

Uhlířová, Ludmila

**[Advances in systemic linguistics: recent theory and practice. Edited  
by Martin Davies and Louise Ravelli]**

*Brno studies in English*. 1993, vol. 20, iss. 1, pp. [105]-109

ISBN 80-210-0889-X

ISSN 0231-5351

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/104388>

Access Date: 24. 02. 2024

Version: 20220831

Terms of use: Digital Library of the Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University  
provides access to digitized documents strictly for personal use, unless  
otherwise specified.

## REVIEWS

*Advances in Systemic Linguistics. Recent Theory and Practice*, ed. M. Davies and L. Ravelli, London and New York, Pinter Publishers, *Open Linguistics Series*, 1992, 258 pp.

Reviewing the latest volume of the Open Linguistics Series which reports recent work in systemic functional linguistics, one need not start from scratch and explain in what ways systemic linguistics differs from other present-day schools of linguistics. It is wellknown that this linguistic theory was created by M. A. K. Halliday in linkage to the traditions of British linguistics and that now it is acknowledged and cultivated not only in Great Britain, but by many linguists across four continents, including Australia, where M. A. Halliday now lives. It is the category of the SYSTEM that is central in systemic linguistics: language is represented as a series of systems, i. e. as a set of linguistic OPTIONS available in a certain environment. Systems are grouped into NETWORKS, i. e. into sets of systems which are closely related from a semantic point of view.<sup>1</sup> As systemic linguistics belongs to the FUNCTIONAL stream in linguistic thinking, a number of its main theoretical points are shared with, or come near to, the Prague functionalism. Concrete examples of mutual influence, or at least of an impetus or inspiration given to each other, may be easily evidenced in Halliday's works as well as in those by František Daneš or Jan Firbas.<sup>2</sup>

On the other hand, what may not be a matter-of-fact piece of common knowledge about systemicists is the full account of their rich theoretical and applied activities in the field. The best account of those is given in the journal *Network* (unfortunately, rarely available here), published twice a year,<sup>3</sup> which brings information on systemicists' meetings, systemic archives, work in progress, issues in systemic theory, book reviews, etc. The information structure of the journal (or, perhaps, its 'ideational metafunction', to paraphrase the systemic terminology), its interactive style of writing (or, its 'interpersonal metafunction'), and, last but not least, its modern image make the journal an excellent servant for linguists desiring to communicate about everything which is currently on the table of systemic linguistics.

It should be highlighted that systemic linguistics as one particular school of linguistics is widely open to other functional approaches. This openness, the willingness to listen to other opinions of varying degrees of similarity, or even to challenges, is a salient feature of systemic linguistics. It is this feature that helps us to understand the method of the selection of contributions to the volume under review.

The volume contains twelve studies 'derived' from papers given at The 17th International Systemic Congress (held at Stirling, July 1990<sup>4</sup>). The papers are arranged in five parts, representing five areas of systemic linguistics within which there is much current discussion. The Parts are entitled (i) Framework, (ii) Metafunctions, (iii)

---

<sup>1</sup> For a detailed exposition of the main principles of systemic theory see Berry 1989.

<sup>2</sup> A critical comparison of both the linguistic schools has been given recently by Davidsen 1987. For a contribution towards a comparison of the approaches of Halliday, Daneš and Firbas see Firbas 1987.

<sup>3</sup> Managing editor: Nan Fries, Box 310, Mount Pleasant MI 48804, USA.

<sup>4</sup> International systemic congresses take place at regular intervals in various parts of the world; the 18th Congress was held at Helsinki in 1991; see Ventola 1991.

Lexicogrammar, (iv) Functional Sentence Perspective and theme, (v) Text studies. In each part there are two or three studies devoted to a topic tackled from different points of view. The studies and their paragraphs in all five parts are numbered continuously like chapters and subchapters in a monograph, which supports an evident continuity in content: the most frequent key terms, repeatedly occurring in various contexts and with different authors and belonging to the general framework, are computational/computer, functional/function, context, situation, given - new, text/discourse, information, process, realization, value, reference/referent, semantics, theme - rheme and other. The concrete methodological, descriptive or explanatory strategy of exposition is distinctive for each study, of course. In some studies, systemic linguistics is presented simply as a well-established, reliable, indisputable theoretical framework, or point of departure to describe and better explain a phenomenon (or a category, a function, etc.) of a language, mostly by construing a semantic network; in other studies the task is posed as a 'puzzle' for the current systemic paradigm, or, even more broadly, as a challenge to revise our linguistic (not only systemic) ideas substantially, or to generalize and deepen our sense of some notions in very general social and semiotic circumstances. The diversification of the individual approaches, and consequently of the genre of 'research study' makes reading the volume a real pleasure.

Now let us proceed to an account of the studies in the volume and to comments on them.

J. Meli Sinclair, *Trust the text*, claims that since the capacity of modern computers enables us to store and process huge quantities of written and spoken language, linguistics hitherto appears to be very heavily speculative, based on 'inadequate evidence' and 'degenerate data' and that 'traditional' linguistic theories and descriptions are inappropriate ('This is not a criticism; it is a fact of life'; p. 15). The substantial change in the availability of information should be 'most gratefully' grasped by linguists and our picture of language and meaning should be rebuilt by inspecting data 'with as little attention as possible to theory'. In this sense linguists should 'trust the TEXT', because premature implications of any kind, as well as any imposition of our ideas on language are 'daunting'. The twin pillars of present and future language research are, according to Sinclair, two: (i) analysis of discourse (in his model it is the PROSPECTIVE function of language which is central, the most important thing being the IMMEDIATE STATE of the text, not retrospection: 'The text is the sentence that IS in front of us when an act of reading is in progress' [10]); (ii) corpus linguistics, such as the Birmingham Cobuild project.

Sinclair's emphasis on the fact that in general people forget the actual language but remember the MESSAGE, in other words that 'a grammar is a grammar of MEANINGS and not of words' (14), is logically interrelated to the crucial question of 'how are meanings made', or *How do you mean?* which is the title of M. A. K. Halliday's study. This question, one of the most central issues in systemic theory, is treated by Halliday in a very broad context. Meaning is explicated as the relationship between our experience and our bodily performance, construed ('projected') in the consciousness. What is construed into a meaning is not a single sign but a two-dimensional semiotic space constituting a sign system (even the 'protolanguage' has its proto-system network). In Halliday's model of semogenesis there are incorporated his many years of theoretical and practical experience in studying language - see, e. g. his investigation of his son Nigel's language development.

Complex issues concerning TEXTUAL METAFUNCTION, which is one of the crucial terms (together with the ideational and interpersonal metafunctions) of the systemic model of language, are dealt with in several studies and concentrate mainly on the quite general and complicated question of how to define, interpret and represent the textual category of Theme. It is shown that equally important contributions to a true functional understanding of the 'elusive' notion of Theme may follow, on the one hand, from an explication operating on as general level of text modelling as possible, such as is offered in C. Mathiessen's study *Interpreting the textual metafunction*, as well as, on the other hand, from a very concrete discourse analysis of the realizations of Theme in a language typologically other than English, namely in Dari (=Afghan Persian), as it is done in L. S. Rashidi's study cited below.

Mathiessen's contribution is fundamental. At the foundation of his interpretation there lies the Hallidayan concept of dynamic MOVEMENT through semantic space, i. e. through text. The movement is characterized in detail in terms of its SHAPE (periodicity, or wave-like pattern, embodying both peaks of prominence and troughs of non-prominence), CARRIER (or MEDIUM) and the TEMPORAL characteristics (inherent dynamicity: a transition from one state to another). The waves are modelled at the level of semantics (illustrative networks are added).

Let me stop at one point of Mathiessen's exposition in more detail, namely at his defence of what he calls the METAPHORICAL character of textual categories, such as Mathesius's 'stream of narration', Chafe's 'flow of information', Halliday's 'swell of information', as well as of such notions as 'point of departure', 'transition', 'in/out of attention', '(thematic) progression', etc. Mathiessen argues that it is pointless to reject these characterizations of textual categories as employed in functional linguistics simply because they are metaphorical and to seek the solution of the problem in cognitive terms such as degree of activation within a cognitive theory of semantics. He claims that 'Metaphor is established as a pervasive strategy for expanding the linguistic resources to allow us to construe various areas of experience. The rejection of metaphors would be to dismiss a fundamental strategy for expanding our understanding of 'reality'. The simple transfer of the problem of characterizing textual categories to the domain of cognition would make sense if cognition was very well understood, but this is not the present state of things. That is why Mathiessen proposes a more interesting alternative: 'To recognize that the semantic system for interpreting language - or any other phenomenon - is typically expanded by means of ideational metaphors and analogies and then to develop an account that grounds "point of departure" and other ideational metaphors of abstract space in a model of textual meaning' (all three quotations are from pp. 39-40). This is what Mathiessen is trying to do in his study, and he is quite successful in it. M's arguments seem to go hand in hand with those of Firbas when objecting to some criticism of the FSP theory (see Firbas in the volume under review and elsewhere).

W. McGregor's lexicogrammatical study *The place of circumstantials in Systemic-Functional Grammar*, challenging the rank hypothesis of systemic theory with circumstantials (adverbials) and rejecting the ideational (experiential) roles of circumstance in the structure of the clause, also contributes to the notion of Theme, as it is conceived by Halliday, quite substantially. Let us illustrate his idea by a sample from p. 147. The sentence *Before long they heard Lily screaming as though somebody was dead* would have - according to Halliday's classical definition<sup>5</sup> - a single Theme, the phrase *before very long*, since this expression functions as a circumstance of time. McGregor suggests that the characterization of topical Theme should be rephrased as follows: 'The topical Theme of an English clause is the first element that has an experiential role in the clause' (147). According to his analysis, there are TWO Themes, a logical Theme **before very long** and an experiential Theme **they**: 'The first functions, as it were, to set the scene, relating it to the previous scene... The second functions to identify what the sentence is about.' (147). Let me add that, in my opinion, the differentiation between logical and experiential Themes, or in other terminology, between SETTING and PARTICIPANTS/OBJECTS as Themes, is rather an important point, which has been lacking so far in Halliday's conception of Theme. It enriches the theory and seems to establish a possible bridge to Firbas's dynamic semantic functions of Bearer of Quality and Setting in his Scales (see below).

J. Firbas's study *On some basic problems of Functional Sentence Perspective* is a perfectly balanced outline of the results of his life-time topic, the theory of Functional Sentence Perspective. It is a pleasure on the one hand to see that the definitions of the basic concepts as laid down by Firbas as early as the fifties have remained untouched (e. g. his definition of the notion of the [degree of] COMMUNICATIVE DYNAMISM), and on the other hand to observe how the theory has developed and how innovations and refinements have been introduced over the course of time, such as Firbas's factors or FORMATIVE FORCES of Functional Sentence Perspective, the characterization of the dynamic semantic scales as INTERPRETATIVE ARRANGEMENTS, as well as the fact that the sentence in order to fulfil a communicative purpose must always be perceived, sometimes even RE-PER-SPECTIVED.

L. S. Rashid in her study *Towards an understanding of the notion of Theme: an example from Dari* seems to be inspired both by Hallidayan characterization of the topical Theme as the first ideational element in the ([English] clause (see note)<sup>6</sup> by Firbas's elaborate, detailed analysis of Functional Sentence Perspective in long passages of texts. She aims at a purely functional explication of the notion of Theme, attempting 'to separate the IDEA of Theme from its REALIZATION' (189).<sup>6</sup> She is successful in demonstrating her ideas on a

<sup>5</sup> See Halliday 1985, 56: 'The Theme of any [English] clause, therefore, extends up to (and includes) the topical Theme. The topical Theme is the first element in the clause that has some function in the ideational structure'.

<sup>6</sup> Let us remember, however, that Halliday himself separates the two points precisely. His definition of Theme is purely functional, see Halliday 1985, 39: 'First position in the

passage of an oral Darl narrative. In Darl, there is nothing as obvious as the sentence-initial position in English, or the **wa**-particle in Japanese, to indicate that Theme has a consistent overt structural realization.

Systemic linguistics attaches a great importance to the sociological aspects of language. This very high priority is sometimes considered 'perhaps the most important distinguishing feature of systemic linguistics' (Berry 1989, vol. 1.22).<sup>7</sup> It is no surprise then that this priority is reflected in the volume, too. J. L. Lemke's *Interpersonal meaning in discourse: Value orientations* offers a sophisticated theoretical framework analyzing the primary function of language, or of all semiosis, namely 'to create, sustain and change social reality' (86).

In systemic linguistics, the overall approach to language is based on TEXT. Therefore, even those studies which deal primarily with the lexicogrammatical component of language and aim at formulating particular networks, e. g. K. Davids's *Transitivity/ergativity: the Janus-headed grammar of actions and events*, or G. Tucker's *An initial approach to comparatives in a Systemic Functional Grammar*, cannot completely do without terms such as CONTEXT or SITUATION, or without a distinction between ELLIPSIS and NON-REALIZATION, etc. In addition, studies devoted to an analysis of concrete types of texts are also presented in the volume. These are J. D. Benson and W. G. Greaves's study *The notion of technicality in register: A case study from the language of bridge*, C. Emmott's study *Splitting the referent: An Introduction to narrative enactor*, touching on the interesting idea of 'enactor' ambiguity in fiction (narrative enactors are created when a SINGLE referent has distinct roles in the narrative, such as when one referent coexists in narrative present and in flashback), and, last but not least, D. Kies's excellent analysis of Orwell's literary language, *The uses of passivity: Suppressing agency in Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Kies departs from the fact that 'agency is one of the most widely used techniques to control a literary theme in a text' (230), and gives a list of fourteen syntactic-stylistic features which systematically undercut agency (e. g. passives, nominalizations, intransitives, patients as subjects, depersonalizations, perfect aspect, negation, etc.) in Orwell's novel. Kies demonstrates how Orwell, using purposefully these means, presents his hero as hardly ever active or in control of any situation, as a person completely deprived of human freedom.

To sum up. The studies in the volume under review range from presentations of purely theoretical or philosophical aspects of language study in broad social and semiotic frames to concrete implementations of the systemic approach on text material. Large computer projects and programs are not left aside, either, e. g. the Birmingham Cobuild Project, the Cardiff Communal Project or CLOC computer program for collocations; other programs for modelling grammar and its semiotic environment computationally are also referred to, or called for. The volume is to be recommended as an excellent and attractive reading in functional linguistics. Last but not least it represents a very good piece of careful and considered editorial work.

Ludmila Uhlířová

## REFERENCES

- Berry, M. (1989). *An introduction to systemic linguistics*, vols. 1 and 2, 2nd ed. (Nottingham: University of Nottingham).
- Davids, K. (1987). 'Halliday's functional grammar and the Prague School', in Dirven and Fried 1987. 39-79.
- Dirven, R. and Fried, V., eds. (1987). *Functionalism and linguistics* (Amsterdam and Philadelphia: Benjamins).
- Firbas, J. (1987). 'On two starting points of communication', in Steele and Threadgold 1987. 23-46.

---

clause is not what defines the Theme; it is the means whereby the function of Theme is realized, in the grammar of English.'

<sup>7</sup> This priority may be confirmed - to mention just one of the most recent publications - by Halliday, Gibbons and Nicolas 1990.

- Halliday, M. A. K. (1985). *An introduction to functional grammar* (London: Arnold).
- Halliday, M. A. K., Gibbons, J. and Nicolas, H., eds. (1990). *Learning, keeping and using language, Selected papers from The 8th world congress of applied linguistics, Sydney, 16-21 August 1987*, vols. 1 and 2 (Amsterdam and Philadelphia: Benjamins).
- Network. *News, views and reviews in systemic linguistics*. Nan Fries, managing editor (Mount Pleasant).
- Steele, R. and Threadgold, T., eds. (1987). *Language Topics, Essays in honour of Michael Halliday* (Amsterdam and Philadelphia: Benjamins).
- Ventola, E., ed. (1991). *Recent systemic and other functional views of language* (Berlin and New York: Mouton de Gruyter).

Bohuslav Mánek, *První české překlady Byronovy poezie* [The First Czech Translations of Byron's Poetry]. *Acta Universitatis Carolinae Philologica, Monographia CXII-1990*. Universita Karlova, Carolinum, Praha 1991, 149pp.

As the author has correctly pointed out in his Introduction to this monograph, while the relations of Czech literature to Byron have been studied by Czech literary scholars from various aspects, particularly those connected with Karel Hynek Mácha and the origin and growth of Czech romanticism, the possible role played by the translations of the poetry of the great English romanticist in the reception of his works and of those of the first and most outstanding Czech romantic poet in the Czech society and literature of the last century has passed almost unnoticed. His aim is to fill in this gap in our knowledge through a detailed analysis and assessment of the function these translations performed in the context of original Czech literary creation and in the development of Czech translation from the 1820s until the beginning of our century.

The monograph is divided into twelve parts including, besides the above-mentioned Introduction, seven chapters allotted to investigation, and four parts containing the scholarly apparatus (bibliographies of Czech Byronic translations and of critical contributions on Byron and Byronism, an editorial note, an English summary, and a list of secondary sources quoted or referred to in the text).

The first of the seven chapters (numbered Two) traces the main lines of the development of Czech (and in the period of the national revival also Slovak) translation from English and American poetry, as it was realized in the selection of authors and texts, the media of publication, the relations between the translation and the original text, and the main linguistic and prosodical features of the source and target languages. The author's investigation issues from a complete bibliography of these translations compiled by him in 1984 (and regrettably not yet published), and has its firm foundation in his extensive knowledge of secondary literature relative to the problems to be solved. The outcome of his being well oriented in the complex points at issue inherent in his ample material is a piece of solid research bringing several interesting discoveries. Of these worth special notice is the establishment of the basic stages in the development of Czech translators' interest in English and American poetry in the given period, as well as the definition of the most important change in this evolution as a shift from a topical literary interest serving the needs of Czech literature to an interest of a literary-historical character and finally to a critical and reappraising attitude. Two small details in this chapter, however, should be pointed out as erroneous - the wrong revivalist Czech translation of the title of Pope's *An Essay on Man*, *Zkouška o člověku*, is used in one reference to the original work (p. 13) and the period of the publication of *Poesie světová* [World Poetry] is limited only to the 1870s, when its final volume was issued in 1885 (p. 14).

The main part of the monograph is opened by the third chapter presenting a thorough investigation of five stages in the reception of Byron's personality and poetry in the Czech lands, at the definition of which the author has arrived by having studied Byronic translations from the point of view of the time of their publication, their poetics, the genres of the poems translated, and the personalities of the translators. This procedure has brought several positive results: a specification of the main trends of the Czech translators' interest in Byron's poetry against the background of general social and literary conditions, a productive investigation of the acceptability of their translations for the evolutionary needs of