

Foreword

Christian M.I.M. Matthiessen

Department of English, Faculty of Humanities,
the PolySystemic Research Group

The Hong Kong Polytechnic University

Robin Fawcett has helped countless academics get their books published – supporting many of them all the way from the development of an idea to the final stage of celebrating the completion of their projects; and so the fact that there is now a Festschrift, this very rich book of chapters by an impressive intercontinental sample of scholars, celebrating him as a scholar admired around the world and highlighting his extensive contribution to our academic community is most appropriate. This book is a very welcome addition to the Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) library of books.

Most leading scholars of Robin Fawcett's standing manage to make a major contribution to one or possibly two aspects of scholarly activities central to the workings of academia – research & publication, institutional development at the home university, creation and maintenance of international academic networks, launch of academic book series, funding through bursaries, and other related activities. Humbly (for the rest of us!), Robin has made pioneering contributions to *all* these areas. Let me give just a very short list of examples:

- Robin launched the series of annual Systemic Functional Linguistics meetings, organizing the first in 1974 – originally conceived of as workshops and then, as they grew, transformed into ISFC, the International Systemic Functional Congress. ISFC now moves around the continents of the world on a six-year cycle, and has inspired regular regional meetings in Australia, Europe, Latin America, Japan and China (and also in North America, but typically embedded in other conferences, and in India under the heading of ICEG, International Congress on English Grammar). These activities are now supported

by an international association, ISFLA¹ and a number of regional ones as well. Having attended many of these meetings since 1981, I know first-hand how much energy and enthusiasm Robin has put into these very time-consuming efforts. And somehow he has managed to ensure that even when the meetings began to grow considerably in size, they were always inclusive and welcoming, giving participants the sense of being part of a world-wide generous and supportive family.

- Robin has created much-needed publication channels for SFL. In the 1960s, it was incredibly hard [= virtually impossible] to get systemic functional books published – several pioneering studies that were text- and corpus-based were rejected by publishers, who favoured generative linguistic contributions, which were fashionable at the time. (Sadly, a number of major SFL contributions from that period still remain unpublished.) The situation has changed dramatically; now, two decades into the twenty-first century, there are a number of highly-regarded publishers keen to publish systemic functional books, and several journals that either welcome SFL articles or specialize in them. This dramatic change is due to Robin's very hard and inspiring work to get publishers onboard, starting with Frances Pinter in the second half on the 1980s – opening up new possibilities after the volumes edited by Jim Benson, Michael Cummings, and Bill Greaves with Ablex in the 1980s. I remember being introduced to Frances Pinter herself by Robin, and I was delighted to realize how well she understood the significance of Robin's visionary publication project and how supportive she was. Robin introduced the Open Linguistics series, and ensured that it would welcome a rich range of traditions and frameworks (one of the many extraordinary books he included was by Ken Pike). I know how Robin intervened as a series editor to ensure that leading-edge work would be produced and published; for example, he ensured that Kazuhiro Teruya's brilliant and still unsurpassed description of Japanese would be published. As publishers transformed (Pinter > Cassell > Continuum, and now Bloomsbury Academic), Robin's guidance continued, and he also made significant contributions as editor of particular books – an undertaking which has now become a continuing contribution by SFL faculty at Cardiff University in the form of a number of volumes edited by different combinations of Tom Bartlett, Lise Fontaine and Gerald O'Grady.

1 ISFLA home: <http://www.isfla.org>

While building this kind of intellectual infrastructure, Robin has also been a leading SFL scholar for half a century, both in the development of the general theory of language and in the description of particular languages – the comprehensive description of English led by him, and his guidance of work on various other languages (including importantly the ‘Kyoto Grammar’ of Japanese by Masa-aki Tatsuki and his followers, the work on Chinese, drawing on the collaboration between Robin and Huang Guowen, and Victor Castel’s work on explicit modelling of grammar, applied also to Spanish); and in terms of what is often referred to as the ‘Cardiff grammar’ he is, of course, the pioneer, widely recognized as such around the world. From the start, his version of systemic functional theory has been oriented towards explicit modelling of the kind that can support implementable computational models – I remember that the very first paper that I read by him was ‘Generating a sentence in systemic functional grammar’ (Fawcett, 1973), given to me by Richard Hudson during one of my visits to London in the late 1970s, when I still lived in Sweden and could take advantage of cheap January flights from Copenhagen to London in order to get a good dose of linguistics and West End theatre. Thus the theoretical ‘architecture’ of his version of SFL is reminiscent of architectures found in computational linguistics. At the same time, Robin has pursued a long-term research programme (involving an ingenious quilt work of funded research projects) of developing a comprehensive systemic functional description of English, bravely extending the description of grammar far into the territory of lexis.

In this last example of my non-exhaustive sample of Robin’s pioneering contributions, there is a very fundamental point relevant to the development of linguistics that I think is, unfortunately, often overlooked: the ability of a few leading linguists to combine work on overarching theory with painstaking descriptive detail. There are many linguists who contribute to one or the other, but actually very few who embrace both – but the few who do are, in my view, much more rewarding to engage with. In SFL, both Michael Halliday and Robin have been deeply engaged with theory and committed to the development of comprehensive lexicogrammatical descriptions. As a result, their work embodies much deeper insight into language than Noam Chomsky’s, since Chomsky has focused only on theory basing it on descriptive fragments of English (except for his collaboration on phonology with Morris Halle), a crucial point made cogently in various critical publications by Peter Seuren (and other scholars too, of course); their work will also have much more lasting value – again because theoretical insights are grounded in extensive descriptions and because their descriptions are theoretically empowered but have no theoretical expiry date (no built-in

theoretical obsolescence). When one examines the work of linguists who are regarded as theoretical innovators, there are surprisingly few whose contributions are actually supported by substantial descriptive work – for example, Edward Sapir and Vilém Mathesius, but not Ferdinand de Saussure, nor Louis Hjelmslev (except for his work on case, published in the 1930s, before his theoretical writings).

If we examine the overall theoretical ‘architectures’ of language proposed by Michael Halliday and Robin Fawcett, it is very clear that there are very major differences – but against the background of fundamental similarities. The history of linguistics since the mid-twentieth century has shown that when this happens within a school or tradition, the result may be increasingly unproductive hostile debates – the so-called linguistic wars within generative linguistics in the late 1960s and early 1970s constitute an obvious tragic example. Yet this has never happened in Systemic Functional Linguistics. Interpersonally, Michael and Robin continued to be close friends and admired each other’s contributions, and their friendship and respect for one another really set the tone for the community, showing us that disagreement can be enriching; and ideationally, there has always been a recognition of the fundamental value of SFL as embodying what Michael called a ‘flexi-theory’ (or surely we should now call it a ‘flexi-meta-theory’ so as to make the fundamental point that we need to take one step further in abstraction in order to be able to characterize and compare theoretical varieties of SFL, for example to explore to what extent they are metalinguistic dialects or metalinguistic registers – or both).

I know how much Michael treasured Robin’s contributions – we had many discussions about his work over the years, including points of detail (e.g. where to draw the descriptive line between material and relational clauses) but also broader descriptive and theoretical issues; as we developed *Construing Experience through Meaning*, we tried to dialogue in print with Robin about certain areas. Importantly, the huge amount of work that went into descriptions couched in Michael’s framework and the huge amount of work that went into descriptions couched in terms of Robin’s framework can be seen as additive: the two sets of descriptions remain largely inter-translatable, e.g. in terms of the lexicogrammatical descriptions of process type, including the elaborations in delicacy. Equally importantly, researchers from these two strands welcome such instances of metalinguistic ‘borrowing’.

Robin has certainly been a very prolific writer; the list of his publications since the early 1970s is very long, and full of substantial publications presenting leading ideas. And yet he strikes me as seriously under-published,

just like Michael Halliday and Ruqaiya Hasan – both of whom also filled many volumes with their work. I base this assessment on the many talks I have heard them give, and the many conversations I have had with them over a period close to forty years. There is so much of their work that has not yet been documented – numerous insights that would benefit the academic community.

I am both deeply honoured and truly touched to have been given this opportunity to write the Introduction to this semiotically rich book – (a) a celebration of Robin as a scholar respected and admired around the world, and an expression of the large but wonderful debt we all owe him; and (b) a serious thoughtful engagement with various aspects of his immense contribution to linguistics, ranging from essential descriptive details to theoretical foundations. At the same time, I am very much aware that Michael Halliday should've written this introduction – I am here as the understudy who steps in when the star cannot make it; and he would have written the introduction, with enthusiasm and very high regard for Robin, and the contributors; but sadly he wasn't able to stay with us long enough. But I know that he wanted to, and I know that he would have provided more insight and wisdom than I am able to – and I am sure he would have recalled the very tough times that he and Ruqaiya and Robin and other pioneering SFL scholars of their founding generation had to deal with (Robin: with apologies, I'm using an elastic notion of generation here!, extended to ensure that the two crucial decades of innovation, the 1960s and the 1970s, are both included).

In my brief remarks, I have focused on Robin – which is entirely appropriate, both in terms of linguistic history and in terms of the focus of this book. But as I was trying to say in the first paragraph, Robin has always been focused on other people, generously supporting their projects – including centrally, the team of scholars and students he has supported and developed at Cardiff University over the decades, and equally centrally, the international team – extended (metaphorically) from Victor Castell in Mendoza to Huang Guowen in Guangzhou and Tatsuki Masa-aki in Kyoto. All this support was made possible by Robin's group at Cardiff University. There have been many members and visitors over the decades; and as everybody in our academic community knows – and as Robin is always the first to point out (both in public and in private to me, on many occasions), Gordon Tucker has been essential and central to the ground-breaking achievements of the 'Cardiff School', both in terms of the collective developments and in terms of his own particular research programme against the background of the collective efforts, including his unique contributions to the extension of grammar towards lexis, drawing on corpus linguistic techniques, where

he has addressed quite thorny problems that might otherwise have been swept under the academic rug under the heading of ‘lexis as most delicate grammar’. So I am also tremendously grateful to Gordon – naturally for collaborating with Robin over a very long period of time, making possible achievements beyond the capacity of a single scholar, but also for inviting me to contribute to a volume celebrating a remarkable scholar.

As I review the list of insightful and substantial contributions to this volume by scholars who (like me!) admire, and have benefited from, Robin’s enormous multi-faceted contributions to linguistics in general and to our academic community in particular, I am of course struck by the variety of contributions, both in terms of geography and in terms of subject matter. This is entirely appropriate, reflecting Robin’s engagement with and support of scholars and students around the world.

While I have not yet been able to read their contributions, I can imagine what they will be like. Like me, they must all have benefited enormously from Robin’s work and infectious energy. I am very well aware that I have been very lucky and fortunate: I met Robin very early on in my post-graduate studies – at one of the early workshops, in 1981. So I know how wonderful it is to be included and supported by him when one is still a ‘nobody’ (though here I would I would hasten to add that Robin – like Michael Halliday or Robert Longacre – would never ever conceive of or treat a newcomer as a ‘nobody’). I have been fortunate enough to work with [= be guided by!] Robin on various occasions – probably in the most focused way in the early 1980s, as he visited and contributed to the text generation project at ISI (the Information Sciences Institute, the University of Southern California); but our extended exchange of meanings has continued over the decades – most recently in Pavia, Italy, this summer.

All of those who know Robin will know what I’m talking about. If anyone hasn’t yet had the opportunity to meet him, I am sure that this volume will be a great starting point – an index into quite a few of his many contributions. Do look for him at the next conference you take part in; and make sure to read all the contributions to this stimulating and substantial volume – and of course all Robin’s wide-ranging contributions that they celebrate.

Christian M.I.M. Matthiessen

Phoenix Palm Villa, Lung Mei Village, Sai Kung, Hong Kong