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# Developing and contributing to systemic functional translation studies in China: an interview with Professor Guowen Huang

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**Abstract:** Systemic functional translation studies (SFTS) has been a research area sustained by scholars from both Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) and translation studies over the past decades. In China, there have been an increasing number of studies in SFTS after the 2000s, with Professor Guowen Huang being one of the pioneering and influential scholars contributing to this emerging research area. This paper is a transcript of an interview conducted with Guowen Huang and it serves to provide a general introduction to his research. In the interview, he discusses his motivation for exploring SFTS, the advantages of applying SFL to translation studies, and the Ph.D. students he has supervised over the past decades. He also introduces his own work on the translations of ancient Chinese poems, the translations of the *Analects* (*Lunyu* 论语) of Confucius, and his investigation of applying ecolinguistics to translation studies. Finally, he suggests some future studies needed in this area.

**Keywords:** ancient Chinese poem; Systemic Functional Linguistics; systemic functional translation studies; the *Analects* (*Lunyu* 论语); translation studies

## 1 Introduction

Systemic functional translation studies (SFTS) (i.e. translation studies informed by Systemic Functional Linguistics [SFL], systemic functional engagement with translation studies, or translation studies in an SFL perspective) has been a research area sustained by scholars from both SFL and translation studies over the past decades. Since the 1950s, various studies have proved the applicability of SFL

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to translation studies (see e.g. Steiner 2015; Wang and Ma 2021). In China, there have been an increasing number of studies in this emerging research area. Professor Guowen Huang (黄国文), one of the pioneering scholars who has been making important contributions to SFTS, has played a key role in the development of SFTS in China.

This paper is based on an interview, which was conducted online on September 3, 2022. In the interview, Guowen Huang first discusses his motivation for exploring SFTS and the advantages of applying SFL theory to translation studies. Then he discusses his own work on translations of classical Chinese poems, the translations of the *Analects* (*Lunyu* 论语) of Confucius as well as his studies on translation from the perspective of ecolinguistics. He also provides an introduction to the Ph.D. students he has supervised. Finally, he suggests some future studies to be explored in this area.

## 2 Motivation for applying SFL to translation studies

**Bo Wang:** What motivated you to apply SFL to translation studies?

**Guowen Huang:** As a teacher of English and linguistics, I am devoted to SFL because I am fascinated by many of the systemic functional ideas about language and linguistics. I am interested in exploring the use of language in relation to language choice, and one of my research interests has been the study of translation issues from an SFL perspective. Briefly, there have been three main reasons for me to undertake studies of translation in relation to using SFL. The first reason is that I fully accept the Hallidayan functional view of language and I want to explore translation issues from a systemic functional perspective. The second reason is that although SFL is both a general linguistics and an applicable linguistics, the focus of recent studies has been on applicable linguistics, because the latter is more closely related to discourse studies and solving practical problems, and studying translation is an example of applying SFL to solving practical problems related to language use. This is in line with Halliday's (2009a) statement that SFL is a problem-oriented theory. The third reason is that about 20 years ago when I first began to pay attention to translation studies, there were only a few studies and publications in systemic functional translation studies, so I published a number of research papers myself in this area (e.g. Huang 2002a, 2002b, 2002c, 2002d, 2002e, 2003a, 2003b, 2003c). Over the last two decades, the situation has changed dramatically. We now have a number of scholars researching this topic, and there have been many publications both in China and

abroad – I have noticed that you two have done a lot of work in this area yourselves (e.g. Wang and Ma 2020, 2021, 2022).

### 3 Advantages of applying SFL theory to translation studies

**Bo Wang:** As a linguistic theory, what are the advantages of applying SFL to translation studies?

**Guowen Huang:** Although translation issues can be studied from different perspectives to different levels of detail, a linguistic approach based on a particular theory of language is necessary. In 1962, Halliday published a paper on linguistics and machine translation arguing that any description of language and language use, including that applied in translation studies, should be based on a theory of some kind. As he noted: “It is impossible to describe language without a theory, since some theory, however inadequate, is implicit in all descriptions; but it is quite possible to make a description that is in practice unsystematic, with categories neither clearly interrelated nor consistently assigned” (Halliday 1962: 147). He later identified the nature of a linguistic theory of translation by saying that “for a linguist, translation theory is the study of how things are: what is the nature of the translation process and the relation between texts in translation” (Halliday 2001: 13). According to Halliday, an SFL theory of translation is a “declarative” theory rather than an “imperative” theory, which studies how things are rather than how things should be. This defines the nature of a linguistic theory of translation and distinguishes it from other theories of translation.

As I said a few years ago (see Huang 2017), in the past few decades, scholars of different ideological, social, cultural, educational, and professional backgrounds have approached translation issues from many different perspectives with different motivations and purposes, and proposed different theoretical models for studying translation. The literature to date shows that there are a number of approaches to the study of translation, linguistic approaches being one. When Halliday’s theory of language was in its initial stages, that is, in the era of Scale and Category Grammar (Halliday 1961), there were already scholars who set out to apply his theory to translation studies, one of whom was Catford (1965), who proposed “a theory of translation which may be drawn upon in any discussion of particular translation-problems” (Catford 1965: vii); Catford acknowledged that his approach to translation was a linguistic one and “the general linguistic theory made use of in this book is essentially that developed at the University of Edinburgh, in particular by M. A. K. Halliday and influenced to a large extent by the work of the late J. R. Firth” (Catford

1965: 1). In terms of his theoretical support, Catford (1965: 1) referred the readers to Halliday's (1961) "Categories of the Theory of Grammar" and Halliday et al. (1964). If we agree that translation is translating meaning, then a meaning-oriented and function-oriented approach such as SFL would have more advantages in studying translation issues, and to me, SFL is the most appropriate theoretical model. Many years ago, after receiving a Ph.D. in applied linguistics from the University of Edinburgh in 1992, I did a second Ph.D. with Professor Robin Fawcett at Cardiff University. I was influenced by Robin's ideas about language and linguistics and I totally agree with him when he (Fawcett 2008: 10) said: "Halliday has given us more insights into the nature of language and its use than any other linguist since Saussure – and probably even more than him".

## 4 Studying translations of ancient Chinese poems

**Bo Wang:** Why would you choose to study translations of ancient Chinese poetry? What is so specific about this register?

**Guowen Huang:** Classical literature plays an essential role in education. There is now a general assumption that ancient Chinese poetry should be taught, read, memorized, and recited by every Chinese child. But I was brought up in the years (1966–1976) when this was not the case. I always feel that my primary and secondary education was inadequate, and one of the reasons was that I did not have the chance to learn the classics at school. After so many years of reading academic works on language and linguistics, I began to read the Chinese classics in my spare time, to make up for those lost years and to enrich myself as a Chinese scholar. One by-product of this activity was that I began to study the translation of classics from an SFL perspective, which was a way of combining my present research interest with the writings I was not able to experience when I was young. Another reason is that the Chinese poems have attracted numerous scholars, both in China and abroad, to translate them into English, and as a result, many poems have many different translated versions. This allows the academic comparison of the different translated versions. Also, a practical reason is that Tang poems are usually very short and so lend themselves to detailed text analysis, which is my favorite research method.

## 5 Studying translations of the *Lunyu*

**Bo Wang:** What motivated you to study the *Lunyu* of Confucius and its translations? What have been your major findings?

**Guowen Huang:** The *Lunyu* is generally known in English as *The Analects (of Confucius)*, and is a collection of different sayings, descriptions, and activities concerned with Confucius (551BC–479BC) during his lifetime. This work has strongly influenced the Chinese people in terms of their understanding of the world and the relationships between people on the one hand and those between people and nature on the other hand; also, the work has influenced people's behavior and social practices. Both the general teaching and learning of the *Lunyu* and the academic study of this classic have a history of more than 2,000 years, and there are numerous academic writings on this work. As I said earlier, I was born and brought up in a special period of the Chinese history when classical Chinese poetry was not taught at school, and people were not allowed to read and memorize the classics. Therefore, one of the reasons for me to pay attention to the *Lunyu* is that I wanted to study it, so that I could see what an “intelligentman” (Xu 2005) was like in ancient times. A second reason for me to carry out research into this great work is to see how an SFL approach can be applied in the analysis of this text and its different translations. These two reasons are closely related to my own interest in understanding and analyzing this canonical text. The third reason is that there are many different approaches to the study of the English translations of this text and to me an SFL approach would be more desirable; thus, doing an SFL analysis of this work is a way to illustrate the applicability and power of SFL.

The *Lunyu* is generally taken *not* to be a book in the sense usually understood by modern readers, because there is no coherent argument or storyline presented by a single author, to be read page by page, or to be digested alone in the quiet of one's study; and thus the way the sayings and descriptions are put together is not textually cohesive in the Hallidayan sense (Halliday 1985; Halliday and Hasan 1976). As a text analyst, I was interested to explore the issues of coherence and cohesive ties in this book.

Halliday (1985: 318, 1994: 339) argues that “for a text to be coherent, it must be cohesive”, but some people in text analysis circles have criticized this argument by quoting Widdowson's (1978: 29) invented example to illustrate that a text can be coherent without being cohesive:

A: That's the telephone.

B: I'm in the bath.

A: OK.

(Widdowson 1978: 29)

After analyzing the text of the *Lunyu*, one of the arguments I want to make is that Widdowson's invented example is both cohesive and coherent. The three utterances or conversational turns are cohesive because they occur in the context of the same communicative activity. "That's the telephone" is a statement by the initiator of the communication which expects a response from the addressee, who thus gives a reason for not being able to answer the telephone – "I'm in the bath", which the initiator acknowledges and accepts by saying "OK". Therefore, it seems to me that Widdowson's invented example is both coherent and cohesive, and this argument supports Halliday's (1985: 318, 1994: 339) statement that cohesion and coherence work together to ensure texture in a text.

The text of the *Lunyu* contains 20 chapters in which most of the quotations, sayings, or descriptions are independent, in that most of them are not locally coherent and cohesive. But my argument was that even if two utterances are not coherent in terms of their propositional meanings, they become coherent and cohesive if they are used as two turns in a conversational pair. Therefore, "That's the telephone" and "I'm in the bath" are cohesive because the latter is used as a response (answer) to the former's request (question). By the same token, if two things are put together in a particular context, they automatically become "cohesive" because they form a pair of some kind in that context. As far as the textual organization of the *Lunyu* is concerned, it is clear that most of the individual quotations, sayings, or descriptions are not propositionally related to each other, even though all of them are concerned with Confucius's teaching. However, as I argued in one of my papers (i.e. Huang 2011), the quotations, sayings, or descriptions in the *Lunyu* are cohesive because they were put together to form different chapters of the same book.

One of the findings of my research has been the importance of using commentaries and notes in the translated versions, which helps to make the meaning of the source text clear to the reader. We argued that more attention should be paid to the context of culture in which the text needs to be interpreted. More so than for the translation of other texts, the rendering of the *Lunyu* needs more interpretations and commentaries, without which the translation is often not to be understood by the target audience.

In the field of translation studies, the nature of translation has been discussed at different times by different people from different research areas. As Hartmann and Stork (1972: 713, cited in Bell 1991: 6) put it, "translation is the replacement of a representation of a text in one language by a representation of an equivalent text in a second language". Moreover, as observed by a number of different scholars, since the 1950s, the issue of equivalence, which is "a central concept in translation theory" (Chesterman 1989: 99), has been one of the most discussed issues in translation studies (Munday 2001: 35) and the concept is incorporated in most

theoretical approaches to translation studies. In Yallop’s (2001: 241) words, equivalence is regarded as “a clear aim of translation”, so almost everyone in the field of translation, no matter whether they are more interested in issues relating to theory or practice, has a stake in understanding this issue. In discussing “the environments of translation” in relation to translation equivalence, Matthiessen (2001) proposes that in line with what SFL recognizes as the main organizing principles of human language, these environments can be defined by the various dimensions of stratification, rank, instantiation, metafunction, delicacy, and axis; and these six dimensions have been discussed and illustrated by Halliday in relation to translation in a number of places (e.g. Halliday 2001, 2009b, 2010).

In translation studies, equivalence is widely regarded as the ultimate goal of translation, and different types of equivalence have been put forward: e.g. “translation equivalence” in contrast to “formal correspondence” (Catford 1965), and “dynamic equivalence” (Nida and Taber 1969). In studying this issue from an SFL perspective, we can apply a metafunctional perspective to characterizing translation equivalence; thus, we can examine the target text from the perspectives of ideational (experiential and logical), interpersonal, or textual equivalence. I (Huang 2017) have argued that experiential equivalence is the fundamental element in any instance of good translation because other kinds of equivalence cannot operate without an experiential basis. By comparing a number of source texts and their corresponding target texts, we hypothesized that in evaluating target texts from certain registers (e.g. the *Lun Yu*), the order of importance would be as follows: the experiential metafunction is the most important and the textual metafunction the least important, with the interpersonal metafunction being less important than the experiential metafunction but more important than the logical metafunction, as illustrated in Figure 1 below:

However, I understand that apart from metafunctional equivalence there are other kinds of equivalence that exist which need to be further studied. For an SFL approach, Matthiessen’s (2001) notion of “the environments of translation” in defining equivalence in terms of the parameters of stratification, rank, instantiation, metafunction, delicacy, and axis can serve as theoretical guidance.

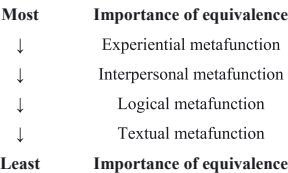


Figure 1: Order of importance of metafunctional equivalence (Huang 2017: 301).

## 6 Ph.D. supervision in this area

**Yuanyi Ma:** Professor Huang, you have trained many Ph.D. students in applying SFL to translation, many of whom have become important and productive scholars in this area in China. Could you briefly introduce their work and their contributions?

**Guowen Huang:** In the Chinese educational context, the teacher generally influences his students in different ways, no matter whether they are young or old, junior or senior, because traditionally the teacher was regarded as the student's life guide. As I have said on a number of occasions, I have been greatly influenced in my academic studies by systemicists such as Halliday and Fawcett, to name just two; and I have to say that I have equally influenced my students in applying SFL to translation studies. Up to the present, I have supervised nine Ph.D. students who did their Ph.D. studies on translation, and they now have become well-known in the field. These students fall into two categories. One group (four students) explored general translation issues and the others (five students) worked on the analysis of the translation of the *Lunyu*: most of these Ph.D. dissertations have been published as monographs.

Yuanyuan Shang (尚媛媛) (2003, 2005) studied the phenomena of translation shifts from an SFL perspective, focusing on the translation of political speeches from English into Chinese. The aim of her research was to use SFL as an analytical tool for text description and analysis. Peng Wang (王鹏) (2004, 2007) explored the translation of fiction using the *Harry Potter* books, and her focus was on the equivalence between the source text and the target text, in relation to the influence of the speaker's gender and age on their use of modality, in particular the modal operators *can* and *could* in English as translated in Chinese. Fagen Li (李发根) (2005, 2007) investigated the expression of interpersonal meanings in Chinese poetry as translated into English, with special reference to equivalence. The focus of his studies was on the linguistic realizations of interpersonal meanings in both source and target text, using as data the lyric poem 蜀道难 (*Shu dao nan*, 'The Road to Shu is Steep') by famous Tang Dynasty poet Li Bai, and five English renderings. Xianzhu Si (司显柱) (2006, 2007) studied quality assessment in translation and proposed a text-based translation quality assessment model based on SFL, focusing on issues such as the nature and quality of translation as well as the dialectic correlation between form, function, and context within a framework of translation as verbal behavior.

Guoxiang Wu (吴国向) (2013) investigated grammatical complexity in multiple English translations of the *Lunyu*, examining the versions by Legge (1861), Ku (1898), Waley (1938), and Pound (1951), with a special focus on the balance



between lexical density and grammatical intricacy. Yang Chen (陈旻) (2014, 2020) compared different translations of the *Lunyu* in the light of their respective communicative functions, her aim being to identify the translator's aims in translating the text, and to find methods of translation quality assessment that would be applicable to the case of classics such as the *Lunyu*. Ying Chen (陈莹) (2014, 2020) studied various English versions of the *Lunyu* produced at different periods of time by translators from different social, cultural, linguistic, and geographical backgrounds, focusing on register variation: her study was an instance of functional discourse analysis, as illustrated by Huang (2001, 2006). Shengwen Gao (高生文) (2014, 2016) also took a register analysis approach, in this case comparing Legge's (1861) and Ku's (1898) translations of the *Lunyu* from a metafunctional perspective, linking the analysis of ideational, interpersonal, and textual meanings to his characterization of the field, tenor, and mode of discourse respectively. Juan Yu (余娟) (2015) investigated the occurrence of explicitation in Chinese-English translations of the *Lunyu*, and like Ying Chen (2014), she worked within the framework of functional discourse analysis (Huang 2001, 2006). Her study showed that the ideational explicitation of participants and circumstances was salient, as reflected in the translators' addition to the target text of participants and circumstances that were only implicit in the source text.

Apart from these nine Ph.D. dissertations, many of my students, including quite a number of my MA and MTI students, have applied an SFL framework to the study of translation issues and have published quite a number of research papers, most of which have appeared in Chinese journals of linguistics and applied linguistics.

## 7 Applying ecolinguistics to translation studies

**Yuanyi Ma:** Ecolinguistics, as discussed in Stibbe's (2015: 1) seminal book *Ecolinguistics: Language, Ecology and the Stories We Live by*, deals with "critiquing forms of language that contribute to ecological destruction, and aiding in the search for new forms of language that inspire people to protect the natural world". We also find that ecolinguistics "has been used to describe studies of language interaction and diversity; studies of texts such as signposts which are outdoors; analysis of texts which happen to be about the environment; studies of how words in a language relate to objects in the local environment; studies of the mix of languages surrounding pupils in multicultural schools; studies of dialects in particular geographical locations, and many other diverse areas" (Stibbe 2015: 8). Can ecolinguistics be applied to translation studies?

**Guowen Huang:** Thank you for your interest in what I have been doing these past seven years in applying Halliday’s (2007) systemic functional ecolinguistics to the study of language and translation. Halliday (1990) states that language does not passively reflect reality but actively creates reality and that our ways of meaning and saying have an impact on the environment. Halliday (1990, 2007) also characterizes the function of language as doing things, including construing experiences, maintaining social relationships, and organizing language and discourse. Our behavior, whether ecological or not, is influenced or determined by our conception of the relationship between man and nature, and our ways of expressing meaning have certainly impacted the ecosystem of which the human beings and their languages are a part. In terms of translation, a systemic ecolinguistic approach can indicate whether a particular translation is characterized more by ecocentrism or by anthropocentrism. Let me illustrate this by analyzing two English translations of the poem 春晓 (*Chunxiao*, ‘Spring Dawn’) by a well-known Tang poet – Meng Haoran:

春	眠	不	觉	晓
<i>chūn</i>	<i>mián</i>	<i>bù</i>	<i>jué</i>	<i>xiǎo</i>
spring	sleep	not	feel	dawn
处	处	闻	啼	鸟
<i>chù</i>	<i>chù</i>	<i>wén</i>	<i>tí</i>	<i>niǎo</i>
everywhere (place-place)		hear	sing	bird
夜	来	风	雨	声
<i>yè</i>	<i>lái</i>	<i>fēng</i>	<i>yǔ</i>	<i>shēng</i>
night	come	wind	rain	sound
花	落	知	多	少
<i>huā</i>	<i>luò</i>	<i>zhī</i>	<i>duō</i>	<i>shǎo</i>
flower	fall	know	how many (many-few)	

As we can see from the interlinear glossing (IG), this poem is about nature (i.e., the season – “spring”; the times of day – “dawn”, “night”; location – “everywhere”; animals – “birds”; weather – “wind”, “rain”; plants – “flowers”) and the actions related to nature: “sleep”, “feel”, “hear”, “sing”, “come”, “fall”, “know”. There are a number of ways to translate this well-known poem and there exist at least 30 English versions (Tan and Huang 2019); let’s just compare two of them here. The first version was translated by Peter Jingcheng Xu:

***Spring Morn***

Spring sleep, coming morn, unaware.

Awake, hearing birds' song everywhere.

After last night's wind 'n rain,

How many flowers fallen fair?

(Tan and Huang 2019: 75)

In this version, life forms other than humans and their actions are represented in the way they occur in the source text. Like the source text, some of the implicit actors are understood but not explicitly represented or expressed in the target text (TT):

IGa:	spring sleep not feel dawn
TT1a:	spring sleep, coming morn, unaware
IGb:	everywhere hear sing bird
TT1b:	awake, hearing birds' song everywhere
IGc:	night come wind rain sound
TT1c:	after last night's wind 'n rain
IGd:	flower fall know how many
TT1d:	how many flowers fallen fair

From an ecolinguistic perspective, Xu's translation reflects the description of the events on one morning in spring and the focus of attention is on other forms of life and their actions rather than on man and his actions. We now look at another version, translated by Witter Bynner and Kuanghu Jiang:

***A Spring Morning***

I awake light-hearted this morning of spring,

Everywhere round me the singing of birds.

But now I remember the night, the storm,

And I wonder how many blossoms were broken.

(Wen 1989: 63)

If we compare the interlinear glossing with this second translation, we can see the differences between this translated version and the source text on the one hand and those between this second translation and the previous one by Xu:

IGa:	spring sleep not feel dawn
TT2a:	I awake light-hearted this morning of spring
IGb:	everywhere hear sing bird
TT2b:	everywhere round me the singing of birds
IGc:	night come wind rain sound
TT2c:	but now I remember the night, the storm
IGd:	flower fall know how many
TT2d:	and I wonder how many blossoms were broken

In this translation, *I/me* appears in every line of the poem, which indicates that the focus of attention is on the speaker experiencing the different situations, and this gives the impression that the poem is not about nature but about a man's experiences in a morning in spring, and hence what this translation provides is a self-centered image of the speaker.

If we carry out a metafunctional analysis of the source text and the two target texts, we can see how powerful a tool SFL can be in revealing the relationships between the participants and circumstances involved in the processes in the texts, as well as in organizing the messages.

## 8 Development of systemic functional translation studies in China

**Yuanyi Ma:** How has the application of SFL to translation developed in China?

**Guowen Huang:** When I first tried to apply SFL to translation studies about 20 years ago, there were only few studies in this area in China, although there were quite a number of good articles discussing translation issues from an SFL perspective (e.g. Halliday 2001; Matthiessen 2001; Steiner and Yallop 2001). The past two decades have witnessed a great number of Chinese scholars working on translation studies from an SFL perspective and many articles and monographs have been published in China. When I typed the keywords 系统功能语言学 (*xitong gongneng yuyanxue*, 'Systemic Functional Linguistics') and 翻译研究 (*fanyi yanjiu*, 'translation studies') on the CNKI (China National Knowledge Infrastructure) webpage, there were 142 entries (retrieved on September 14, 2022). There have also been a number of review articles on the SFL approach to translation studies, one of which was written by Si and Tao (2014), which reviews the literature on this topic between 2004 and 2014 and discusses the theoretical and applied value of SFL theory in translation studies, focusing on different aspects of the theory in relation

to translation studies: metafunctions, context, appraisal analysis, and grammatical metaphor. There have also been papers written in English on applying SFL to translation studies published outside China, and I have contributed two of them (Huang 2014, 2017). You two (e.g. Wang and Ma 2020, 2021, 2022) have also done a great job in recent years, and I have enjoyed reading your publications on systemic functional translation studies.

## 9 Future studies needed in this area

**Yuanyi Ma:** What future studies involving the application of SFL to translation are needed in China?

**Guowen Huang:** I have read the collection you edited with Dr. Bo Wang (Wang and Ma 2022), and I very much agree with what those well-known SFL scholars say about the key themes and new directions in systemic functional translation studies. They have clearly mapped the new directions for us in SFL studies of translation issues, and all of the new directions predicted by these scholars, it seems to me, are also applicable in the Chinese context. Here I would like to emphasize one point: since translation studies can be dealt with from a number of different perspectives going across a number of different disciplines, we have to remember that a linguistic approach is only one of the possibilities in our endeavor. In my opinion, an interdisciplinary approach with the SFL approach as its core will be a good choice for future work in this area.

**Bo Wang:** Thank you, Professor Huang. The purpose of editing *Key Themes and New Directions in Systemic Functional Translation Studies* (Wang and Ma 2022) is not only to summarize the contributions of this research area by interacting with important scholars, but also to offer some directions for future research. The interview with you is also conducted by following the same principle. In the near future, we hope we can collect this transcript first in the English translation of your book on poetry translation (Huang 2006, 2024) and later in the second volume of *Key Themes and New Directions in Systemic Functional Translation Studies*, which is so far still in preparation.

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