



Address at the 2018 SFL forum of Peking University

Respected Professor Ning

Dear friends and colleagues, ladies and gentlemen,

It is my pleasure and privilege to come back to the campus of my alma mater to attend this SFL forum and join in the celebration of the 30th anniversary of the first National Conference of Functional Linguistics, initiated by Professor Zhuanglin Hu and held in the beautiful lakeside Linhuxuan (临湖轩) at Peking University in 1989. With Professor Hu away at Tongji University in Shanghai addressing another SFL forum, I am the only representative of the participants of the first conference today. That conference is significant for initiating the SFL tradition in China and for “paving the way” for the following generations “to build on and extend” (Webster and Peng 2016, xxiii) though it only had twenty or so participants with limited themes. Looking back, we feel very proud of the growth of the SFL community and the achievements made by Chinese SFL scholars under the three leaders of our functional association(s), first Zhuanglin Hu, then Guowen Huang and now Xuanwei Peng (Chinese Association of Functional Linguistics) and Guowen Huang (Chinese Association of Discourse Analysis). China’s SFL community has expanded into a very large one with a great vitality, having a membership of three or four generations of scholars coming from different regions of the country. We have travelled along a path from mainly introducing the basics of SFL to expanding our work to many of the major research domains though we are facing new problems and challenges.

What we have achieved would not have been possible, of course, without the guidance and advice given by Professor Halliday himself and other renowned SFL scholars including those who are present here today. I would like to take this opportunity to express our gratitude to all of them and particularly to pay tribute to the late Professor Halliday, the founder of SFL, one of the greatest linguists of our time, a true friend of the Chinese people, the guide of our community, my dear teacher and one of my best friends.

Professor Halliday’s leaving us is indeed a great loss. Many of us including myself have not recovered from the grief and sadness of his passing. Memories have often visited me in the past six months, such as having meals at his home, supervision discussions in his office, talking and meeting with him at conferences and seminars in different places in China and the world, and his comments made on my papers and presentations. These memories are very precious to me and will forever live in my mind. I have written two articles in Chinese in commemoration of this great man, one published in the network journal “iResearch” on April 18th entitled “May You Rest Peacefully, My Dear Teacher!”(安息吧, 2018a) and the other in the Journal of Zhejiang International Studies University with the title “A Great Life Dedicated to Working with Meaning” (与意义同行的伟大一生) (2018b). At present, I am working on a third one about topical theme in Chinese.

Prof. Halliday has left behind rich academic legacies. The best way to remember him is to carry on with our work. There could be a very long list, of which I shall mention only a few. One of his legacies is the spirit of perseverance in working hard to achieve his goal of founding “one true theory of grammar”, known as Systemic-Functional Linguistics, for short SFL, which he regarded as an Applicable Linguistics. When he first proposed this linguistic theoretical model, he “was laughed out of court” (Martin 2016, 51) and was put under a great pressure in the early 1960’s, when Chomsky’s generative – transformational grammar dominated the linguistics world with all the other models pushed “silently into the background” (Halliday 2016, 3). However, his strong belief that this would be “a comprehensive and theoretically powerful model of language” … “capable of being applied to the problems, both research problems and practical problems”, which people are encountering every day (Halliday 2008, 7; Martin 2016, 52), made him determined to build block by block the great architecture of the model. Finally, together with his colleagues, he had succeeded in working out the main framework of the model and having it spread from Australia to Asia, Europe, the Americas and Africa, covering all the continents on earth. The second one, which is rooted in his idea of Applicable Linguistics, is his view on the dialectical relation between theory and practice. This is explicitly explained by him: “ … if you want to apply something, you have to have a theory to apply; there has to be a coherent body of knowledge behind the application – but, by the same token, that body of knowledge will be shaped, modified, extended by what results from the efforts to apply it.” (2008, 14); in other words, “theory is developed to support application; and application is a way of testing theory” (Matthiessen 2014, 139). The third one would be his inclusive attitude and transdisciplinary approach in making researches, as he maintained that all the theoretical models are complementary in nature. The next one may be his dedication to the study of Chinese and his hope that his students and all Chinese SFL linguists should continue with this work. Indeed, we should make a greater endeavor in doing researches in our own languages. I agree with Professor Guowen Huang that we could start with comparative and typological studies between English and Chinese and other languages spoken in this country (2016, xx). Many Chinese scholars have contributed to researches in this field in the last decades. I myself have also made some efforts in promoting this work. In the past three years, I have been giving a series of lectures on the basics of the SFL theory to a group of MA and PhD students coming from different ethnic groups in Minzu University of China or the University of Nationalities of China. Now we have begun with seminars analyzing linguistic features of their essays written in Chinese such as the thematic elements at both the clausal and discourse level, even with analyses in their own languages or of other semiotic discourses, for example, the verb processes in Uygur and multi-semiotic features of some drawings of divination by the Qiang ethnic group. Recently Professor Baodi Ruan, the initiator and organizer of all these activities, who has been teaching the course of An Introduction to Functional Grammar in Chinese in the last two semesters, has discussed with me about organizing a forum such as this one in the future. She asks me to welcome all of you to her campus when the event takes place. However, the most important of Professor Halliday’s legacies is his stress on regarding “language as a meaning potential and its representation as networks of systems …” (2016, 11), which means that when working with language, we should take meaning as the core element or the soul of language. What impresses me most is what he said in one of his articles, which has a profound implication: “I feel I have

been very fortunate to be able to spend my working life working with meaning – working with all the different meanings of meaning ... " (Halliday 2008, 22).

Finally, let me express my best wishes for the success of this forum. I firmly believe that activities and functions such as this one will not only promote the healthy and meaningful exchanges between scholars from both home and abroad and will also expand our vision for the understanding of the linguistic as well as other semiotic resources for the creation of meaning.

Thank you very much!

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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