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A tribute to Michael Halliday

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A TRIBUTE TO MICHAEL HALLIDAY*Jiří Lukl*

PROFESSOR Michael A. K. Halliday passed away on the 15th of April, 2018, at the respectable age of 93. The linguistic community thus lost one of its greatest and most influential minds of the past five decades. His many contributions in both theoretical and applied linguistics cannot be overstated and have not only vastly expanded our understanding of how languages work (particularly in relation to their environment) but have also deeply influenced the disciplines of education – especially in the field of English Language Teaching (ELT) – quantitative linguistics, and corpus linguistics. Halliday is most well-known for his comprehensive model of language that is broadly known as systemic functional linguistics (SFL).

Halliday was born in 1925 in Leeds, UK. As his parents were both involved with languages (his mother, Winifred Kirkwood, taught French, and his father, Wilfred Halliday, was a teacher of English and a poet), it was only natural for him to become interested in linguistics (Cahill 2018). He received his first linguistic training as a student of Mandarin Chinese. He was awarded a BA degree in Modern Chinese language and literature at the University of London. Soon after, he began his postgraduate studies in Beijing before moving back to the UK to study linguistics, first under the supervision of Gustav Hallam and then John R. Firth (Lowe 2008). He received a PhD in linguistics at Cambridge University in 1955 (Interestingly, while there, Halliday had a brief encounter with the Communist party, from which he broke away after the shock of the Soviet Union's invasion of Hungary in 1956 (Cahill 2018). Even so, his political views remained pro-left throughout his life and influenced the way he viewed language and society, too.). In the following two decades he held various research and educational positions, until in 1976 he moved to Sydney, Australia, to become the foundation professor of the Linguistics department at the University of Sydney. He remained there until his retirement in 1987, after which he became Emeritus Professor of the University of Sydney (Cahill 2018).

During his tenure in Edinburgh, Halliday met his future wife and frequent collaborator, Ruqaiya Hasan, whom he eventually married in 1967. He had been married several times before that, but it was in Ruqaiya that he found a true companion in all his endeavours, professional and private (Jones 2010; Cahill 2015; 2018).

Halliday's early academic interests included modern Chinese, intonation, and grammatical description. Following his teacher and mentor, J. R. Firth, he had been

from the very beginning inspired and influenced by the functional view of language developed in the Prague Linguistic Circle (Lowe 2008), which itself was inspired by the work of the German psychologist and linguist Karl Bühler; however, Halliday's views were shaped by many other linguists and philosophers: the American linguist Benjamin Lee Whorf (language and society), the American sociologist Basil Bernstein (language and society; education and learning), the Polish anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski (language and society) and the philosophers Ludwig Wittgenstein and Alfred North Whitehead (language and science, language and the mind) (Lowe 2008). He was also influenced by the scholars who taught him during his three-year stay in China, notably his mentor, Wang Li.

Halliday's research interests were broad and varied. He made numerous contributions to sociolinguistics, developmental linguistics, cognitive linguistics, corpus linguistics, phonetics, language and education, knowledge, and science, translation, semiotics, language and cognition, discourse analysis, textual studies, theoretical linguistics, and grammar. Nowhere else are these varied interests reflected better than in the momentous eleven-volume collection of his works, edited by Jonathan J. Webster (see Selected Bibliography). Each volume in the series is devoted to one aspect of Halliday's linguistic inquiry. Despite this variability, however, they all share a common ground, a perspective from which Halliday launched all his investigations: the approach to language from a functional, systemic, and environmental point of view, aptly referred to as systemic functional linguistics. This approach began to take shape very early in Halliday's academic career and was first comprehensively laid out in his paper "Categories of the Theory of Grammar" (1961). This paper was later followed by perhaps the most cited of Halliday's papers, Notes on Transitivity and Theme, parts 1-3, published from 1967 to 1968. The theory then received the most comprehensive and extensive treatment in Halliday's crowning jewel, *An Introduction to Functional Grammar*, first published in 1985, with subsequent editions in 1994, 2004 (with Matthiesen), and 2014 (also with Matthiesen).

The guiding principle of this view of language is that languages are functionally determined. The three basic functions that each language must perform if it is even to be considered a language are the experiential, interpersonal, and textual (Halliday 1974, 44; Halliday and Matthiesen 2014, 30-31). Language is also treated by Halliday as a "system of systems". These systems operate at various strata, or levels, of the encoding process (context, semantics, lexicogrammar) and offer speakers a set of meaningful choices through which they encode the three functions. The functions thus determine the choices made at each of the three levels of meaning-making in the following way: a) what features of context are relevant to any given instance of language use; b) in what ways are these features transformed into

linguistic meaning; and c) how is this linguistic meaning expressed in terms of the language's lexicogrammar (Halliday 1978; Halliday and Matthiesen 2014).

For Halliday, context represents a social semiotic environment in which people exchange meanings (1978, 110). Only certain features of it are relevant to language use at any given moment and they may be conceptualized in three functional dimensions: field, tenor, and mode. **Field** represents the content, or what is and what happens in the situation. **Tenor** embodies the nature of the relations among the people present in the situation and the values they associate the situation with. **Mode** determines the role that language plays in the situation (Halliday and Matthiesen 2014, 35-36).

Together, they represent the social semiotic structure from which linguistic meanings are derived via the operation of semantics. Semantics, as it were, serves as an interface between context and lexicogrammar. It draws on social semiotic meanings and transforms them into linguistic meanings, which are then encoded via lexicogrammar as words, clauses and sentences (Halliday and Matthiesen 2014, 43). In creating text, speakers draw on three metafunctions that are directly linked to the three constitutive features of context. The **ideational/experiential** metafunction expresses the content of the situation (field) as configurations of meaning, called figures. The **interpersonal** metafunction represents text as an exchange of moves (propositions and proposals) between speaker and addressee and draws on their mutual relations (tenor). The **textual** metafunction shapes text as a message, which is a flow or waves of information (mode) (Halliday and Matthiesen 2014). Interestingly, according to Halliday, it is the acquisition of this third, textual, metafunction that marks a child's transition from child language to adult language (1978, p. 55-56).

These metafunctions are then encoded in lexicogrammar to produce the patterns of wording that are the final or near-final product (the actual final product being determined by patterns of phonology and phonetics, or orthography). The metafunctions are each realized through three different systems: the **system of transitivity** realizes the ideational/experiential function in configurations of processes, participants and circumstances; the **system of mood** realizes the interpersonal function in patterns of moods and residues; and **the system of theme** realizes the textual function as waves of themes and rhemes (Halliday and Matthiesen 2014).

Although conceptually and descriptively convenient, Halliday stresses that these systems do not operate independently as there are no clear boundaries between them. They are conflated, and the choices we, as speakers, make in one system are always dependent on the choices we make in the others. In the end, they are mapped onto each other to produce one final product: a clause.

What stands out in Halliday's systemic-functional description is its sheer scope and exhaustiveness, his attention to detail and the thoroughness with which he presents his analyses. The strength of his investigations and research also lies in the comprehensiveness and compactness of his theories and his insistence on relying on naturally occurring examples – which is one reason why he also devoted much energy to corpus studies.

Halliday always strongly believed that his theoretical work should not remain an isolated ideal construct with no practical implications. That is also why he never really liked the line drawn between theoretical linguistics and applied linguistics: as with everything, he saw the two not as mutually exclusive, but as mutually beneficial, complementary, and interrelated. This belief in the ultimate practicality of his theories is nowhere else more evident than in his views and studies on first language acquisition, and language and education. This is where he mostly drew on the ideas of Basil Bernstein. One of Halliday's core ideas is that children coming from different social backgrounds have access to varied social semiotic systems. These semiotic systems are not necessarily better or worse, but educational systems favour certain systems over others. Schools thus set up pupils to whom these systems are alien to fail because they are unable to adapt to, or even understand, what the teacher is requiring them to do (Halliday 1978). These findings have established Halliday as one of the most influential figures in language acquisition research and practice, and eventually gave rise to the Common European Framework of Reference and a functional approach to teaching and learning foreign languages (Lowe 2008).

It is not without interest that Halliday's professional life had been closely related to Czechoslovak linguistic research. His predominantly functional approach is naturally based on the ideas of the Prague Linguistic Circle, especially of its founder, Vilém Mathesius. Mathesius's idea of "aktuální členění větné", later given in English as "functional sentence perspective" gave rise to the Czech tradition of information structure studies, represented by such scholars as Josef Vachek, Libuše Dušková, Eva Hajičová, Aleš Svoboda, František Daneš but mainly by Jan Firbas. It was predominantly Firbas who developed functional sentence perspective (FSP) as a universally valid theory of information structure. Halliday recognized FSP as one of the three integral functions of language – the textual – and used the concepts of theme and rheme in his own systemic-functional description (Halliday 1974, 52). At first glance, theme and rheme seem to differ in the two theories; however, this should not be taken to suggest that the theories diverge on core issues. The difference arises merely because in FSP theme and rheme include "given" and "new", which Halliday treats as a system of its own, one which, however, is closely related to his theme and rheme.

Halliday's functionalist interpretation of language and his belief in language as a social semiotic system naturally led him to taking the environmentalist position in the eternal nature-nurture debate, a position also held by his teacher, J. R. Firth (Lowe 2008; Halliday 1978). That is why he was at odds with Noam Chomsky, who believes in innate universal grammar that each human being is born with. Halliday would never agree with this interpretation, but he would not discard it completely, either, believing that the two positions were complementary, rather than contradictory (1978, 16-17). Having always had a strong dislike for unnecessary dichotomies (such as the theoretical-applied linguistics mentioned earlier), Halliday did not understand why it was necessary to separate the ideal, or innate, language from the actual instances of language use. In other words, he did not see as necessary the Saussurean dichotomy of *langue* and *parole*. He argued that the system of language does not exist separately from instances of language use, but rather is a system of instances of language use (Halliday 1978, 38).

I acknowledge that the previous lines are but a poor and belated attempt at praise of a lost titan. Others have done it sooner and better (ASFLA 2018). I have not met Halliday, nor could I have ever hoped to do so. My thoughts are then necessarily superficial, remote, and theoretical, and I need to draw on the ideas of others in celebrating the work of this extraordinarily gifted and prolific scholar. However, I do count myself among the myriads of those who have been inspired and influenced by Halliday's ideas, and as such, I consider this tribute to be a matter of course, a matter of obligation, even. His ideas, and especially the completeness and unity of his descriptions, have allowed me to perceive and understand language in such a way as to appreciate it in all its complexities, while at the same time to take comfort in the fact that all these complexities arise from a relatively simple frame of reference which is based on nothing more or less extraordinary than the most basic functions that languages perform.

Tenures Held by Halliday

1954-1958: Assistant Lecturer, Cambridge University

1958-1960: Lecturer in General Linguistics, Edinburgh

1960-1963: Reader, Edinburgh

1963-1965: Communication Research Centre, University College London

1964: Linguistic Society of America Professor, Indiana University

1965-1971: Professor of Linguistics, University College London

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1972-1973: Fellow, Centre for Advanced Study in the Behavioural Sciences, Stanford
1973-1974: Professor of Linguistics, University of Illinois
1974-1976: Professor of Language and Linguistics, Essex University
1976-1987: Foundation Professor of Linguistics, University of Sydney
1987-2018: Emeritus Professor of the University of Sydney and Macquarie University, Sydney
Honorary doctorates from the University of Birmingham (1987), York University (1988), the University of Athens (1995), Macquarie University (1996), and Lingnan University (1999).

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