Martin & Rothery 1980/1). In general, as remarked above, differences among different registers are likely to be found in the relative weightings assigned to different systems: the orientation towards different metafunctions and different options in semantics. In some instances, however, more clearcut distinctions emerge; for example the different kinds of complexity associated respectively with speech and writing.

5) Systemic theory accepts the Saussurean concept of how the system is represented by the observed *actes de parole*. But, as I see it at least, this has to be interpreted as Hjelmslev interpreted it; first in the framework of system and process, where the process (text) 'instantiates' the system, and secondly, with a distinction between instantiation and realization. The latter refers to the stratal organization of the system (and therefore also of the process) whereby the expression is said to 'realize' the content.

To take the latter point first: we assume that language is stratified. The number of strata ('levels', in Firth's terminology) that we recognize, and the kind of relationship between strata, will tend to depend on the questions we are asking and the problems we are trying to solve. For example, for certain purposes we may want to work with a Hjelmslevian model of content and expression, the only stratal boundary being the Saussurean line of arbitrariness; this is a way of pushing the grammar so far towards the interface as to incorporate the semantics within it. For other purposes, such as the study of language development, especially the move from protolanguage to language, we may want to interpret the lexicogrammar as a third, purely abstract, level of coding that gets 'slotted in' between the two interface levels of semantics and phonology. We may want to add other, higher-level strata to accommodate a theory of register, or to represent the knowledge base in a text generation program. It is the basic concept of stratification that is important.

Secondly, whereas Saussure, in separating *langue* from *parole*, drew the conclusion that linguistics was a theory of *langue*, systemic theory follows Hjelmslev in encompassing both. For a linguist, to describe language without accounting for text is sterile; to describe text without relating it to language is vacuous. The major problem perhaps is that of interpreting the text as process, and the system as evolution (its ontogenesis in the language development of children): in other words, of representing both the system and its instantiation in dynamic as well as in synoptic terms. Dynamic models of semiotic systems are not yet very well developed, and this is one of the problems that theorists of language now have to solve.

6) It is a general feature of semiotic systems that they develop and function in a context, and that meaning is a product of the relationship between the system and its environment—where that environment may be another semiotic system. For language, the context of the system is the higher level semiotics which it serves to realize; hence it is the stratal representation that allows us to interpret the context of the system (Malinowski's 'context of culture'). It is in this sense that semantics is an interface ('interlevel', in earlier terminology), namely when we are considering it as the relationship between the lexicogrammar and some higher-level semiotic. The context of a text, on the other hand, is Malinowski's 'context of situation': the configuration of semiotic processes that are constitutive of its rhetorical structures and shape its ideational, interpersonal and textual characteristics. Systemic theory has always been explicitly contextual, in both these senses, offering contextual explanations for such problems as how children learn language from what goes on around them and how language provides a grid for the construction of models of experience.

7) Finally, given the tradition to which it belongs, it is to be expected that those using systemic theory have tended to take a particularist rather than a generalist position with regard to linguistic categories. In part, this has been to avoid claiming universality for categories such as 'cases', or phonological features, that seemed far too specific to bear such a theoretical load, but equally, perhaps, from the knowledge that, while no one is likely to question the identity of all languages at a sufficiently abstract level, for most purposes for which linguistic theory is used it is

the DIFFERENCES among languages that need to be understood—while in those applications where only one language is concerned, the universality or otherwise of its categories is irrelevant.

I am not suggesting for a moment that these observations are acts of faith to which all 'systemicists' subscribe; but that it is an inclination to adopt viewpoints such as these that leads people to explore the potential of systemic theory. What is perhaps a unifying factor among these who work within this framework is a strong sense of the social accountability of linguistics and linguists. Systemic theory is designed not so much to prove things as to do things. It is a form of praxis. I have often emphasized that language, both in its nature and in its ontogenetic development, clearly reveals a dual function; it is at once, and inseparably, a means of action and a means of reflection. Linguistics, as metalanguage, has to serve the same twofold purpose. Systemic theory is explicitly constructed both for thinking with and for acting with. Hence—like language, again—it is rather elastic and rather extravagant. To be an effective tool for these purposes, a theory of language may have to share these properties with language itself: to be non-rigid, so that it can be stretched and squeezed into various shapes as required, and to be non-parsimonious, so that it has more power at its disposal than is actually needed in any one context.

Systemic theory, then, is a way of thinking about language and of working on language—and through language, on other things. But it is also a symbolic system; and, as every infant knows, symbols do not affect things, only people. Thus 'applying' linguistics is using a linguistic theory to act on people. But thinking about language is also, of course, thinking about people, since there is no language other than in people's acts of meaning; so that action and reflection in linguistics are not very clearly separated activities. Just as, in the evolved adult language, mood and transitivity are mapped into a single clause, so that one cannot mean in one way without also meaning in the other, so in reflecting on how people communicate we are likely to be also acting on their communicative processes. It seems to me that this is a perspective which most systemicists share, and which emerges strongly in the papers assembled in the present volume.

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Meaning, Context and Text— Fifty Years after Malinowski

2

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Perhaps a more accurate title for this paper would have been *Malinowski Forty Years after Himself*, for in fact, I am not concerned here with reviewing developments in the study of meaning, context and text since his time; rather, my primary concern is a review of the traditional reviews of Malinowski. Any comparison of his position with that of some of the famous modern authorities in these areas is largely incidental upon this primary concern. The time seems ripe—both historically and academically—for such an enterprise. Historically, we are close to the first centenary of Malinowski's birth, and we are just four decades away from his last writings. But more important is the change in the academic scene: the recent revolution against the so-called Chomskian revolution in linguistics cannot but draw attention to Malinowski. There has grown a practice, in the past decade, among linguists, anthropologists, AI specialists—in fact just about anyone interested in language—to begin their own discussion of some linguistic problem by first drawing attention to the inadequacies of the present day linguistic models. As an example let me quote Schank and Abelson, AI specialists, who claim that “linguistics has managed to miss the central problems”, because linguists have concerned themselves with

... considerations of semantics at the level of ‘can one say this? Will it mean something?’. People already know what they want to say and that it is meaningful. (Schank & Abelson 1977:7)

They also criticize linguists for having failed to understand understanding. For this failure they offer the following reasons:

... semantic features are considerably more important than linguists had generally been willing to acknowledge ... there has been increasing recognition that context is of overwhelming importance in the interpretation of text. Implicit real world knowledge is very often applied by the understander, and this knowledge can be very highly structured. The appropriate ingredients for extracting the meaning of a sentence, therefore, are often nowhere to be found within the sentence. (Schank & Abelson 1977:9)

To Malinowski, writing in 1923, approximately half a century before Schank & Abelson, none of this would have sounded particularly revolutionary or even original. In this early essay he claimed that:

... utterance and situation are bound up inextricably with each other and the context of situation is indispensable for the understanding of the words. Exactly as in the reality of spoken or written language, a word without *linguistic context* is a mere figment and stands for nothing by itself, so in the reality of a spoken living tongue, the utterance has no meaning except in the *context of situation*. (Malinowski 1923:307)

I must admit I find Malinowski's formulation preferable to that of Schank & Abelson's, for, in him, there is not the hidden assumption that the knowledge of the world is sharply distinct from the knowledge of language. For Malinowski there was a continuity between words and action, between social knowledge and social semiotic, the recognition of which is only just beginning to become fashionable amongst those dealing with language. But in making these comments I am anticipating myself, so let me begin again—and this time with a personal anecdote.

I was asked a few months ago if I could name a small book on Malinowski, such as perhaps Culler's *Saussure*. True to the Malinowski-Firth prediction, my text was affected by the properties of its linguistic context; so I asked: “How about Fontana *Modern Masters*?” I was told that they do not have one. I have checked personally since, and surely enough, Malinowski is no modern master. This state of affairs seems to me quite typical; and it is typical both of Malinowski and of intellectual fashions in the academic world. Let me develop this comment.

First, it is typical of Malinowski to miss the *Modern Masters* series. After all, Raymond Firth's *Man and Culture: An Evaluation of the Work of Bronislaw Malinowski* opens as follows:

This book has been written because some of us have thought for a long while that too little attention has been paid to the work of Bronislaw Malinowski. (R. Firth 1957:1)

With very minor adjustments, I too could have begun my paper with these same words without violating any truth conditions! Of course, Raymond Firth was concerned mainly with Malinowski the anthropologist, about whom Edmund Leach comments:

... Malinowski transformed ethnography from the museum study of items of custom into the sociological study of systems of action. (Leach 1957:119)

Coming from Edmund Leach, this is high praise indeed, for he is not entirely uncritical of Malinowski's contributions to his chosen field. However, insofar as boundaries in the realm of knowledge have any reality, I shall not be concerned in this paper with Malinowski as an anthropologist. By taking this position, I wish to claim a neutral stance about his hypotheses regarding the origins of cultural institutions. Though quite obviously the same teleological stance is carried over into his thinking about language, the situation appears somewhat different, as I hope will emerge later. An early appraisal of Malinowski's contribution to linguistics comes from a close contemporary, J. R. Firth:

The most outstanding anthropological contribution to linguistics in recent years is Malinowski's *Supplement to Ogden & Richards' Meaning of Meaning*. (J. R. Firth 1930:150)

And, again writing in *Man and Culture*, he declared:

We can be proud to include him as one of the makers of linguistics as we now understand it in this country. (J. R. Firth 1957:94)

Though not as caustic in his criticism as Edmund Leach, J. R. Firth could hardly be described as an unquestioning admirer of Malinowski's views on language. I mention this to emphasize the fact that the appraisals presented above are taken from discerning readers. They are, thus, doubly interesting as they highlight the fact that despite being a scholar of appreciable stature, Malinowski typically did not attract as much attention as might have been expected. The question naturally arises: why has his work been so undervalued? Malinowski's main contribution to linguistics—as Firth was quick to recognize—was his enunciation of the relationship between language and the context of situation. Today most literature in linguistics, whether concerned with models for the description of language as system, or for text production, text comprehension or for translation, recognizes the centrality of similar ideas under such impressive labels as *knowledge of the world*, *belief system*, *logic of conversation*, and so on. I doubt if these high-sounding concepts are better reasoned out today, made more objective, theoretically more viable or even more explicit than Malinowski's own description of context of situation or of culture. Why has the modern terminology caught on, bringing such prestige to the creators? and why is reference to Malinowski still an occasion for his denigration? I suggest that these questions can bear serious investigation, providing useful insight into the convention-bound behaviour of the academic community.

I shall myself make a modest beginning in this direction by saying a few words about intellectual fashions, which far from being seen as mere fashions, are regarded by the pundits as totally self-evident, logically sound truths. Note the good company Malinowski keeps in being ignored by Fontana Modern Masters. The series includes neither Boas, nor Sapir nor Firth—and of course, to think of Whorf in this connection would be total anathema. To turn Bolinger's phrase around (Bolinger 1968), our minds are so in the grip of scholarly misrepresentations (Alford 1980, Hasan 1975, Hasan 1978) that I despair of Whorf ever getting a fair hearing. But one may ask: what have Boas, Sapir, Firth and Whorf in common with Malinowski? I would suggest that what they have in common is their commitment to the essentially social foundation for one's ability to function as an individual. Despite crucial differences, each one thought of language as inextricably bound up with culture, of culture as a force essential to the shaping of the individual, while for each the essence of linguistics is, to use Whorf's expression, "the quest of meaning" (Whorf 1956:73). In other words, these linguists can be grouped together by virtue of the fact that they attach importance to precisely the two factors for the neglect of which Schank & Abelson criticize today's linguists—namely, commitment to statements of meaning (Firth 1957a) and an acceptance of the centrality of social context both in the creation and the interpretation of the text.

I suggest that in the consistent neglect of a group of the above type lies the second aspect of what is typical in Malinowski missing the Modern Masters series.

By tacit common consent it is typical of our time to either ignore such scholars of language, or if they are noticed, it is equally typical for them to be misrepresented. Note for example that when Schank and Abelson criticize modern linguistics for underplaying semantics and for ignoring context, they do not seem to be at all aware of the existence of any of these scholars: for them—as for many—linguistics is largely synonymous with the Chomskian revolution, one of whose main contributions to the field is precisely to accentuate this questionable dissociation of language from the life of the speech community. It is hard to choose between this neglect and such misrepresentation of, for example, Malinowski's position as can be found in the writings of F. R. Palmer or Geoffrey Leech, to mention but two. In this respect, Whorf is probably the most misrepresented of all. A galaxy of impressive names springs to mind immediately—Black (1959), Bolinger (1968), Brown (1976), Cole and Scribner (1974), Greenberg (1954), Hockett (1954), Berlin & Kay (1969) and Lenneberg (1971)—each claims to have proved that the Whorfian hypothesis is untenable; ironically, it remains to be demonstrated that what they have refuted is actually the Whorfian hypothesis!

There is a danger that these comments might be read as an effort to politicize academic evaluation—worst still, they may be attributed to paranoia. So let me add at once that in drawing attention to the neglect and the misrepresentation of sociologically oriented linguistics, I do not imply any conscious academic conspiracy. However, there remains the fact that all ideology, including academic ideology, thrives by keeping the other point of view out of view. One may not set out consciously to achieve this aim, but vast differences in ideology inevitably lead to a failure in sharing the assumptions and following the motivation behind an enterprise. Notwithstanding the Gricean maxims (Grice 1975), at least in academic pronouncements it is not automatically and unquestionably evident what constitutes sufficient evidence for saying what one does say—much less, what it means to be truthful, or relevant. Inevitably, if the structure of beliefs, aims and attitudes is at variance, failures in textual interpretations are bound to occur. Instead of finding metaphors, such a reader arrives at a metamorphosis of the message. The five scholars I have named have all—except perhaps Boas—suffered in this respect. They are assigned views which they can be shown not really to hold; their position is exaggerated beyond recognition, rendering their views so untenable as to be suitable only for a merciful oblivion.

I think it is useful to enquire further into the reasons for failure in communication in this specific case. It seems to me that, in the first place, culture as the main driving force in the life of the individual is not a theme that is readily favoured—least of all in linguistics. We insist on seeing the individual as a free agent in a free society, the sole architect of his own destiny, himself the shaper of his own personality. And more relevant to the discussion here, we see him as the most significant element in the production of his parole, if not in the creation of his langue. To be sure, the immediate source of behaviour lies in the individual—and I mean not simply Saussure's executive side of language (Saussure 1916:13) but also, in an important sense, the motivational and intentional elements of behaviour must be

traced, at least in the first instance, to the individual. But this does not seem to me to be the end of the enquiry into behaviour. If 'individual-ness' is at the core of behaviour, it also seems important to point out that the belief in the autonomy of the human organism turning itself into an individual is neither intuitively obvious nor empirically substantiated. Individuality and inter-subjectivity are mutually dependent notions and that argues for a social base for the construction of individuality. If we dissociate the individual from his cultural context, so that most of what is significant to the construction of his individuality is by definition a-social, then, logically the final mainsprings of intention, motivation and execution have to be sought not so much in the social environment as within the organism. And this, in the last resort, leads to a biologism whose popular name in linguistics is the 'innateness hypothesis'. This popular stance on the individual appears all the more reasonable to us, since in the literature there is no outright rejection of the possibility of cultural differences. However, while we recognize cultural differences, we also render them harmless by relegating them to surface phenomena which have only secondary importance in human affairs. The deepest stratum, it is argued, consists of the innate species-specific attributes which are ipso facto universal; culture-specific facts—if there are any—are simply surface phenomena. These attitudes are implicit in the ways in which we talk about meanings, understanding, perception and cognition. So we say that the semantic space for mankind is the same; or we insist on the centrality of 'the knowledge of the world' rather than of 'acculturation' to understanding; and so far as perception and cognition are concerned, they are basically the same across the human race. According to this philosophy, the physical is far more fundamental, far more 'real' than the social. Metaphorically speaking we overplay Freud and underplay Durkheim.

This preoccupation of modern linguistics with innateness—this insistence on the primacy of intra-organic approach to language (Halliday 1974)—is not a break-away, revolutionary movement. Chomsky has rightly implied, by referring to distant authorities (1965), that this is a dominant stance on the Western intellectual scene, which takes different shapes to suit the current dominant ideology. Today's concern with a clear distinction between deep and surface phenomena is simply a new version of an old academic fashion. Given the intellectual convention of glorifying the innate properties of the human brain, it appears superfluous to ask: what are the factors—if any—which affect the actual development of the potential of this marvellously designed instrument? Those who suggest, like Mead (1934), that unlike the human brain, the human mind is a social phenomenon, remain on the periphery of our deliberations about language. This is not because there is a necessary conflict between accepting the universal innate properties of the human brain and acknowledging that the actualization of this potential is subject to social environment (Halliday 1974, 1977a). Rather it is because academic conventions dictate that the individual be seen as the fulcrum of the social universe. We see then that there is a considerable ideological gulf between those committed to this latter convention and those for whom the essential foundation for individuality is social in nature. Failure in communication between these two groups is not surprising once

we see clearly the differences between their basic assumptions. Malinowski, without doubt, belonged to the sociologically oriented group of scholars—as did Boas, Sapir and Whorf and Firth. The misrepresentation and obscurity from which they have suffered might be described as 'an ideologically induced low academic visibility'.

I intend to argue that, whatever his shortcomings as an anthropologist might have been, Malinowski's contribution to linguistics deserves less perfunctory, less pejorative and a more serious treatment than it has so far received. I will argue this by focussing mainly on issues relating to meaning, context and text, since in my opinion it is in these domains that Malinowski made his main contributions to the study of language. I will begin by enquiring into Malinowski's views on the relationship between meaning and context; here it would be important to describe the nature of the central problem that Malinowski attempted to solve. This will take us into a consideration of the Saussurean notion of sign. I will argue that to see the relationship between meaning and context in the way that Malinowski saw it implies a recognition of the centrality of text to the study of language. Since the three concepts are closely linked, a consideration of one naturally merges into that of the other(s) and the boundaries may not be as clear as my programmatic assertion suggests.

Let me begin then with meaning and Malinowski. Most semanticists would agree with Palmer that:

The problem of semantics is not the search for an elusive entity called 'meaning'. It is rather an attempt to understand how it is that words and sentences can mean at all. . . . (Palmer 1981:29)

Despite the risk of some oversimplification, it would be essentially correct to claim that the pre-occupations in modern semantics fall under two distinct areas. First there is the concern with questions relating to how a linguistic unit, of whatever size, comes to have the meaning that it does have. To quote Searle:

How does it happen that when people say, "Jones went home" they almost always mean Jones went home and not, say, Brown went to the party or Green got drunk. (Searle 1969:3)

Secondly there is the concern with devising techniques following which an explicit representation can be made of the meanings that the linguistic units are perceived to have. It seems to me that important as the second concern is, the first constitutes the substance of our theory of linguistic meaning. And, notwithstanding linguists' disdainful attitude to Malinowski, I would claim that he made his major contribution in this central area of semantics.

It is a commonplace of linguistics that the basic problem—namely, "how it is that words and sentences can mean at all"—arises from the principle which Saussure described as 'the arbitrariness of the sign' (Saussure 1916:67). This principle according to Saussure lies at the centre of language; it

. . . dominates all linguistics . . . its consequences are numberless . . . (and) not all of them are equally obvious at first glance. . . (Saussure 1916:68)