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Preface

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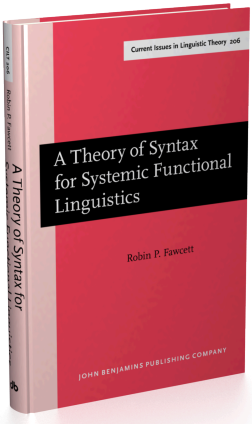

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Robin P. Fawcett
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Preface

1 Systemic Functional Linguistics as a major current theory of language

From some viewpoints, Systemic Functional Linguistics would not be considered one of the major theories of language of our time. If one judges the importance of a theory by the evidence of papers given at conferences of the Linguistic Society of America, the Linguistics Association of Great Britain and other such events, and by its representation in the journals associated with these societies and associations, then this inference is understandable. But it is an inference that would be seriously misleading.

Let us accept that a linguistic theory includes not only (1) a set of assumptions about the essential nature of language but also (2) assumptions about the goals of linguistics, (3) assumptions about the methods by which it is appropriate to try to achieve those goals, and (4) assumptions about the relations between theory, description and application. In this broad definition of a theory, there is a continuum of theories stretching from standard Chomskyan and para-Chomskyan linguistics at one end to Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) at (or near) the other — with theories such as van Valin's Role and Reference Grammar and Dik's Functional Grammar somewhere in the middle. Thirty years ago, in the heyday of what Smith & Wilson (1970) hailed as "the Chomskyan revolution", there was far less tolerance for non-Chomskyan approaches than there is today, and those of us who wanted to be able to explore the value of the still quite new theory of SFL found that we had to create our own conferences, summer schools, newsletters, book series, and ultimately journals in order to have an academic forum in which to pursue alternative interpretations of what the task of linguistics is. It really was that bad.

Nowadays, of course, there is a rather less prescriptive atmosphere in linguistics, and most conferences and journals are open to a rather wider spectrum of types of contribution. But the legacy of that period is the series of 'alternative' forums that were created at that time, such as the annual meetings

of the Linguistics Association of Canada and the United States (LACUS) in North America, the regular conferences of Dikian functional linguists, and the International Systemic Functional Congresses (ISFCs) that take place annually in one or other of Europe, North America, Australasia, and the Far East, attracting attendances of 2-300 or more — and with annual local workshops in many countries as well. The picture is similar in the domain of publications. There are certain journals that are known to give a warmer welcome than others to papers with a functional perspective, so that many functional linguists have long since stopped offering papers to journals which are thought — perhaps quite wrongly — to be less interested in functional theories of language than they are in formal theories. In any case, there is so much going on within SFL (the functional theory which I know best) that those working within the theory find that they do not have the time and money to present systemic functional work at all of the wider linguistics conferences that they no doubt should — and this can in turn lead other linguists to think that 'not much is happening in Systemic Functional Linguistics'.

What this means is that, if the base from which you set out on your exploration of language is a department of linguistics in which the 'core' of linguistics is seen as lying within formal syntax (i.e., in what we might characterize as the 'S -> NP VP' paradigm, invoking 'X-bar theory' and so on), then you would probably have to make a considerable effort to find out about Systemic Functional Linguistics. My claim, of course, is that SFL is a far more interesting — and so far more important — theory of language than it may at first appear to be to someone whose initial standpoint is anywhere that is at all far away from it on the continuum of theories that I mentioned earlier.

An alternative approach to evaluating the importance of a theory is to ask what effect it has on the various fields in which a model of language is required — i.e., the various areas of 'applied linguistics'. The first level of 'application' of a theory is one that is usually not thought of as an application at all — but it is. This is the use of a theory of language in the description of a language. It is descriptions of languages — not theories — that get used to help solve problems of various sorts in fields such as the teaching and learning of languages, translation between languages, studying how children learn their mother tongue, analyzing literary style, critical discourse analysis, and the like — these being what are usually thought of as the 'applications' of the theory. But the fact is that you cannot apply a theory of language directly to a problem; you can only apply a theory-based description of a particular language (or languages).

Over the last forty years or so, the ideas of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) have influenced the description of many languages, and through this many other fields of applied linguistics. While the ideas of Noam Chomsky and other formal grammarians have dominated the conferences and publications in theoretical linguistics, descriptive linguists who have been concerned to provide usable descriptions of language such as Quirk, Leech, Sinclair, Huddleston, Biber and their colleagues have also drawn, directly or indirectly, upon the ideas of SFL — a theory whose principal architect is Michael Halliday (e.g., the treatment of 'given' and 'new' and 'theme' and rheme' as separate pairs of concepts in Quirk *et al.* 1985). And there are numerous other scholars working in the various fields of 'applied linguistics' who have found the ideas of SFL useful.

Indeed, the belief in SFL is that the division between theory, description and application is ultimately an artificial one, since the influences can work fruitfully in both directions (e.g., as emphasized in Halliday & Fawcett 1987b). When a theory is used in a challenging field of application such as syllabus design, literary stylistics or modelling the computer generation of text, inadequacies in the description may be revealed, and an improved version of the description — and so sometimes also the theory — may then be developed. Indeed, it can be argued that any theory of language that has been found useful in as wide a range of fields of application as SFL has should for this reason alone be of interest to the theoretical linguist.

However, SFL can claim a considerable theoretical status in its own right. A major reason is its pre-eminence in the field that is the most demanding formal test-bed of all for a theory of language. This is the field of natural language generation in computers. This is both an application of the theory — which is why it was included in the list above — and, when the work is carried out in a principled, theory-based manner, a highly demanding formalization of the theory. In the 1980s and 1990s broad-coverage systemic functional grammars have been formalized and tested more fully than most (if not all) other current theories in the field, and my involvement in this work over the last fifteen years has convinced me that this is indeed the most stringent of all types of formalization. Each of the two major alternative versions of SFL to be described here have satisfied this demanding test of their 'generativeness' to an impressive extent, these two models being "among the largest grammars existing anywhere in computational form" (Halliday 1994:xii). Butler in fact goes further, saying of the grammar in the COMMUNAL Project at Cardiff that it "currently operates with the largest computer-based systemic grammar in the

world" (Butler 1993b:4503). Although it is notoriously hard to make comparisons between the coverage of grammars, I believe that he is right. Moreover, the Cardiff Grammar is still growing, as further areas are added and as existing areas are re-written to include the awkward and untidy bits that are omitted from so many published grammars (especially generative grammars).

In sum, then, we can say that Systemic Functional Linguistics has its own sets of assumptions about the essential nature of language, about the goals of linguistics, about the methods through which they should be pursued, and about relations between theory, description and application. These assumptions may only in part with those of theories of language at other points on the continuum mentioned earlier, but it can be argued that even from the standpoint of those other theories SFL deserves be regarded as a major current theory, because of its successful formalization in computer models of language.

2 What this book is about

This book proposes a new theory of syntax for SFL. In doing so it examines and evaluates some of the major differences between two current versions of SFL, focussing in particular on the way in which they model syntax.

We shall find that there are also important alternative positions within Halliday's theory, and — most pertinently — that he gives us no adequate statement of a 'theory of syntax' in either of the two major recent publications in which we might expect to find one: his paper "Systemic theory" (1993) and his widely influential *Introduction to Functional Grammar* (1985, second edition 1994). Moreover, we shall find that this leads us to draw unexpected conclusions about the theoretical status of the representations of clauses in *IFG,* and so about what a theory of syntax for SFL should be like.

Indeed, it is one of the most surprising facts about SFL that, after forty years of fairly widespread use in various fields of application, there is no general agreement as to how best to represent the structure of language at the level of form. This book makes clear proposals for a (partly) new theory of syntax, and in particular for the replacement of the method of representing structure that is used in Halliday's *Introduction to Functional Grammar* (1994) by a simpler method. Moreover, the new theory of syntax is one that is equally relevant, I shall argue, to a model of language in which Halliday's current representations are retained.

This book therefore addresses a major current issue in a major current theory of language. The questions that it discusses and the concepts that it proposes are ones that are potentially relevant to any functional grammar, so that the exploratory journey on which it takes the reader should interest any linguist who takes a functional approach to understanding the nature of language.

3 The book's two parts

The book has two main parts: a 'prolegomenon' to a theory of syntax, and the presentation of the theory itself.

The 'prolegomenon' provides the framework of ideas that is necessary in order to understand why the theory to be presented in Part 2 is as it is. Theories have histories, and the founding document of systemic theory is Halliday's "Categories of the Theory of Grammar" (1961/76) — a paper that was essentially a theory of syntax. It is fascinating to trace the way in which the original seven main concepts of "Categories" have developed into the two current alternative accounts of what is required in the syntax of "a modern systemic functional grammar" (a term that will be defined in Chapter 1). I have therefor chosen to begin Part 1 with a summary of Halliday's seminal paper "Categories". I then sketch in the major components of a systemic functional (SF) model of language that has the two levels of 'meaning' and 'form', going on to show that it provides a framework that can be used for evaluating the two major alternative approaches to syntax being considered here. Specifically, I identify the place of a **theory of syntax** within this overall model — both for the grammar itself and for the outputs from the grammar. Then in the following chapter I sketch in the major stages through which the theory of language presented in "Categories" has been transmuted into the new theory of language that is Systemic Functional Linguistics.

Against this historical background, the later chapters of Part 1 describe and summarize the three major 'post-Categories' sources for establishing a modern theory of syntax for SFL. The first is the 'theoretical-generative' approach to systemic functional syntax exemplified in Halliday's "Systemic theory" (1993), but also in works by Matthiessen & Bateman (1991) and by Fawcett, Tucker & Lin (1993). The second is Halliday's *An Introduction to Functional Grammar* (second edition 1994, henceforth *IFG*). The third 'updating' of "Categories" is my "Some proposals for systemic syntax" (1974-6/81) — together with the later

revisions to it, as described in Fawcett (1980), Tucker (1998) and Fawcett (in press). I shall try to provide a clear explanation as to (1) what the differences between these three current models of syntax are, (2) why these differences exist, and (3) the extent to which each work is a useful source for establishing a modern theory of syntax for SFL. Taken together, these three 'post-Categories' accounts of systemic syntax provide most — though not quite all — of the concepts needed for the new version of the theory presented in Part 2.

In evaluating these alternative theories of syntax, we shall find it useful to distinguish between two broad strands of scholarly work that are found in each of the two versions of SFL theory that are being compared. Indeed, these two strands can be found in many theories of language — though by no means all. They are what we shall call the 'theoretical-generative' and the 'text-descriptive' strands, and these terms will be explained more fully when they are introduced in Chapter 5.

However, there is a second set of distinctions that is equally useful. When we look at a theory from the viewpoint of a reader who is trying to discover what a given theoretical statement actually involves, it is useful to be able to consult published descriptions of languages that exemplify those concepts. In Chapter 7 we shall distinguish three major levels on the 'scale of availability' of a theory — and we shall find that both versions of SFL are currently inadequately provided for in these terms (as indeed are most if not all other theories of language). I then summarize the prospects for rectifying this situation.

With these points in mind, Part 2 presents the full set of categories and relationships that are required in a theory of syntax for a modern systemic functional grammar — i.e., a model of language that can be used for both the generation and the analysis of texts (including generation and analysis by a computer). At the same time, Part 2 evaluates the relationship between what is proposed here and the earlier major writings within the theory — including, as well as the works mentioned above, those by Halliday's colleagues in the 1960s who contributed to the theory of syntax, and those who implemented his version of the grammar in the computer.

While the concepts being presented in Part 2 are, in their very nature, abstract, they are illustrated at every point through a description of the syntax of English — with occasional comments on the requirements of markedly different languages.

The book has three appendices. Each of the first two illustrates an aspect of the theoretical model described in the main text. Appendix A provides

a simple but fully explicit example of the model of a SF grammar presented in Part 1 — a model, it is suggested, which can be said to be common to both of the current modern SF theories of language. Appendix B provides, in just three pages and a key, summary diagrams of the central units of English syntax and their structures. Finally, Appendix C provides a fuller account of the 'rank scale debate' than it seemed appropriate to include in the main text, for those with a particular interest in this topic.

Appendix B is taken from my *Functional Syntax Handbook: Analyzing English at the level of form* (Fawcett in press), a work which consists of a full description of English in terms of the theory of syntax presented here. It is designed for use both as a 'fast track' course book and as a reference work that can be consulted by those analyzing the structure of text-sentences in functional terms. This 'syntax handbook' will be complemented in due course by my *Functional Semantics Handbook: Analyzing English at the level of meaning* (Fawcett forthcoming a), and this will provide an equivalent framework for the analysis of texts in terms of their various types of meaning.

4 The relationship of the new proposals to Halliday's representations of structure

In what I have said so far, I have been writing as if the theory of syntax to be presented here is an **alternative** to Halliday's approach to structure. And this is indeed what it is, in that the method of representing the syntax of a text-sentence to be described here is ultimately an alternative to his 'multiple structure' method rather than a complement to it. However, I shall also suggest that even a user of Halliday's approach who remains unconvinced by my argument **also needs the set of concepts proposed here** (or a fairly similar set). This statement is likely to come as a surprise to many readers, i.e., to those who are familiar with Halliday's proposals for representing the structure of a clause by a set of several different structures — proposals which have not until now been publicly questioned by other systemic linguists. The reason why Halliday's model needs to incorporate the concepts proposed here is that his current structural representations in *IFG* and elsewhere are not, as he himself would agree, the final stage in the process of generation in his framework, but an intermediate one. In the final stage, the five or more different structures that he distinguishes must be integrated into **a single represent-**

ation. And it is this integration into a single structure that the theory of syntax presented here provides.

To express matters in this way seems at first sight to provide a neat way to reconcile the two models of structure. To my considerable regret, however, I have to point out that this is not what I am proposing. This is because, once one recognizes the need for this final type of representation, it leads on to further questions. If this final integrated representation is required — as it undoubtedly is — we have to ask questions such as:

1 What is the status in the theory of the intermediate 'multiple structure' representations of clauses in *IFG*?
2 Do they represent some sort of 'intermediate' structure between the representation in terms of systemic features and the final integrated representation?
3 If so, are the 'multiple structures' needed at all?

If the answer to the third question is "Yes", so that 'multiple structures' of the type shown in *IFG* are indeed to be treated as an integral part of the model of language, this entails the addition to the model of a new component. Its function would be to convert the 'multiple structure' type of representation into a single representation. But this leads in turn to further questions, such as:

4 Is such component used in the computer implementations of Halliday's theory, e.g., is it described in Matthiessen & Bateman (1991)?
5 Is there any indication anywhere else in the literature of SFL as to what this component would be like? Indeed, we must also ask:
6 Is there, in fact, any way in which it is possible to 'integrate' several different structures (as opposed to integrating their elements, which is already standard practice in the theory)?

Chapter 7 asks these questions, provides the answers, and then discusses the implications of these answers for the theory.

Where does this leave the representations of clause structure in *IFG* and the many derived works? It may be argued by some that the main value of such 'multiple structure' representations is that they provide the best available description of a language that foregrounds the concept that each clause is the realization of several different broad types of meaning (or 'metafunctions', in Halliday's terms). On the other hand, a representation of the clause that shows (1) the various different types of meaning that it expresses **at the level of**

semantics and (2) a single structure **at the level of form** provides an equally insightful representation of this important aspect of language, and presents no additional problems for the theory. Moreover it is in fact easier, in a fully generative SF grammar, to generate the final structures directly from the system networks than it is to do it via a 'multiple structure' representation. Chapter 7 includes an example of the alternative way of representing the many meanings in a clause, i.e., by showing the semantic features in their 'strands of meaning'. In this approach, then, there is no 'intermediate' structure, and the representation of syntax at the level of form is the final structure.

Thus, whether or not one retains the intermediate level of 'multiple structure' representations of *IFG* in one's model of language, every systemic functional grammar requires a representation of syntax in a single, integrated structure, underpinned by a set of theoretical concepts such as those set out in Part 2 of this book.