

## SYSTEMIC FUNCTIONAL GRAMMAR: A FRAMEWORK FOR COMPARISON

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**Abstract:** In an attempt to establish a coherent body of doctrine so as to come both to a better understanding and to an assessment of contemporary grammatical models, several proposals have been put forward mainly by Moravcsik (1980), Stockwell (1980), Droste & Joseph (1991) and Escribano (1990, 1993). My aim is to scrutinize the metatheoretical parameters set by these authors by systematically applying them to the functional view of language proposed by M.A.K. Halliday. I claim that true progress in the theory, and consequently in its applications, can only be made successfully if an appraisal of the everyday linguistic procedures is carried out and subsequently taken into account for future systemic research.

**Keywords:** metatheory, parameters, Halliday, Systemic Functional Grammar

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The approach to the metatheoretical study I present in the sections that follow aims to provide suitable answers to questions such as: what is the status of linguistics as opposed to that of other (perhaps neighbouring) disciplines?; what aspects of language are the preferred centres of linguists' attention, and what are not?; what are the methods employed?; how do linguists select the data they work with and how do the former contrast the latter? These, and similar, preoccupations can be traced in authors of various types, origins and trends: Moravcsik (1980), Stockwell (1980), Escribano (1990, 1993), Droste and Joseph (1991), Beaugrande (1991). The underlying belief of these authors is that the great many approaches to language study nowadays can indeed be classified and compared only if some observed oppositions (=parameters) at different levels are more or less clearly identified. This is precisely the aim of this article: first, to provide a panorama of the types of oppositions which can be effectively recognized (Section 2); second, to approach Systemic-Functional Grammar (henceforth, SFG) from this perspective (Section 3); and third, to provide a tentative framework for comparison which allows us to characterize Halliday's model of grammar in metatheoretical terms (Section 4).

## 2. WORKING HYPOTHESIS: PARAMETER SETTING

The starting point is as follows: the different views found in syntax, and extensionally in grammar, nowadays are the logically natural consequence of a range of decisions having to do with philosophy of science, epistemology and methodology. These three fields contribute in their own way to a comprehensive mapping of problems of varied nature which, put together in packs of parameters, makes it possible to establish links and divergences between the different approaches to language study. What follows is a summary of the ideas contained in Moravcsik (1980), Stockwell (1980), Escibano (1990, 1993) and Droste and Joseph (1991).

### *2.1 General parameters*

These parameters stem from philosophy matters, and aim to cover aspects such as the ontological status of the theory (realism, conceptualism, nominalism, instrumentalism). The relationship between the theory itself and the theoretical object is explained from two viewpoints, that of descriptivism and that of constructivism. Besides, data can be either verified or falsified, depending on the decisions previously taken. In order to select (linguistic) facts, the conscious (phenomenologist stance) or unconscious (radical behaviourism) influence of the human being must also be taken into consideration. If, on the other hand, it is the theory itself that chooses the facts, then the approach is immanent. The criteria to evaluate the hypothesis made by linguists are manifold: explicitness, logical consistency, exhaustiveness, simplicity, naturalness, and some others. The naturalness reveals itself to be problematic: is it really all that necessary to relate linguistics with disciplines such as biology, sociology, psychology, and so forth? What are the linguist's goals? to describe facts? to explain linguistic realities? to reproduce natural language in the same way as native speakers do?

### *2.2 Conception of the object of study*

These parameters are of an epistemological nature. One of the aims is to analyze the object of study of linguistics, which seems to be either human language (Universal Grammar, for that matter) or particular languages (individually considered, or groups of similar languages). Languages at large, or human language, can present themselves as sets of instructions kept in the speakers' brains/mind. An alternative view is also defensible: human language or particular languages seem to be culturally determined and are conceived of as sets of linguistic conventions shared by the speaking community. There is yet a third argueable position: that of those who think that languages or human language are placed in an ideally intelligible world. Lastly, it is possible to identify a parameter which studies the degree of restriction of the theoretical object. Two possibilities are raised: one regards language as a highly restricted and well defined system of regularities (thus, being able to predict linguistic facts with few or no failures); the other considers language to be vague, little determined and underspecified.

### *2.3 Design and implementation parameters*

These parameters explore questions having to do with the ways grammars are designed. To start with, grammars can be classified according to the scope of application of the theory (sentence grammars vs. text grammars), depending on who the theory is oriented to -be that the listener and/or the speaker (procedural view) or the message itself (neutral view). Escibano (1990) argues that theories can be conceived as either models of isolated interactive modules or as grammars made up of non-interactive strata. The material grammars handle can be

constituted by huge blocks of preprogrammed information, with more or less finely defined patterns; there are other grammars, though, that favour algorithms in which most of the information is reduced and maximally synthesized.

### 3. METATHEORETICAL JUDGEMENTS: A FLAVOUR OF THE STATE OF THE ART IN SFG

The field of contemporary linguistic theory is divided between those linguists who favour a formalist approach and those scholars who develop a functionalist study of language. In the bibliography, both stances are commonly presented as competing paradigms, above all due to the very scarce scholarly exchange of ideas between these two views of tackling language issues. The functional approach to language in SFG emphasizes social meanings with a marked tendency towards semantic and contextual aspects of linguistic expressions, a lesser interest being taken in purely syntactic questions -a primary object of study among formalists, for that matter. In this light, it would be wise to remember that in linguistics, like in many other disciplines, such as logic, it is customary to find a growing interest in semantic aspects after predominantly syntacticist periods (Parret, 1974: 362).

Probably due to the non-formalist nature of SFG, attention has not been paid to this theory as regards metatheoretical considerations, since studies of this kind are usually accomplished on the basis of, mainly, formal theories -or, at least, models of grammar with some degree of formalization. By and large, metatheories are influenced by Chomskyan maxims which link philosophy and linguistics; this may be a reason, too, for the abundance of metatheoretical statements in formalism over those in the functional spheres. Nonetheless, it is possible to find interesting arguments in the work of some systemic authors, such as Halliday himself, Butler, Berry, Fawcett or even Downing.

#### 3.1. *Halliday*

The father of systemic grammar has systematically neglected critical thinking of his own theoretical model. At the beginning of his career as a linguist he did make a metatheoretical analysis of his Scale-and-Category Grammar (1961). However, in the course of the evolution of the theory his statements turned vague and, thus, vulnerable, which gave rise to criticism and fostered varied interpretations of his work.

Halliday (1985) poses that the aim of SFG is not to theorize about language but to do things with grammar. This is the reason why the value of a theory lies on the use one can make of it. This idea is taken to the extreme end of claiming that the shape a theory takes should be directed towards satisfying the consumer's needs. In other words, SFG does in fact contemplate "made-to-measure" subtheories. Obviously, then, it is not possible to talk about one and only one systemic grammar, but about a family of theories which share some basic tenets, irrespective of the final design of each particular model.

Unlike advocates of generative grammar, Halliday followers believe that a language cannot be equated with the set of all grammatical sentences it contains, be that finite or infinite. Language, they say, cannot be interpreted as rules defining such a set; conversely, language study entails considering tendencies, not statements of the type "either x or y". In the same vein, systemic grammarians adopt the nivellar hypothesis and distinguish between semantics, lexicogrammar and phonology. Note that the term "syntax" is rejected because it is widely used in the tradition that links linguistics and philosophy, that is, at the opposite end of the systemicists' purposes.

Halliday's mastergrammar (first published in 1985) is only a fragment of the grammar of a language, English in this case. In fact, this linguist does not believe in comprehensive (=complete) grammars of languages, since language, he says, is inexhaustible. His aim, then, is to build a multi-purpose grammar with which written and spoken texts can be analyzed. In this light, his grammatical model can be used in the study of teacher-pupil interactions, in the analysis of the language of textbooks, in the comparison of registers or functional varieties of English, in the analysis of spontaneous speech, and so forth.

### 3.2. Butler

One of the most outstanding works by Chris Butler as regards criticism of SFG is a book published precisely in the same year as Halliday's first edition of his functional grammar: 1985. In its last chapter, Butler makes some very revealing metatheoretical statements worth highlighting in this article.

Butler addresses the systemic grammarians' claim that the descriptions they make of a language should be considered true, even if some systemicists have argued that there is not always only one good version of the description of a given linguistic phenomenon. He remarks that some of the systemic descriptions may be certainly false; it is not so evident, though, that all descriptions can be falsified. "It is possible to falsify a claim only if that claim is expressed in explicit, unambiguous terms" (Butler, 1985: 216). He feels that some key categories in SFG -such as *field*, *tenor* and *mode*- have not been defined explicitly enough to be falsified.

Most of the theoretical studies carried out about language take the sentence (or the clause) as the unit of analysis. Butler notices that this characteristic is shared by Halliday's earlier models of grammar as well as by Hudson's and Fawcett's theories. However, there is a growing interest on the part of a great sector of systemicists in delving into wider stretches of linguistic structure, the leading tendency being towards expanding syntax (≈lexicogrammar in SFG) "upwards" into the domain of discourse. This attitude has clearly exerted a profound influence on other linguistic approaches such as S. Dik's functionalism. A direct consequence of this shift in orientation is the consideration of text as the unit of analysis, regarded, not from a syntagmatic, structural point of view, but from a purely semantic perspective. In fact systemic linguists have never been interested in drawing the line between what is grammatical and what is not grammatical. Perhaps due to its low level of abstraction, SFG admits expressions other linguists would never tolerate. Halliday aims to predict (=describe) the meaning potential speakers have in a particular social and situational environment. This line of research favours not so much grammaticality judgements but acceptability appraisals instead.

Butler remarks that some, very few, versions of SFG share aims such as: to give an explicit account of both syntagmatic and paradigmatic relationships; to seriously ponder the links between phonological patterns and their influence on semantic structure; and to note that the theory should be something else than the mere identification of intralinguistic phenomena, and enlarge its domain towards contextual manifestations. It should be remembered that at the very outset of SFG linguists were mainly concerned with the description of syntagmatic patterns languages have, basically English and, to a lesser extent, Chinese. Later, paradigmatic relations started to assume paramount importance around the 60s and early 70s. At the same time, syntagmatic relations fell into decay. However, they were never forgotten or even neglected, since some systemicists claim that syntagmatic relations are a useful source of validation of the theory (for instance, Gregory (1987) believes that syntagmatic relations are the proof of the metafunctional hypothesis).



As regards the use of rules in the theory, Butler observes that Halliday's approach in his earlier models was essentially analytic, as opposed to the generative basis of other contending systemic models, especially those by Fawcett and mainly Hudson. The rules the latter includes in his grammatical model facilitate the explicit generation of more or less well-formed expressions. These very same rules also serve the purpose of text analysis, since they specify the choices made and the realization rules applied to produce the surface structure from the originally semantic systemic features. With respect to this approach of SFG, Halliday reminds us that there is a high degree of optionality in the construction of system networks and realizational rules. For him, the analyst is able to choose the degree of delicacy of his analysis, which depends on the needs and aims to reach.

### 3.3. *Berry*

Margaret Berry's major contribution to the metatheoretical panorama of SFG is contained in her 1989 article on systemic methodology. There, she argues that systemic linguists seem not to adopt any coherent methodology at all, and insists that, unless this intolerable situation is changed, systemicists should be called blind with respect to their colleagues. Besides, the absence of a coherent methodology may explain the little progress in the aims systemic linguists set out to reach. Berry remarks that it is not at all striking to see the theory is making no headway, since there is no consensus about how smooth progress can be facilitated. She adds that her criticism does not necessarily imply developing a different methodology from that of other linguistic schools, or even that of science, and suggests adopting the perspectives and methodology simply available on the market -for instance, Popper's (1976) methodological assumptions.

As a result of the impossibility of following the Baconian methodological tradition, Berry points out that systemic grammarians do not attempt to start their research on the basis of observation and experimentation. Moreover, systemicists neglect the formulation of hypotheses and, what could be even worse, do not validate or falsify them. Berry discards the idea that some of her colleagues should start their own research patterns, and insists that, as far as methodology in SFG is concerned, no characteristic systemic features can be found.

Berry believes that improvements should be made in the theory in the line of taking the question of motivation seriously. She wants to make the point that motivation is only *part* of a scientific method: it is no good thinking, she argues, that two paragraphs on motivation suffice at the end of a paper and otherwise continue exactly the same research strategy. It is necessary to include some alterations, before which one should see whether there are different analyses, or theories, available of a necessarily rival character. Berry acknowledges the existence of a number of systemic analyses, but she is not at all sure that systemicists regard them as rival analyses. "At present we are much too polite (...) I think we should start being rude. (...) We need to be very much more critical of each other's work." (Berry, 1989: 9). Berry favours Popper's ideas that it is through criticism that scientific progress is made, and that it is through criticism that scientific progress is *seen* to be made.

Dealing with motivation from another angle, Berry addresses the question of the adequacy between the theory itself and the problems this theory is set up to solve. In linguistics these problems usually have to do with linguistic data: two analyses can just be compared iff (i.e. if and only if) they are attempting to explain the same data. Besides, Berry remarks that a key step in scientific research is to try and explain why something is a problem in the theory, apart from identifying it as a true problem. The linguist confesses herself let down after checking that

systemic analyses raise no real problems, or, if they do, the problem is so faintly identified that it just deserves a vague answer. This is why she claims that more trouble should be taken over the formulation of problems in systemic analyses. In this connection, it should be stressed that it is not only problems that must be carefully formulated but also the very theory itself together with its hypotheses. It is rather difficult to criticise a theory if one is not sure what the theory is supposed to be exactly. It is not only the general theoretical framework but the particular claims (=hypotheses) too that should be made clearer. This would make an outstanding contribution to the progress of the theory.

Finally, Berry shares the opinion of generative (=Chomskyan) linguists and philosophers of science that *ad hoc* explanations should be avoided altogether. They may apparently contribute to the progress in the theory; however, the only effect they have is that of distracting the linguist's attention to the problem under investigation without really furnishing any clarifying way out. Systemic practice is reduced to providing some empirical data and developing a sketchy theory for them. It is not assumed that a theory is a first approach to a problem that can be refined, achievable only if a workplan is laid out at the beginning.

### 3.4. Fawcett

Next come some ideas contained in Robin P. Fawcett (1975, 1980 and 1988). His proposal incorporates some diversions from what could be considered mainstream systemic linguistics (=Halliday). This does not mean that Fawcett is not well accommodated in the systemic spheres -not the case of Hudson, for that matter, who is frequently looked down on by his former fellow systemicists.

An important consequence of accepting the fact that the aim of the linguist is to disclose the psychological reality of language, is to assume that the methodology favouring linguistic construction is anyhow justifiable if it leads to a psychologically real linguistic model. Fawcett believes that evaluation criteria such as elegance must be supported because they contribute to finding meaningful linguistic patterns, but elegance must never be taken as the *only* evaluation criterion for a theory such as SFG.

Fawcett's model is basically semantics-oriented. On the one hand, the psychological reality he aims to disclose prevents him from considering syntax independently of, let us say, semantics. His approach is holistic in this sense. On the other hand, Fawcett believes simplicity is a quality of the human mind. His linguistic plan is simpler than that of other linguists in that system networks are only available at the semantic level, and not at the semantic level *and* at the syntactic level *and* at discourse level. Choices speakers make are exclusively semantic in nature, and it is just meaning which decides whether a feature should enter a system or not. Besides, Fawcett criticises some of his colleagues because they do not make explicit the connections between the semantic networks and the lexicogrammatical ones. Halliday followers argue that semantic choices predetermine lexicogrammatical ones; however, Fawcett believes that most studies carried out in SFG are not clear enough to verify the semantics-syntax interface (recall Berry's criticism above).

In this vein, SFG reveals itself as lacking coherence in the use of semantic and syntactic labels throughout the system networks. Fawcett is amazed at finding how his colleagues name the entry condition to the system networks "clause", inside which both semantic and purely syntactic features can be located. Orthodox systemicists defend themselves by saying the only restriction to be made in network construction is the contrastive character of two alternative options.

All languages include recursive devices of one type or another. The generalized solution given in SFG is to determine re-entry points in the system network, a clear advantage of this method being the degree of simplicity it incorporates in the theory. No lists are needed any more. However, Fawcett shows that this procedure is empirically and technically complex. His solution points towards including *ad hoc* restrictions in the lexicon, so the simplicity achieved by the re-entry points fades away when using *ad hoc* solutions.

One of the leading questions of SFG is how meaning is organized in language and how it is coded through language. Halliday's statements on this issue emphasize the speaker's capacity to mean. It is true that the speaker occasionally needs to reformulate his message depending on the needs of the listener. Nonetheless, everyone agrees that it is the performer's meaning that is being transmitted; the listener cannot mean. The meaning SFG tries to account for is the meaning the speaker can choose from a range of possible meanings determined by the context of situation and context of culture. Then, the function SFG performs is that of producing natural language from the level of semantics to the level of phonology. Fawcett insists that nothing prevents his model from being considered, not from the perspective of the speaker, but from the point of view of the listener (in other words, from sound to meaning). So it would be both a production model and a reception model. He thinks that a feasible aim of SFG is natural language generation. The degree of generativeness is, however, low, and should never be compared to that of Chomsky's models. Unlike many current generative models, which simply focus their attention on syntactic acceptability, Fawcett thinks that a generative theory of grammar should include all acceptable sentences of a language. He also acknowledges, however, the difficulty that occurs in attempting to draw the line between acceptability and ungrammaticalness.

### 3.5. *Downing*

Section 3 of this article ends with a brief review of some metatheoretical comments made by Angela Downing in a paper delivered in 1991. In this work Downing sketches some metatheoretical tenets of the SFG doctrine.

As opposed to the cognitive orientation of generative grammarians, systemic linguistics emphasizes the social perspective of language study. The object of study of SFG, she points out, is the verbal interaction between members of a community. Downing is aware of the fact that linguistics is subject to fashion too: sometimes the leading tendency stresses the philosophical aspects of language, whereas functionalists seem to be a small minority; at other times, the situation is reversed and functionalism gains strength over philosophical linguistics.

Halliday's model rejects the autonomous character of syntax (a view defended by Chomsky and others), since the ultimate aim of his theory of language is to account for the role language plays in the transmission of culture. In this sense, Downing supports an instrumentalist view of linguistics, in fierce opposition to formalist linguistics, also called 'microlinguistics'.

As can be seen from the preceding paragraphs, Downing takes a special interest in establishing divergences between Halliday's approach and Chomsky's competing model of linguistics. Furthering this contrastive strategy, she adds that Halliday is not interested in the competence/performance distinction, simply because this distinction, he argues, is only operative in biological and cognitive approaches to language study. Halliday favours the study of language as a meaning potential, closely linked to language acquisition, since children, he says, learn how to mean. In a similar vein, she rejects the level of abstraction defended by

Chomsky: if the speaker/listener interaction is to be understood, then it is necessary to minimize the bridge between what is grammatical and what is acceptable.

Finally, Downing states that Halliday's model is tristratal, like those of Hjelmslev, the Prague School, Firth, Lamb or Pike. The key concept is that of realization between levels, each of which contains networks of meaningful options available to the speakers. SFG develops a top-down design: semantic options are realized in lexicogrammar, and lexicogrammatical options are in turn realized in phonology. However, Downing gives a tacit warning: much work must be done in SFG as regards another level some systemicists contemplate in their proposals, the level of behaviour potential, which is still lacking definitions of both its content and its status in the overall theoretical model.

#### 4. A METATHEORETICAL ANALYSIS OF SFG

In the light of the parameter hypothesis sketched in Section 2, and the statements made by outstanding systemic grammarians contained in Section 3, Section 4 presents a tentative characterization of SFG on metatheoretical terms. The basic tenets of Halliday's functionalism will be considered, so that systematic comparison can be made between SFG and other (rival) theories available on the market.

SFG favours a realist conception of its object of study. According to the general opinions defended by systemicists, we are faced with realism of a progressive type, in that theory is not designed as a (definitive) complete grammar of a language -or of language as such. Since language is inexhaustible, its object does not overtly manifest itself in its entirety from the very beginning. It should be remembered that the grammarians' contributions are always partial accounts of a phenomenon which, they say, goes further away from their domains. Besides, SFG fosters a descriptivist approach to language study. Halliday's proposal aims to give a detailed account of the mechanisms speakers have at their disposal when making meaning in a social context. This shapes the theory in a very particular way, that is, as a repertoire of system networks which contain individuals' meaning possibilities.

Intuition plays a key role in systemic methodology, more important than, let us say, Popper's method. Categories are put forward, but rarely checked, either rigorously or systematically, in the light of facts. This issue in particular distinguishes SFG from many other current approaches to language. For Halliday, the idea of obtaining data from spoken language must be combined with the linguists' experience of having read a considerable amount of linguistic bibliography. Hypotheses are not presented as such, so verifying them reveals itself to be a difficult task -some even think this jeopardizes the model's theoretical progress. Maybe the reason why systemicists reject Popper's ideas is the fact that to generate natural language is not their first priority. In this sense, I think it is correct to claim that SFG does not aim to be an explicit theory.

Data are primarily selected from unconscious, spontaneous, spoken language, which represents the speaker's first socialization -as opposed to written language, considered to be the speaker's second socialization. Systemic practice shows that the examples contained in the analyses are not invented *ex vacuo* by the linguists themselves, the general tendency being the use of *corpora* as a basic worktool. Despite all this, there is a small group of systemic linguists who claim that invented examples should be included in the analyses whenever they are relevant to the problem studied. Considering examples of this kind would certainly enhance the analytical insight, and would entail the application of Halliday's idea that linguists' intuitions (I would say the observer's judgement) are totally valid in linguistic analysis.

As regards evaluation criteria, *exhaustiveness* is not a valid criterion. Remember: systemic linguists claim that language is inexhaustible. Even so, system networks are partially exhaustive meaning making mechanisms. *Simplicity* is not usually regarded either, for systemicists are not worried about the use of redundancy in their grammars (some degree of simplicity is perceived in the formulation of the Total Accountability principle, for example, which is very exceptional). Besides arguing that language is inexhaustible, systemic grammarians claim that language is not a well-defined system. Thus, *explicitness* is a criterion difficult to apply: systemic practice shows a lack of interest in realizational rules which explicitly indicate how meaning features are to be interpreted. Oddly enough, system networks do seem to be devised as sets of explicit options speakers of a language have at their disposal to construct meaning. *Naturalness* is interpreted in SFG in a very particular way (nothing to do with its use in science): functions present in systemic analyses happen to be natural because they stem from speakers' language use. Halliday's model will be a natural theory so long as it renders what speakers do with language.

The two truly relevant evaluation criteria in SFG are *applicability* and *usefulness*. Systemic linguists pose that the value of a theory lies in its practical applications. This is in line with the idea that there is not one and only one true grammar, but many, each of which serve a different purpose. This implies that SFG has been more or less fruitfully applied to discourse analysis, to computational studies, to stylistics, and so forth. As can be noted, systemic linguistics touches areas or disciplines other theories would never dare to because of their fuzzy, undefined character. To aid applicability and usefulness, some grammarians find it pertinent to regard minor criteria such as elegance or readability: elegant tabular data presentation, for instance, contributes, they say, to a better understanding of the grammatical system.

Concerning the goals of linguistic theories, explanation seems to be a universally accepted theoretical goal. A functionally-biased model such as Halliday's could be studied applying Simon C. Dik's (1986) notion of functional explanation. According to Dik's ideas, SFG should provide explanations connected to the fact that it is society language is a part of, and that language is an instrument of interpersonal communication -by the same token, systemicists should frame their analyses in both the situational context and the cultural context in which messages are delivered.

However, close scrutiny of some descriptions contained in Halliday's (1985) grammar produces somewhat distressing results. For instance, Halliday's approach to premodifiers inside noun groups is more of a description than a functional explanation. To account for the surface arrangement of premodifiers, he resorts to two principles, specification and permanence, apparently derived from the use speakers make of language. Very little space is devoted to the question of recursiveness, and Halliday does not explain why Epithets can iterate and other functions cannot. Despite the fact that we are presented with taxonomic analyses (lack of simplicity), he must, nevertheless, be given credit for trying to seek more general principles (specification) which can also account for the order of clause constituents, explored in the textual metafunction.

Halliday's systemic grammar aims to provide analyses of particular languages and of varieties of those languages. English is the most commonly studied language, although there are other languages, mainly of Asia, which are being analyzed from a systemic perspective too. In this sense, it could be argued that SFG is greatly biased by English and by any other language explored from that stance. However, this very same fact may point at another metatheoretical characteristic of SFG: the universal tendencies it contemplates. Systemic grammarians claim that the metafunctional hypothesis or the rank hypothesis are universal in their abstract,

fundamental tenets (i.e., in their formulation); then, each particular language stipulates what metafunctions and what ranks are relevant to the study of that language.

Halliday maintains that language is socially-determined, and his model of grammar follows the anthropological, sociological and ethnographic tradition opposed to Chomsky's philosophical underpinnings. SFG conceptualizes language as systematic sets of linguistic conventions determined by a speaking community and by the culture created by that community (context of situation and context of culture). Halliday fiercely rejects the link between linguistics and psychology, and supports a sociological influence on linguistics.

SFG favours a holistic view of language study, which manifests itself in, for instance, grammatical labels such as "lexicogrammar" (lexis+grammar) and "semantax" (semantics+syntax). The theory aims at a constant territorial expansion, but is not paralleled by a higher degree of formalization. In this vein, fuzzy areas traditionally considered marginal in philosophical linguistics proper have not been formalized, even from a systemic viewpoint, the possible reason being the intuitive, subjective nature of many of the systemic statements.

As regards the design of the theory, the dimension SFG defends is a source of constant problems, for Halliday rejects arguing in favour of or against Chomsky's competence/performance distinction. He prefers to deal with questions such as: what can speakers of a language do with it? what do they in fact do with it? That is, Halliday's favourite distinction is potential vs. actual. In the light of what systemic practitioners do, it could be claimed that their object of study is language performance, in other words, they analyze what speakers do with language, and then some of them hypothesize about what speakers could do/could have done in those particular situational and cultural contexts. According to the range of facts they consider, SFG can be said to be a text grammar, since it does not include different mechanisms in the study of sentences on the one hand, and of texts (discourse) on the other. This certainly follows from the key role context plays and the holistic approach of SFG. A systemic model must be *context-sensitive*, and the text should never be conceived as a unit higher than the sentence, but as a semantic unit which comprises the influence of the context of situation and the context of culture. The text is the result of hierarchical systemic choice too.

Halliday's grammar is a theory which gives an account of what the *speaker* can mean, set in groups of alternative meaning options. This he does in a *top-down* fashion, which can be interpreted in two ways. Either the meaningful options are made at clause level and then proceed downwards into more embedded levels in the rank scale, or the speaker selects features in "higher" levels such as ideology, down through the levels of genre, register, semantics, lexicogrammar and phonology. These two alternatives share a common principle: choices made at higher levels of the model determine further choices at the lower levels.

In part derived from options exercised in other metatheoretical fields, SFG is basically a structure-checking theory of grammar, linked to the descriptive approach of the model and to the eagerness for applicability and usefulness. Nonetheless, there are some systemicists who maintain that SFG serves the purpose of generating natural language too, since the system is a tool powerful enough to do so (it is obvious, I think, that the latter linguists are those who favour explicitness as an evaluation criterion). The descriptive approach to language study in SFG renders structural representations at one level, the wording, within which several compatible, simultaneous structures can be observed. The wording embodies in one level what other theories of grammar divide between the deep and the surface structures. The design of systemic grammar is not modular: each component of the model contributes to the whole of the theory with a structure compatible with the rest of the structures of the grammar. In this



sense, it is possible to identify part-whole relationships. This attitude on the part of systemic linguists is an instance of the holistic approach of the theory.

Finally, the metatheoretical panorama of SFG comes to an end by posing that Halliday's model supports semantic primitives as the basis of his functional understanding of language. This does not mean, though, that there are no syntactic features working hand in hand with strictly semantic information in the system networks. Functions reveal themselves as primitives, whereas structures identified with them are derived. System networks represent the scaffolding of language with the aid of realizational rules which map the speaker's options into chunks of language, determined by social and cultural underpinnings.

## 5. CODA

The metatheoretical approach I have just sketched contains, I believe, the basic tenets of SFG and serves the purpose of evaluating Halliday's theory from a critical point of view. Studies of this kind, frequent in formalist theories of language and rather scanty in the functional paradigm, allow the comparison of SFG with other potentially rival theories, and also lead to finding not only weak points but true claims which shape the theory as well. The attentive reader may have noticed that some characteristics specific to Halliday's grammar have not been considered, the reason being that those missing aspects are so theory-specific that they do not conform to any pattern of comparison worth exploring across several theories. Besides, the systemic postulates which were left out of this analysis are surely derived from other more basic systemic maxims which are indeed contemplated in this article. Let me insist once more on the fact that the leitmotiv of a study like this one is to establish relevant connections between supposedly rival theories and to identify similarities and divergences between them, either one by one or grouped in families of theories. Only by addressing theories in this metatheoretical way is it possible to determine the weight of the theory, its true progress and its influence on other models.

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