An invitation

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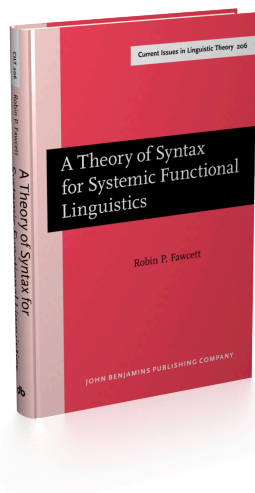
An invitation

The subject of Linguistics is conducted in the main by busy academics with teaching and administrative loads that have grown significantly heavier over the last few decades. The result is that time for research — let alone time for the exploration of theoretical frameworks other than that in which one is currently working — is severely limited. But there is a second major group of working linguists: the postgraduate and undergraduate students who are being shepherded into the subject by these over-worked academics. And the members of this second group should have more time for exploring alternative approaches to understanding language — and indeed, as an intrinsic part of their work, an obligation to undertake such explorations. And there is perhaps a third group: those who regard themselves as 'users' or 'appliers' of Linguistics. But these linguists, I shall argue in the Preface, should not regard themselves as being different in kind from 'theoretical' and 'descriptive' linguists.

This invitation is addressed to linguists of all these types. But before we come to the invitation itself let me give you a little of the background to it.

During the last thirty years I have looked at many different approaches to understanding the nature of language. I have done so as a constant check on the rightness of my original decision (which I made around 1970) to work within the broad framework of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL). These alternative theories have included the following: Stratificational Linguistics; Tagmemics; Categorial Grammar, Transformational Generative Grammar (TGG) and its string of successors, culminating in the Minimalist Program; TGG's occasional interesting spin-offs (such as Lexical Functional Grammar, Generalized Phrase Structure Grammar and its successor Head-driven Phrase Structure Grammar, all of which I regard as still essentially 'Chomskyan' in their orientation despite the belief of those working in each that they represent a significant alternative to Chomsky); connectionist approaches to modelling language; Starosta's Lexicase Grammar and Hudson's Word Grammar; and other explicitly 'functional' grammars such as Dik's Functional Grammar, Langacker's Cognitive Linguistics, and van Valin's Role and Reference Grammar.

However, I still consider that Systemic Functional Linguistics has the greatest potential as a framework for understanding the nature of language and its use. An important part of its value — but only a part — is that it is a tolerant framework, with open boundaries, so that one can use it to develop a version of the model that fits one's own perception of the forms and functions of language. Even more importantly, it is a theory that enables one to keep an appropriate balance between such fundamental pairs of concepts as language and text, form and meaning, and paradigmatic and syntagmatic relations in language.

If I had thought that one or other of the alternative theories really was a better prospect, I would long ago have stopped working in the framework of SFL and devoted my time to exploring the nature of human language in that other framework. In other words, I have looked at many alternatives, and the fact is that I still find that SFL — despite the occasional frustrations that one encounters in working in this or any other theory — the most promising of all current theories of language.

We come now to the invitation. If you have not yet taken a serious look at SFL, perhaps this is the moment to dip a toe in the water? This book provides an introduction to the theory as a whole, as well as a full examination of the problem of the representation of the structure of language at the level of form. It will introduce you to the basic principles of this fascinating and sometimes elusive theory, and also to some of the theory's major current issues.