Foreword

Pages xi–xiv of
Language Typology: A functional perspective
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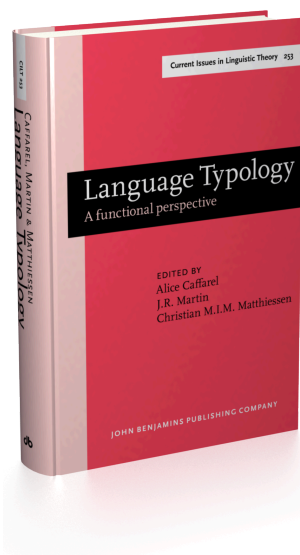**M.I.M. Matthiessen**
[**Current Issues in Linguistic Theory**, 253]
2004. xiv, 702 pp.

Foreword

This volume explores the clause grammars of eight languages — two from Europe (French, German), five from Asia (Tagalog, Vietnamese, Chinese, Japanese, Telugu) and one from Australia (Pitjantjatjara), covering seven language families. Each language is presented in its own terms, with evidence from a range of spoken and written discourse. The final chapter discusses descriptive motifs and generalizations, drawing on the languages explored in the book but also making reference to many other languages as well. The descriptions of the individual languages and the typological generalizations are all based on one particular functional theory – systemic functional theory, which is introduced in the first chapter.

The book reflects and consolidates the growth in descriptions of a range of languages based on systemic functional theory, going back to Halliday's fieldwork on dialects of Chinese in the Pearl River Delta in the late 1940s and including a number of new accounts being added in the 1990s. In the last few years, two workshops focusing on systemic functional typology have been held at the University of Sydney – the first in December 1996 and the second in September 1999. During these workshops, systemic functional researchers presented and contrasted grammatical profiles of a range of languages. This book includes languages discussed at the first workshop, but it also adds languages that were not represented at that workshop – German and Telugu. The second workshop included continued work on the languages from the first workshop, but it also saw the addition of other languages – Danish, Cantonese and Korean in particular. These will be included in a sequel to the present book, together with accounts of other languages as well.

The book is intended to serve as a contribution to a range of multilingual concerns. One of the central multilingual concerns is, of course, language typology and the material has been used in this context. But the book is also intended to support other multilingual concerns such as language comparison, translation studies and the development of descriptions of languages that have not yet been described in (systemic) functional terms. The descriptions presented in this book are all based on rich evidence from discourse; and they have been designed to be useable in discourse analysis – something that has become increasingly important in translation studies.

In the field of typology, the book is offered as a complement to existing works: it combines accounts of individual languages couched in terms that are sensitive

to their own unique discourse concerns with an exploration of descriptive motifs and generalizations. Developing an account of a particular language that strikes a balance between viewing it as unique and viewing it as either just another manifestation of language as the general human semiotic or a peculiar, scrambled version of some dominant language like Latin, English or Chinese is a signficant challenge that can only be met by using the resources of a powerful theory of language(s) and a powerful metatheory of our theory of language(s). The contributors have met this challenge by drawing on systemic functional (meta)theory. This theory of language is a general theory in the sense that it provides us with the resources needed for construing human language as one kind of semiotic system without building in descriptive assumptions based on one or a small number of languages. The descriptions developed within the general theory are descriptions of particular languages – descriptions that are grounded in natural discourse. The descriptions are of course guided by the accumulation of descriptive experience. (i) On the one hand there are models emerging from work on other languages; for example, when he began developing his descriptions of English, Michael Halliday was able to draw on his experience with describing Chinese and many have been influenced in their work on various languages by his account of English. Such accounts serve as model or protocol descriptions; but there is an inherent danger in using them – the danger of transferring them to other languages. One way of avoiding this danger is to ensure that the account being developed is based on natural discourse and then to test the description by using it in discourse analysis. The accounts presented in this volume have all gone through these two processes. Thus if the descriptive category of "Theme" or "Subject" is posited in the account of a given language, this is only because it represents a plausible interpretation of patterns that emerge in discourses from different registers. (ii) On the other hand, comprehensive descriptions of particular languages provide material for descriptive generalizations concerned with systems such as those of transitivity, theme, mood, tense/aspect and expansion & projection. Such generalizations should be based not on isolated structural fragments but on a sense of how whole systems operate in their environments. For example, the category of Subject should not be the focus of investigation; rather any generalizations about Subject should emerge from more holistic considerations of how languages grammaticalize interpersonal patterns of meaning as a resource for creating dialogue in the form of systems of mood.

Acknowledgements