

# SYSTEMIC FUNCTIONAL APPROACHES TO DISCOURSE

James D. Benson  
William S. Greaves, Editors

## Volume XXVI

in the series  
ADVANCES IN  
DISCOURSE PROCESSES



**SYSTEMIC FUNCTIONAL  
APPROACHES TO DISCOURSE:  
SELECTED PAPERS FROM  
THE 12TH INTERNATIONAL  
SYSTEMIC WORKSHOP**

**edited by**

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## Preface to the Series

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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.

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## Introduction

This volume, like the previous *Systemic Perspectives on Discourse*, Volumes 1 and 2 (Ablex, 1985), offers an overview of current work in Systemic Linguistics of particular relevance to the study of discourse. The papers have been selected from those given at the 12th International Systemic Workshop held in August 1985 at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor.

The volume opens with Fawcett's proposed criteria for evaluating system networks, the fundamental formalism of Systemic Linguistics. The papers which follow illustrate the range of discourse topics in which Systemicists are interested. Lemke investigates heteroglossia, or the intertextual relations of discourses across groups with diverse social interests and points of view. Ventola discusses the logical structure of exchanges, fundamental units which realize social interaction. Malcolm identifies the registerial characteristics which differentiate casual conversation from more ritualized and therefore more easily formalized discourses. Benson, Greaves, and Schulz discuss the relation between language code and context as seen in a French-English bilingual camp setting. Two papers deal with narrative. Martin and Lowe bring the concept of a dominant participant to bear on Sikaritai discourse, and Rashidi analyzes fairy tales in terms of the functions of situation, problem, solution, and evaluation.

The remaining papers in this volume show how the study of discourse stimulates the development of Systemic Linguistics as an analytical tool. Matthiessen and Kasper are motivated by the goal of computerized text generation. Matthiessen is particularly concerned with the problem of the lag between linguistic theory and its formal representation, the solution of which is of some urgency for computational linguists. Kasper extends the discussion of representational issues by comparing Systemic Grammar to Functional Unification Grammar. Two papers focus on a systemically oriented description of human activity. Colby, recognizing Malinowski's influence through J.R. Firth on the Systemic tradition, argues for a similar reorientation in anthropology, and Steiner interprets the Leont'evs' theory of activity from a Systemic perspective. Three papers deal specifically with grammatical issues. Martin weighs a two-

way distinction between coordination and subordination against a more complex description involving coordination, hypotaxis, and embedding. Bowers argues for an eclectic though principled application of different descriptive theories to the question of topical vs. nontopical thematization. Jordan examines the importance of the mutual contextual study of grammar and the grammatical study of text. Mock looks at the relation between phonic substance and phonology showing how system networks and the theory of markedness relations reveal the constraints which phonic substance imposes. The volume concludes with three papers with an historical dimension. Fulton suggests the relevance of Systemically oriented developments to literary stylistics and literary history. Green, using *behatan* and *gehatan* as concrete examples, finds that a systemic analysis of the choices of form clarifies our understanding of an institutional sense of purpose in Anglo-Saxon life. Jeffery notes that lexicographers relying completely on skilled intuition in assigning meanings to polysemous words not infrequently produce entries whose senses might have better been arranged otherwise, and offers Firth's theory of context as an alternative to such intuition.

We would like to express our thanks to the workshop organizers, R.W. Bailey and Barbara Couture, without whom there would have been no conference, and hence no written record. Equally important, we wish to thank Ann Russell for her skillful contribution in editing the manuscripts for publication.

James D. Benson

William S. Greaves

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## Chapter 1

# What Makes a “Good” System Network Good? —Four Pairs of Concepts for Such Evaluations

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### Who Is This Paper Addressed To?

Let us begin by asking this question: “What is it that those who are interested in a book such as this—or indeed those who attended the workshop out of which this book springs—have in common?” The answer is obvious enough, but it is one with at least two interesting implications: it is that we are all systemic linguists or inquirers into systemic linguistics.

Some may protest “I’m not a *proper* linguist, systemic or otherwise; I’m only a *user* of linguistics.” But the distinction between the “proper” or “theoretical” linguist and the “applied” linguist is one that I want to challenge. It is in practice irrelevant in systemic linguistics—and should perhaps be irrelevant in *all* schools of linguistics. The fact is that there is no systemic linguist that I know of who is not involved in one way or another—and often in several ways at once!—in the practical use of systemic ideas in one “applied” field or another.

Something rather significant follows from this. The fact that we do not have a priesthood of theoreticians implies that we are all, if only potentially, theoreticians. By this I mean that every time we try to *use* a piece of systemic descriptive apparatus and we find that it doesn’t quite do the job as we feel it should—we become theoreticians. That is, we make some little change in the apparatus, or we extend it, or we may even reject quite large parts of it and start again, still within the basic assumptions of the theory. It is, of course, unfortunately *not* the case that everyone who attempts this does it with an equally sure theoretical touch and with equal descriptive success. But, if we do it at all, we are in practice engaged in an experiment in remaking the descriptive apparatus and

so, potentially, the theory—and we would do well to recognize the fact. We may not publish articles in *Language* or the *Journal of Linguistics* about our little exploratory innovations, and we may feel that they are not worthy of consideration beside those of, say, Michael Halliday—but we are nonetheless acting as theoreticians when we try out any such changes.

My concern here is to encourage those who have made what may seem “mere descriptive adjustments” as a result of such attempts to solve practical problems to share their ideas with others, so that these ideas can be thought about by others, tried out, and hopefully found useful. Michael Halliday has perhaps been the most insightful source of new ideas in linguistics of any linguist over the last quarter of a century, so that those who work within the broad framework that he has pioneered tend to operate on the basis of the unspoken dictum “If in doubt, follow the Hallidayan line.” But perhaps we should all be more ready to consider alternatives and to recognize, as Michael Halliday himself would, that he does not have a complete monopoly on insights! Let us try, hard-pressed as many of us are, to make the time to publish our ideas: we have *Network* for short articles and notes (edited by myself,) *Occasional Papers in Systemic Linguistics* for longer ones (edited by Margaret Berry et al., University of Nottingham), and more friendly journals and publishers than ever before.

Others, however, of those linguists who may pick up this book and who attend the systemic workshops will do so simply because they are interested in the systemic approach—while not yet having decided to adopt it as their basic framework for understanding language. For these, then, it may be useful to ask: “What is the central concept of our theory and its use?” Perhaps the best summary answer is in the words of the title of Halliday’s important 1977 paper “Text as semantic choice in social contexts.” What we have in common, then, is a recognition of the absolute centrality in understanding language of the paradigmatic relations of choice between meanings, that is, of choosing between features in a system. And tied in with this is the concept of the dependency that a system has on one or more less delicate features, as well as the simultaneity that so often exists between systems in an overall network. And then, for all this, the relation to the context of situation, which can itself usefully be seen to be a cluster of semiotic constructs of the participants in the production of the text. (These concepts will be explained in due course; there are moreover many other components in a complete account of how the systemic theory of the 1980s seeks to understand human language, but this is not the place to go further. Recent works such as Halliday & Fawcett, 1987 and Fawcett and Young, forthcoming illustrate well the range of current work.)

It is with the concept of the system networks of choices, which lies at the heart of systemic linguistics, that this paper is concerned. Before we start, however, it is important to realize that system networks are ultimately a set of concepts that exist independently of any medium of representation, and of any notation. A system network is a system network, whether it is stored in a computer with the relations between features and systems defined in terms of "instructions," or on paper, with these relations represented by lines (as is the usual practice) or by "subclassification" rules (as in Hudson, 1976). But I shall take it that most of us, when we think systemically, still do so through the medium of "pencil and paper" (or some close equivalent), using line and bracket diagrams.

The answer to the question "Who is this paper addressed to?" is therefore as follows. In principle, it is for anyone who has ever read or drawn a system network, or who would like to try. In practice, the kind of reader who I have had in mind is one who already has some experience of interpreting system networks—and, preferably, of drawing them. But I have tried to write in such a way that the discussion can be understood by a linguist from a nonsystemic background who is interested in discovering more about the nature of the fascinating tool for exploring language that a system network is. I would like to encourage more linguists to use system networks, and it is in one sense encouraging to see their use, including one quite complex one (p. 894) in Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech, and Svartvik's 1985 *Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language* (but see a caveat on p. 7 below). It is, in fact, hard to think systemically unless one feels able to sketch out a system network for the area of language that one is interested in. Indeed, I suspect that many systemic linguists are rather less confident than they would like to be about how to use the systemic notation. This is perhaps in part because there is no handbook, as yet, which tells us how to draw system networks, and in part because we hardly ever discuss such problems in our papers, or even informally at the systemic workshops. We may even be reluctant to admit that we sometimes have difficulties in interpreting some of the networks of well-know systemicists!

This paper does not offer guidance as to how to draw system networks, although it does refer (especially on pp. 14f) to my own practice—and such a guide certainly ought to be written one day. Rather, this paper is an attempt to begin to fill the gaping hole in the systemic literature where we might expect to find a discussion of the concepts found useful in making descriptions of languages through the use of system networks (see also Martin, 1987 and parts of Fawcett, 1987). It will be fairly abstract, in the sense that it will not be laced with examples from the current systemic literature (in part because this might be invidious!) and yet at the same time it is practical, both in the sense that it is grounded in practice

and in the sense that it is intended as a help to your own practice—at whatever level of systemic expertise you are at present operating.

### The Four Pairs of Concepts

I realize, with some surprise, that I have spent a fair proportion of what is now getting on for twenty years of my life either in constructing system networks and their associated realization rules, or in examining those of other systemic linguists. Over this period, and particularly in the years when I have been working on the various versions of "The Semantics of Clause and Verb for Relational Processes in English" (Fawcett, 1987), I have developed a number of concepts, at first quite informally, which I find useful when thinking about system networks, and so for evaluating them. These concepts relate only indirectly to the formal, mathematical properties of system networks, although some important formal issues are in fact addressed in passing, such as the intertranslatability of various sorts of network.<sup>1</sup> The emphasis here is on the difficulties that arise when a linguist uses the systemic approach to draw networks to model the meaning potential of a language (or a bit of a language, as in Fawcett, 1987).

The fact is that system networks are easy to draw—beguilingly easy! Almost anyone who has grasped the basic principles can draw one that gives him/her some sense of having brought out a significant paradigmatic patterning of language. Yet, while they are easy to draw, they are hard to draw well—even if "well" is only taken in the sense that the network provides others too with a sense that significant patternings have been brought out. If I am right that the concepts to be introduced here make it easier to decide when a network is "good," this paper may contribute in some measure to improving the quality of the networks drawn by systemic linguists—whether at the "beginner" levels or in scholarly papers intended for publication.

I shall introduce four pairs of concepts, as follows:

1. *Mere taxonomies* and *system networks*
2. *Usable* and *unusable* system networks
3. *Elegant* and *messy* system networks
4. *Consolidated* and *displayed* system networks.

The precise senses in which these terms are used will be given when each is discussed in detail, but in most cases their rough senses will al-

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<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of some of the theoretical issues concerning features in system networks, see Martin's chapter 'The meaning of features in systemic linguistics' in Halliday and Fawcett, 1987.

ready be clear. Of the four pairs, the most novel and the most essentially systemic is the last. I gave an earlier version of this paper at a systemic workshop a few years ago, and the terms "consolidated" and "displayed" have as a result already found their way into the usage of some systemic linguists (e.g., Gotteri, 1985:75-76; Gotteri, 1987:5-14). But the use of these terms—as well as that of the term *semi-displayed*—raises important theoretical issues, and the topic still merits full discussion.

The first pair of terms is intended to specify the nature of system networks themselves by contrasting the term with another, and the three other pairs describe differences between system networks. However, the two terms in each of the last three pairs are clearly the endpoints on three clines; one might therefore describe a network as, for example, "relatively elegant but pretty unusable."

As those words suggest, elegant networks are not necessarily "better" than messy networks, in the sense of "messy" proposed here; indeed, in no case, with the exception of "usable," is one end of a cline necessarily superior to the other. And, just as elegance and usability do not always coincide, so too there is no necessary correlation between the endpoints or *any* of the four clines.

System networks can be used to model choices between features at various levels of language, and indeed of the other semiotic systems. I shall not raise the question here of whether they are in fact needed at every level of language, or only at one (or two?); see Fawcett, 1983:115f., where I propose a distinction between *exhaustive* and *minimal procedural* grammars that bears on this topic (minimal procedural grammars having the minimal complexity of levels needed to enable a computer model to operate). Here we shall assume that the networks are at the level of those well-known options in transitivity, mood, theme, and so on that are familiar from the systemic literature. For our present purposes it does not matter whether we consider them to constitute the level of semantics (as I do and as Halliday does at some points in his writings), or as being "meaning reflecting," so that the term "semantics" (or "socio-semantics") can be used for some higher level, (as Halliday does at other points). The discussion should in any case be relevant to constructing networks at other levels of language and for other components of the overall model, including, for example, "genre" grammars and "local discourse" grammars.

### Mere Taxonomies vs. System Networks

In the heyday of transformational grammar, systemic linguistics was criticized for offering 'mere taxonomies'. The clear implication was that taxonomies are inherently trivial. System networks can of course be re-

garded as taxonomies; that is, as classification systems—especially if you start with a text and ask what features it displays. But there is nothing inherently trivial about using a systemic grammar in this way: a trivial systemic grammar will result in trivial analyses, and one that is complex enough to be insightful will yield complex insights.

However, I suggest that it may be useful to pick up the term “mere taxonomy” for our own use, though in a nonderogatory sense. (In this way the term differs from the term “bogus network,” as proposed by Gotteri (1985:74; Gotteri, 1987)—who also, however, uses the term “taxonomic network” in a similar sense (e.g., 1985:74). As I have already pointed out (Fawcett, 1984:151), system networks can be used for modeling *any* set of taxonomically related phenomena, for example, British Leyland vehicles for use in rugged terrain, in the example given there. But I went on to suggest that it might be useful if we were to restrict their application to modeling options in behavior. So far in the short history of systemic semiotics, their main use has been in modeling options in linguistic behavior, but the fact that systemic grammars seem capable of being insightfully used to model any type of semiotic system suggests the extension of their field of application that far at least. My suggestion (Fawcett, 1984:152) is that, by limiting the use of system networks to that of modeling the behavior open to an animate creature,<sup>2</sup> we can usefully reflect the vital distinction between phenomena that are options in behavior—and especially in communicative behavior—and phenomena of other types.

What notation is available, then, for those occasions when we want to present a classification without at the same time claiming that it constitutes a set of options in behavior—a “mere taxonomy”? There is already one in common use, and (b) in Figure 1 illustrates it. (I have used letters to stand for features, in order to avoid raising irrelevant descriptive issues.) Note that the conventions are basically as in Halliday (1967:38). Thus a curly bracket means “and” (i.e., “simultaneity”), just as it does in the system network in (a), indicating that whatever phenomena are being classified must be categorized in terms of the features represented here by letters, as *d* or *e* and *f* or *g*.

When is it appropriate to use mere taxonomies? There are in fact, many occasions on which it happens that we wish to propose a classification of some aspect semiotic behavior without claiming that we are modeling the behavior potential stored in the mind of a member of some social group. It would be useful if we could establish a general convention that in such cases we used the mere taxonomy notation. (I have done this myself in Fawcett, 1983:149), in a “sketch towards a taxonomy of semiotic systems.”) It is also perhaps worth noting that Quirk et al. (1972)

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<sup>2</sup> The category ‘animate creatures’ should now perhaps include computers.



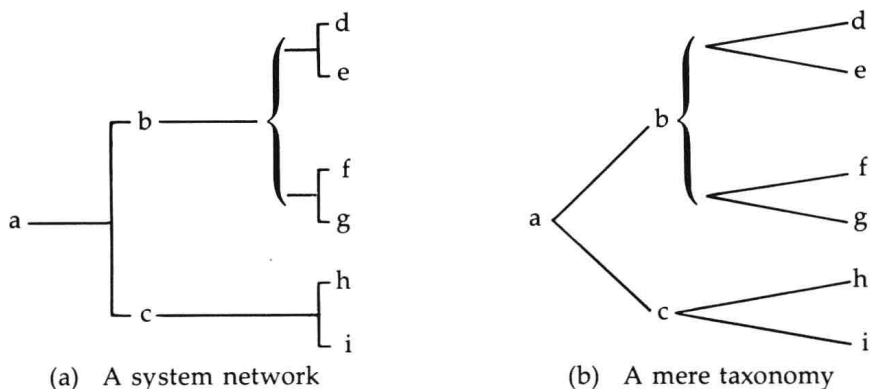


Figure 1: Notations for system networks and mere taxonomies

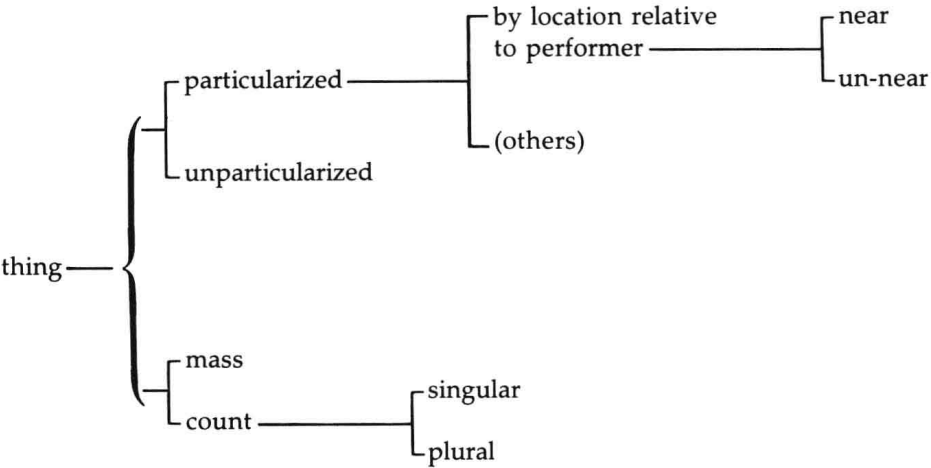
make frequent use of this notation—for example on p. 429 for a taxonomy of types “adjunct”. In that diagram there is no suggestion that one chooses for a clause between, say, time adjuncts and place adjuncts; one may have both. However it has to be said that their notation varies from page to page; on p. 521, for example, they use what appears to be a system network for an equivalent classification of “conjuncts”, and in the recently published revised and extended version of the grammar (Quirk et al., 1985) the “mere taxonomy” notation seems to have been abandoned completely. It may seem churlish in a systemic linguist to regret the increased use of the system network notation, (so that occasionally, as on p. 894, the curly bracket indicating simultaneity is used), but the point remains that it would be useful if we had a convention whereby the nature of the claim being made for the taxonomy is shown in the notation.

### Usable vs. Unusable System Networks

What does it mean to say that a network is “usable”? To answer this we need to specify (a) three major criteria for “usability”, and (b) three degrees of usability.

The first criterion is that the system network must be accompanied by a set of realization rules (or, as Halliday prefers to call them, realization statements: the two terms are used by systemic linguists in the same sense). Sometimes, as in a number of Halliday’s diagrams (e.g., in Kress, 1976:103f), these take the form of “footnotes on features,” as it were, in the system network itself, and when this occurs they are preceded by an oblique arrow, thus: “\”. This works well enough so long as there are no conditions on the realization of a feature. But conditions are in fact, a regular occurrence in usable networks, and their use is illustrated in Figure 2. Notice that here we could not write “\ *this*” under





KEY: d<sup>d</sup>=deictic determiner  
<='is expounded by'

FEATURE	CONDITION	REALIZATION
near	NOT plural	d <sup>d</sup> < this
	plural	d <sup>d</sup> < these
un-near	NOT plural	d <sup>d</sup> < that
	plural	d <sup>d</sup> < those

Figure 2: A simplified excerpt from the ‘thing’ network (cp. Fawcett, 1980:210, 223)

the feature [near], because if [plural] is coselected rather than [NOT plural], the realization is that the deictic determiner in the nominal group that is being generated is realized not by *this*, but by *these*. (Note, incidentally, that the condition is [NOT plural] rather than [singular], because *this* and *that* are used for [mass] things too.) In my experience, then, I have found that when I develop a systemic grammar beyond the introductory level, it becomes necessary to use a separate layout for the realization rules. Halliday (1969/72:253–54/), Hudson (1974:19/1981:200, for example) and Fawcett (1980:115f, for example) all use a simple column notation, roughly as in Figure 2. (Incidentally, this lends itself naturally to the translation of the grammar into a computer format, since computers find it easy to check lists.) As an alternative, a “wiring” notation can be used instead of the column notation, as is usually done in stratificational grammar (cp. Lamb 1966, where a similar point is made). Mann and Matthiessen, in their computer model of a systemic grammar NIGEL (1983:29f./1985:64) state conditions in a wiring notation by using what they term a “gate.” In Fawcett (1980:50–51 and 115–24) I discuss the place of realization rules in the grammar and how they may be represented; see also Berry (1977:18f).