

Book Review

Anne McCabe: *A Functional Linguistic Perspective on Developing Language*. New York, London: Routledge, 2021, pp. 268. ISBN: 9780429462504, (hbk) £96.

Reviewed by **Moazzam Ali Khan**, Chinese Classics Research Institute, Fudan University, Shanghai, China, E-mail: 19110100015@fudan.edu.cn

<https://doi.org/10.1515/csh-2023-0016>

Anne McCabe's *A Functional Linguistic Perspective on Developing Language* explains language development from a Systemic Functional Linguistic (SFL) standpoint, combining theory and evidence from various research projects. The book opens with a detailed examination of SFL theory and its emphasis on texts, emphasizing the meta-functional character of language and how individuals' repertoires of meaning-making resources evolve as they engage with the world.

The book comprises five chapters. Each chapter includes various SFL studies to illustrate variations in language development over various phases and discuss other functional views to investigate how these diverse methods to influence one another. McCabe focuses on three significant areas of language development: language development in infancy and early childhood, language development in school, and the development of additional language(s) once a first language has been mastered.

The subsequent chapter of the volume is based on an SFL approach, which looks at the significant phases of language development, from birth to school settings to different, second, and foreign language acquisition contexts. Understanding language development—that is, getting to the heart of how we learn to effectively communicate across a wide range of settings throughout our lives—is quite appealing. McCabe shows the language development process. In doing so, she highlights how parents eagerly await their babies' first words; teachers of all subjects spend classroom hours explaining terms that they hope students will use effectively in assignments and exams; and people of all ages and backgrounds invest significant time, effort, and money in learning to communicate with others through additional languages.

McCabe provides illustrations of language development, e.g., explaining the usage of the verb 'develop' in a functional linguistic perspective. She argues that

‘developing’ might be an adjective that modifies the term ‘language,’ i.e. a classifier of the word ‘language,’ and as such, it relates to descriptions of an individual’s language as it evolves through time. Throughout the book, McCabe employs the term “evolving” in two senses: at times, the emphasis is on portraying language as it evolves through time, through the giving of linguistic snapshots of persons, as in the case of the reported studies of youngsters.

Chapter 2 outlines the functions that children serve as they develop their language, which includes the role of language in regulating others’ and their behaviour, creating relationships with others, expressing their creativity and individuality, learning, and then communicating what they have learned. Small children, of course, are surrounded by more proficient language users who may correct their language use, often in terms of appropriateness to a given context: for example, parents may chastise their children for using taboo expressions and encourage them to use pragmatic politeness markers such as ‘please’ and ‘thank you.’ They may correct the speech or word choice of youngsters. Nonetheless, the ‘rules’ kids acquire due to these admonitions tend to teach youngsters how to get things done more efficiently. She describes the background research on child language development (CLD) in the second chapter. McCabe illustrates the interest by showing how children learn language from infancy, which comes from the Latin meaning “without language,” predating CLD as a recognized field of research. She offers examples of ‘Diary’ studies from the early seventeenth century that are particularly relevant as a basis for Halliday’s research, whereas child development and language acquisition were philosophical and empirical issues in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

McCabe presents Chomsky’s nativist and universalist theory and considers perhaps the most prominent and widely growing theoretical position at Halliday’s ethnographic research. Within this framework, CLD researchers are primarily concerned with how children develop a mental repertoire of syntactic structures specific to their language variety, beginning with an inherent state. Chomsky’s theorizing challenged the dominant paradigm of “empiricist and behaviourist doctrines” (Chomsky 1992, 22) according to which knowledge of the language is a “system of habits, dispositions, and abilities” acquired through “conditioning, training, habit-formation, or ‘general learning mechanisms’ such as induction” (Chomsky 1992, 19).

The author presents language usage of extra language learners in Chapter 3. In essence, the author presents Child language development, the final of Halliday’s three significant areas of work in language development that influenced SFL theory. First, she shared Halliday’s experiences with extra language acquisition when teaching English and Chinese. Then, in terms of school language development (henceforth SLD), the author shows how Halliday transitioned from Chinese studies

to linguistics towards the end of the 1950s, when he was appointed to the Department of English Language and General Linguistics at the University of Edinburgh.

The most significant part of this chapter is the development of genre-based pedagogy (GBP). She sheds light on Halliday's early insights into the differences between spoken and written language to the carefully structured pedagogic interactions of GBP and Reading to learn (R2L). It is abundantly clear that, rather than seeing the language developmental value of school as one of eradicating 'incorrect' ways of speaking, the SFL view equates SLD with expanding repertoires of registers, accompanied by discernment in choosing a register. In the SFL method, the expansion happens through careful scaffolding from home to school registers and within school registers, shunting back and forth between more concrete instances of concepts wrapped up as abstractions through more metaphorical, static, nominalized academic language. Finally, Chapter 3 provides the importance of language development in advancing SFL theory to account for meaning-making in high-stakes texts of schooling contexts.

Chapter 4 discussed the importance of language teaching/learning in Halliday's first scale-and-category grammar evolution, as illustrated in his 1960 French teachers' lectures. In this chapter, the author presents the processes of developing language or how, over time, we expand our repertoires of language use. She offers the explanation of Language Teaching and Early Development of Systemic Theory and shows how Halliday's interest in language teaching was sparked by his experiences learning and then teaching Chinese in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Halliday's ideas on teaching a language other than one's mother tongue were published in papers such as "General linguistics and its application to language teaching," which was first delivered as a series of lectures to French teachers in 1960 and then published in English in which he provides a description of language for teaching (p. 151).

McCabe further provides an overview of the type of published research that has been conducted with SFL as the linguistic theory underpinning development claims, as described in Chapter 3. Referring to the journal impact for 2017 released by the Journal Citation Reports, she conducted a research synthesis of SFL-based articles on language development from the top 60 journals in the category of 'Linguistics'. McCabe divided the investigated articles into three categories, namely, cross-sectional studies, longitudinal and cross-sectional studies and longitudinal studies, and introduced the overall findings and issues of those studies.

McCabe sums up Chapter 4 with the discussion on SFL and adult language development (ALD). Starting with Halliday's original thinking about SFL, followed by his personal experiences teaching and acquiring an additional language, this chapter has studied SFL and its link to ALD. In terms of measuring ALD, SFL tracks

improvements in the variety of meaning-making resources accessible to persons for contextualized usage and therefore emphasises development as the capacity to make suitable, meaningful choices based on the language user's goals. As in earlier chapters, McCabe demonstrates the SFL perspective of ALD as an additive to previously existing repertoires, linked with a requirement for learning discernment in selecting semiotic resources and tailored to learners' language skill level. She also explains the importance of rich interactive settings for ALD, as it did for CLD and SLD. Finally, the literature examination also reveals some support for the benefits of an SFL approach to teaching L2 learners, albeit the data comes primarily from school-based or EAP contexts rather than general language acquisition.

The last Chapter, *Developing Theory, Pedagogy, and Research*, discusses the implications of these findings for future research and practical approaches in literacy instruction. McCabe begins by weaving together a brief story about the influence of Systemic Functional Linguistic (SFL) theory on the study of language development. Next, she talks about the general levels of language substance, form, and situation, which were connected via more specific levels: phonology/graphology, which connected phonetics/script (substance) to both grammar and lexis (form), and semantics (then dubbed 'context,' which connected grammar and lexis to a situation in other languages. The most significant section of this chapter is the mention of *Stratification*. Concentrating on the modelling of stratal relations between semantics and lexicogrammar in the interpersonal and ideational metafunctions leads first to a theoretical suggestion for the child language model, and then to a discussion of the tensions surrounding Stratification—tensions that extend to the concept of grammatical metaphor as well as considerations of contextual information. In this part, each of these ideas is developed one at a time.

After all, this volume presents several avenues for future study in language development which has emerged from the discussion in this chapter, one for each of the three aspects of language development discussed. Specifically, in terms of CLD, it would be worthwhile to incorporate Taverniers' suggestion of modelling the informative function as an intrinsic language function (rather than as a macro function) in child language studies and reinterpreting existing literature data and launching brand new studies of the late transition period. In addition, given the possibility for the informative function to allow children to assign metafunctions to the macro functions, such studies might provide more detailed information on how children go from the macro functions to the metafunctions through interaction.

This book demonstrates the fantastic reach of SFL theory, pedagogy, and research in promoting developmental paths toward more excellent meaning-making resources that enable us to engage and act successfully in our world. This book aims to explain language development from a functional viewpoint, Systemic

Functional Linguistics (SFL), by presenting its theory and associated research on how individuals develop their language talents for meaningful interaction with others.

Overall, this book is a valuable addition to linguistics and applied linguistics. Due to its examination of the relationship between SFL theory and its application to language development, this book will require reading for students and professors interested in Systemic Functional Linguistics, language and education, and literacy studies.

References

- Chomsky, Noam. 1992. "On the Nature, Use and Acquisition of Language." In *Thirty Years of Linguistic Evolution: Studies in Honour of René Dirven on the Occasion of his Sixtieth Birthday*, edited by M. Pütz, 3–29. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins.