

Why Systemic Functional Grammar Isn't Just for Those Working in SFG (and vice versa)

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0. Introduction

In this paper I would like to talk about aspects of Prof. Michael Halliday's approach to communication that I think are important to all linguists, but have been overlooked or obscured in some other approaches. These include the recognition of the construction or structure as being the relations between the elements of the structure and the idea that the structure itself influences the interpretation; the separation of interpersonal, textual, and ideational meaning; the recognition of different constructions for manifesting transitivity; the recognition of the importance of explanation in description; and the recognition of the importance of Theme-Rheme and the separation of Theme-Rheme and "Given"- "New". In the process I will also point out aspects of Prof. Halliday's approach that have influenced other approaches, and aspects that relate to concepts in other approaches, such as the role of the construction to understanding. I would also like to present a new idea that grew out of my understanding of Prof. Halliday's approach, in interaction with what is called "projection" in Interactional Linguistics.

1. Brief mention of certain important distinctions made in SFG

1.1 Recognition of the influence of constructions on interpretation

SFG sees the metafunctions as constructions (called "structures" in Halliday 1994) in which the functional relationships between the elements is what makes the construction:

. . . clause as a message, clause as an exchange, clause as a representation. Each of these three strands of meaning is construed by configurations of certain particular functions. Theme, Subject, and Actor do not occur as isolates; each occurs in association with other functions from the same strand of meaning . . . A configuration of this kind is what is referred to in functional grammars as a STRUCTURE.

The significance of any structural label lies in its relationship to the other functions with which it is structurally associated. It is the structure as a whole, the total configuration of functions, that construes, or realizes, the meaning. (Halliday 1994: 34)

Halliday (1994:114) shows how the construction itself influences the interpretation. For example, in discussing the example *the empty house was longing for the children to return*, he says "Simply by putting *the empty house* in this grammatical environment, as something that felt a longing, we cause it to be understood as endowed with consciousness."

This way of understanding structure has been adopted partially in Role and Reference Grammar in terms of the understanding of grammatical relations, but it is only with the advent of Construction Grammar that the rest of linguistics is catching up with the idea that we need to look at the constructions/structures as a whole. In grammaticalization theory we also know now that it isn't individual words that grammaticalize, but constructions that grammaticalize.

1.2 Transitive/Ergative distinction in the transitivity system

In 2001 František Kratochvíl and Alec Coupe and I edited a special issue of *Studies in Language* on transitivity. In the introductory paper for the volume, we introduced the SFG notion of distinguishing transitive and ergative constructions (structures) within the system of transitivity. We also showed its similarity to the traditional Tibetan view of transitivity as involving or not an external agent rather than the action carrying over or not to another participant. We argued for recognizing transitivity as a constructional phenomenon, rather than assuming that one system and one construction type holds for the whole language, and for seeing the Ergative construction as a possibility for construction types when talking about transitivity both across languages and within a single language.

1.3 Seeing explanation as crucial to description

The Structuralists did not worry about explanation or historical development or comparative issues. Modern Structuralists, for whom the framework is now often called “basic linguistic theory”, have added typological and historical comparison to the original Structuralist approach, though some, such as Matthew Dryer (2006), have argued that explanation is not necessary in describing a language using basic linguistic theory. Yet most of us working in language documentation feel that we should, as much as possible, explain the patterns we find from a historical or communication point of view (or both). Mark Post's article to appear in *Linguistic Typology* argues for this position. It has always been core to Prof. Halliday's approach to explain the patterns found in terms of communicative and interactive goals, a truly functionalist approach.

1.4 Text as a process and interaction

An important difference between Prof. Halliday's approach and many other approaches is that language use is seen as a process of interaction. Schleppegrell (2012: 22) writes,

SFL describes linguistic systems and the functions they enable, revealing the ways social actors construe their experience and enact relationships. From the systemic perspective, language is seen as a network of dynamic open systems from which speakers and writers are constantly selecting as they use language, thereby maintaining or changing the systems over time through their choices.

This is similar to the current recognition of language as an emergent and usage-based phenomenon, which arises and changes the way it does due to the choices speakers make when they speak in response to the actions of their interlocutors. SFG then manifests

similarities with Interactional (Socio)-Linguistics, Conversation Analysis, and usage based approaches (see Ochs, Schegloff & Thompson 1996; Couper-Kuhlen & Selting 2001; Couper-Kuhlen & Thompson 2005; Thompson & Couper-Kuhlen 2005; Bybee 2006; Hopper 2011, 2012). I'll return to this below.

1.5 Separation of ideational, textual and interpersonal meaning

Traditional grammarians saw the entire utterance or sentence as part of one structure, and so argued that it was ungrammatical to use an adverbial form like *hopefully* in *Hopefully he will come today*, as semantically it was not modifying *come*. By separating out the interpersonal meaning and the ideational meaning, Prof. Halliday was able to explain in a functional way what was going on here, that *hopefully* isn't meant to modify *come*, but functions as an interpersonal comment on the ideational proposition *he will come today*.

And by separating out the logical structure of modification from the ideational structure, Prof. Halliday was able to explain such things as why within the structure of the noun group in English the Epithet can often appear either before the Measure/Head or before the Thing (which appears within a Post-modifier of the Head; Halliday 1994: 195), even though, as in example (1), it is the Thing that is strong, not the Measure:

- (1) a. *a strong cup of tea*
b. *a cup of strong tea*

He insightfully recognizes that this is partially due to analogical transference from cases where the Epithet could apply to either the Head or Thing in such a structure, such as in example (2) (ibid):

- (2) a. *a thick cloud of smoke*
b. *a cloud of thick smoke*

This is very much how usage-based approaches to grammar see the influence of exemplars in understanding changes in grammatical structure (see for example Bybee 2006).

By separating out the textual metafunction, Prof. Halliday was able to give a very plausible explanation for the structure of the English clause, and why English is not a so-called “pro-drop” language:¹ English marks the grammatical mood of the clause by what appears in the Theme:

Indicative: declarative: The unmarked Theme (the most usual Theme) in declarative clauses is the Subject, as in (3)-(4) below:

¹ Given the fact that it is a grammaticalized aspect of English, and English is the odd-man out in this regard typologically, it would actually make more sense to call English a “retain-pro” language.

	Theme	Rheme
(3)	The boy	lost his notebook.
(4)	The cup	was smashed to pieces.

The Theme in exclamative declaratives usually is an exclamatory WH- element:

	Theme	Rheme	
(5)	How lovely	you look!	(Exclamative)
(6)	What a bizarre outfit	that is!	
(7)	How silly	he is!	

Indicative: interrogative: yes/no question: The Theme in yes/no interrogatives generally includes the Finite Verbal Operator (*is, isn't, does, doesn't, etc.*—that which embodies the expression of polarity) and the Subject, in that order:

	Theme	Rheme	
(8)	Did you	eat yet?	(Yes/no interrogative)
(9)	Does he	like ice cream?	
(10)	Can I	do it?	

Indicative: interrogative: WH-word question: The Theme in question-word type interrogatives is the question word, i.e. that which requests the missing piece of information:

	Theme	Rheme
(11)	Who	left the cat out?
(12)	What	are we having for dinner?
(13)	Where	did he say we are going?

Imperative: The unmarked Theme in non-negative second person imperatives is the Predicator (the function of *be* in (16)), though it is possible to have a pronoun or *Do* + Predicator as marked Theme. The unmarked Theme in negative second person imperatives (prohibitives) is *Don't* plus the following Subject (marked form) or *Don't* plus the Predicator (unmarked form, as in (17)). The unmarked Theme in first person imperatives is *Let's*. Imperative is the only type of clause in which the Predicator is the unmarked Theme.

	Theme	Rheme
(14)	Be	quiet!
(15)	Don't be	so talkative!
(16)	Let's	have lunch together!

This is important and functionally useful because it allows the hearer to know right at the beginning of the clause what sort of interaction is being carried out (assuming congruency between mood and speech act), and if it is an interrogative, what sort of information is being

asked for. This is what is talked about in Interactional Linguistics as “projection” (e.g. Auer 2005, Thompson & Couper-Kuhlen 2005, Hopper 2012). Projection includes both the ability to guess what is coming up in the interaction, and also the grammatical mechanisms for helping the hearer to make such guesses. Typologically different languages allow for different types of projections (e.g. Tanaka 2000). The clause is seen in Interactional Linguistics as the locus of interaction, as “. . . the clause is precisely that unit which permits significant projectability” (Thompson & Couper-Kuhlen 2005:485). The same authors (p. 487) point out that “Schegloff (1987, 1996b) has proposed that the *beginning of the turn* in English is the key locus for projectability”. Hopper (2012: 208) argues that “Projection is what makes verbal communication an open and collaborative affair; as participants develop a sense of where the discourse is going, they tacitly mould it, allow it to continue, harmonize with the speaker’s goals, interrupt it with their own contribution, offer supportive tokens of various kinds, or predict when their turn will come”. Compare this with Prof. Halliday’s view of the clause as something to interact with. I will return to this below.

One example of the influence of the three-way distinction in metafunctions outside SFG is the work of Elizabeth Traugott on subjectification in grammaticalization (Traugott 1982, 1988, 1989, 1990; Traugott & König 1991). Traugott has shown that there is a type of secondary grammaticalization where a construction that has grammaticalized at first with only an objective meaning often later further grammaticalizes in the direction of subjective (speaker-oriented) meaning, with a stage in between of marking textual cohesion (that is, the path of development is ‘propositional ((> textual) > (expressive))’; Traugott 1990:497). In Traugott 1989, three semantic-pragmatic principles of grammaticalization are given:

Semantic-pragmatic Tendency I:

Meanings based in the external described situation > meanings based in the internal (evaluative/perceptual/cognitive) situation. (p. 34)
 [e.g. *behind* (body part) > (space) > (time), where it operated twice]

Semantic-pragmatic Tendency II:

Meanings based in the described external or internal situation > meanings based in the textual situation. (p. 35)
 [cohesive, e.g. *æfter* ‘following behind’ first became a temporal connective (Tendency 1), then became a marker of textual cohesion as a subordinator]

Semantic-pragmatic Tendency III:

Meanings tend to become increasingly situated in the speaker’s subjective belief state/ attitude toward the situation. (p. 35)
 [e.g. English *sipþan* ‘after, from the time that’, through conversational inference from the temporal sequence came to have a causative meaning (*since: Since you’ve got a cold, we’ll cancel the trip*); also *while: OE þa hwile þe* ‘at the time that’ > ME *while (that)* ‘during’ > PDE *while* ‘although’; situation viewed as existing in the world >

signal of cohesive time relation between two clauses > expression of speaker's attitude (Traugott 1990:497)]

Traugott's use of the terms 'propositional', 'textual' and 'expressive' are based to a large extent on SFG's 'experiential', 'textual' and 'interpersonal' metafunctions of language, respectively, and some of the grammaticalizations mentioned are interpersonal metaphors mentioned by Prof. Halliday, such as a projecting clause developing a modal sense, as in *I think it's going to rain*.

2. Separation of Theme-Rheme and "Given-New"

In the Prague School of linguistics the concepts of Theme-Rheme, Functional Sentence Perspective, and Communicative Dynamism have loomed large. In discussing Theme, Firbas (1987) argues that the Theme is not necessarily the initial element of a clause, and it is not necessarily "known" ("Given"), but it is the item with the lowest degree of communicative dynamism in the clause. That is, "the information conveyed by the theme contributes least to the further development of the communication within the sentence" (p. 138). But it provides the foundation (using Mathesius's "základ" 'foundation') for the information provided in the rest of the clause. He mentions that Daneš (1964) pointed out that Mathesius used three different terms, *východiště* 'point of departure', *téma* 'theme' and *základ* 'basis, foundation', and that

. . . in 1939 Mathesius explicitly stated that the point of departure was not necessarily always identical with the theme (cf. Mathesius 1939: 171; 1947: 235; 1982: 174). Mathesius, however, did not explain the difference between the two. Later he dropped the term *východiště* ['point of departure'] altogether and used the terms *téma* ['theme'] and *základ* ['foundation'] synonymously, in fact returning to a practice he already chose in 1929 (cf. Mathesius 1929; 1982: 29-38; 1983: 121-42). (Firbas 1987: 140)

Firbas goes on say that the feature 'aboutness' is always a part of the Theme, but the Theme is not necessarily "context-dependent" (i.e. "Given"), so the two are separate features. He quotes Mathesius at length, but the important part for us is that Mathesius felt the two parts of the semantic structuring of the sentence were "what is being spoken about" (the basis, foundation) and "what is being said about it" (the 'core'; Mathesius 1982: 120, cited in Firbas 1987: 144). That sounds to me like topic and comment. I will return to this below.

Prof. Halliday's SFG is possibly the only major theory outside the Prague School that distinguishes Theme and Rheme. Many other theorists do not understand the difference between Theme and Topic and just assume they are the same. Prof. Halliday argues that Topic is just one type of Theme (1994: 38). He identifies the Theme as the initial element of the clause in English, but states clearly that is not how it is defined; it is defined functionally, in construction with the Rheme, as a message is made up of a Theme and a Rheme, and within that "the Theme is the starting-point for the message; it is the ground from which the clause is taking off" (Halliday 1994: 38). He goes on to say

First position is not what defines the Theme; it is the means whereby the function of Theme is realized, in the grammar of English. There is no automatic reason why the Theme should be realized in this way; . . . there are languages which have a category of Theme functionally similar to that of English but which nevertheless express it in quite a different way. But if in any language the message is organized as a Theme – Rheme structure, and if this structure is expressed by the sequence in which the elements occur in the clause, then it seems natural that the position for the Theme should be at the beginning, rather than at the end or at some other point. (Halliday 1994: 38)

Matthiessen and Halliday (2009: 65) state that

The system of THEME sets up a local environment, providing a point of departure by reference to which the listener interprets the message. With this system the speaker specifies the place in the listener’s network of meanings where the message is to be incorporated as relevant. The local environment, serving as point of departure, is the Theme; what is presented in this local environment is the Rheme.

Distinct from this is the “degree of newsworthiness” (Matthiessen & Halliday 2009: 66), what was called Communicative Dynamism in the Prague school, “represented as a configuration of Given + New”, the system of information focus (ibid).

So what we see here are three separable concepts, Topic, Given, and Theme, though Topic and Theme seem to be collapsed in Mathesius’ view, and also in the SFG analyses of some languages. What I would like to argue is that there are very good reasons for the Theme being the initial element of the clause, and that the collapsing of Topic and Theme into one concept is problematic.

Before I can make my point I need to digress a bit and talk about how communication happens, and why I think the initial position in an utterance is important independent of being the topic or not.

3. The creation of meaning

Meaning doesn’t exist in the world; it is created in our minds.² That is, even in communication, there is no meaning in words or sounds, we create meaning from the actions of other people by putting together certain assumptions in which the actions “make sense”.³

² In Wendy Bowcher’s plenary talk she used the example of a fist, and all the meanings one could ascribe to it; in Geoff Thompson’s plenary talk he showed a picture which could be understood in different ways. These examples highlight the subjective nature of meaning.

³ Language is not a thing, but a behavior, and many of the principles and cognitive abilities are the same as for other aspects of human behavior. As David Butt talked about with his system networks, they are a representation of “the flow of behavior”. I also want to stress, as Prof. Ruquaiya Hasan pointed out after my presentation, the assumptions related to language

This is called abductive inference, and it is how we understand the natural world and how we understand the motivations of other people when they do something. We have a natural instinct to “make sense” of things, and that means trying to hypothesize a reason for some phenomenon, whatever it is. When we observe a natural phenomenon, we take whatever information is available to us and create a context of interpretation in which that phenomenon makes sense to us. When we see another person doing something, we instinctively hypothesize why they are doing it, using abductive inference (see LaPolla 2010 for details).

So communication is not coding and decoding, it is ostension and inference, that is, the communicator doing an action ostensively to show the desire to communicate, and then the addressee using abductive inference to infer the reason for the person’s action.

Communication can happen with or without language, but language serves to constrain the creation of the context of interpretation in particular ways relevant to the culture of the speakers. Each language is unique, as it emerges out of the communicative behavior of a unique society of speakers, and so each language will differ in terms of what semantic domains the speakers have constrained often enough for the particular pattern to become conventionalized on the societal level and habitualized on the individual level, and they will differ in terms of how much they constrain the interpretation of a semantic domain if they do so, and they will differ in the particular linguistic mechanisms used to constrain it if they do so.

As perception of a speech act is linear, interpretation is also linear, and this is why the initial segment of the utterance is so important. We don’t wait for the whole utterance to be completed before we start creating the context of interpretation; we start building the context of interpretation with the very first word, and then that context of interpretation influences the creation of the context for interpreting the rest of the utterance. We project what is to come, and languages can give us clues as to what to expect. We saw in English that the initial segment influences the creation of the context of interpretation in terms of constraining the interpretation of the mood such that the addressee can project what sort of interaction the speaker intends to accomplish with the hearer. Other languages can put other elements in initial position to help the hearer project aspects of the interaction that that culture deems salient.

and other cultural aspects that we bring to the context of interpretation are socially constructed, that is, they are social conventions (as well as personal habits), and I do not intend to downplay the social aspect of language use, but the idea is that our understanding of language is simply memories of how we have seen or heard language being used, and how we have used it ourselves.

Languages also differ typologically as to what is obligatorily thematic and what isn't. For example, in English, Textual Themes such as *if* must precede the Topical Theme, but this is not the case in Chinese.⁴

I will use Tagalog as an example of a language that, like English, also makes good use of the clause initial position to aid the hearer's projection, but uses it for somewhat different purposes than English does, and does not always put the Topic in initial position.

4. Theme in Tagalog

Tagalog, a Malayo-Polynesian language spoken in the Philippines, is a predicate-initial language and so in the most unmarked situation, the information structure is comment-topic rather than topic-comment. The predicate in most cases marks aspect, realis/irrealis, and often the semantic role of the Topic of the clause. Topic here is actually a grammatical status, as it is an argument singled out for special morphological treatment. Generally any argument, whether participant or circumstance, can be the Topic of the clause, and the predicate takes a form to reflect the semantic role of that argument, and the representation of the argument (if it is not a pronoun) takes either a marker of specificity (*ang*) or a demonstrative pronoun to mark it as the Topic. Let's look at some examples (adapted from Schachter 2008: 337-8).

1) Intransitive

a. A-alis [ang tindero] [sa Lunes.]
 REDUP-leave SPEC storekeeper LOC Monday
 'The storekeeper will leave on Monday.'

b. Mag-lu-luto [ang tindero] [para sa babae.]
 IAT-REDUP-cook SPEC storekeeper for LOC woman
 'The storekeeper will cook for the woman.'

2) Transitive

a. A-alis-in [ng tindero] [ang bigas] [sa sako.]
 REDUP-leave-UT REL storekeeper SPEC rice LOC sack
 'A/The storekeeper will take the rice out of the sack.'

b. A-alis-an [ng tindero] [ng bigas] [ang sako.]
 REDUP-leave-LFS REL storekeeper REL rice SPEC sack
 'A/The storekeeper will take some rice out of the sack.'

c. I-pag-a-alis [ng tindero] [ng bigas] [ang babae.]
 CON-GER-REDUP-leave REL storekeeper REL rice SPEC woman
 'A/The storekeeper will take out some rice for the woman.'

⁴ This of course would have implications for identifying something as part of the Theme, as Halliday identifies a textual or interpersonal element as being part of the Theme or not on the basis of whether it precedes the Topic Theme or not.

- d. I-pang-a-alis [ng tindero] [ng bigas] [ang sandok.]
 CON-INST-REDUP-leave REL storekeeper REL rice SPEC ladle
 ‘A/The storekeeper will take out some rice with the ladle.’

In a series of insightful papers, James Martin (1981, 1988, 1990, 1995b, 1996, 2004) discusses several aspects of Tagalog grammar from an SFG point of view. He shows that Tagalog has a “predisposition for loading interpersonal meaning onto the front of the clause” (1990: 36). Aside from marking on the verb for such things as polite imperative, there is a large number of second-position clitics that mark textual or interpersonal meaning, and the monosyllabic pronouns are also second position clitics. Interrogative elements also obligatorily appear in initial position. Following are some examples adapted from Martin (1990: 19, 22, 12):

- 3) hindi **pa** **rin ho** **ba** lumabas si Cory
 NEG immature also RESPECT Q left:AT SPEC PN
 ‘Didn’t Cory leave anyway, sir/ma’am?’

- 4) baka **naman** gusto **mo-ng** mag-kape
 maybe contrast want 2sgNT-LNK IAT-coffee
 ‘But maybe you’d like to have coffee’

- 5) **kailan kaya** siya ta-takbo
 when speculation 3sg REDUP-run
 ‘When do you suppose she’ll run?’

Prof. Martin calls these elements thematic, but also considers Topic phrases at the end of the clause, such as in (2b-d), thematic. This view is also followed in Matthiessen & Halliday 2009.

It is also possible for the Topic or circumstantial elements to precede the predicate when linked to the predicate with the particle *ay*, as in (6), which Martin (1990:20) classifies as having a marked Theme:

- 6) si Aquino pala ay pinatay ni Marcos
 SPEC PN surprise FT kill:RUT REL PN
 ‘Surprisingly Aquino was killed by Marcos’

In most of the major discussions of Theme, from Mathesius 1929 up through Gómez-González 2001, the languages under discussion have been topic-comment languages, and so there has been the problem of distinguishing the initial part of the utterance or clause and the Topic. A language like Tagalog allows us to separate the two, and see that the starting point of the utterance does not have to include the topic.

What I’d like to argue is for associating Theme with those elements at the beginning of the utterance that help with the hearer’s projection of the communicator’s intent, and so a Topic that comes at the end of the clause would not be considered to be part of the Theme, as it is not contributing to the projection. The clitic pronouns and the clause initial topics, though, could be considered part of the Theme.

Now, this talk is not really about Tagalog; I am just using Tagalog as an example. I am arguing for a methodological principle. I want to argue that, unlike the Prague School, we should clearly distinguish between the Theme, defined as the speaker's starting point, and the Topic. The Theme forms a structure with the Rheme, and the Topic forms a structure with the Comment. By Topic here I am referring to what the clause is about. In Tagalog this is explicitly marked. As Lambrecht (1994) has shown, the pragmatic status of referents in the minds of the speaker and hearer (i.e. "Given" and "New", what he calls identifiable vs. unidentifiable) is a different type of information from what he calls the Focus Structure (e.g. Topic-Comment), and so these two concepts also need to be distinguished.

This then leaves us with a problem, though. In Halliday 1994 everything up to the Topic (Topical Theme) is considered part of the Theme in English, but if the Topic is not part of the Theme, how do we draw the line between Theme and Rheme in a language like Tagalog when the Topic is not part of the Theme? In an example like (3), repeated here, do we draw the line after the question particle *ba* or after the entire predicate (i.e. include *lumabas* in the Theme), leaving only the Topic outside the Theme!

3) hindi **pa** **rin ho** **ba** lumabas si Cory
 NEG immature also RESPECT Q left:AT SPEC PN
 'Didn't Cory leave anyway, sir/ma'am?'

One possibility would be to say everything up to the first participant, process, or circumstance would be considered part of the Theme, but then in (6), repeated here, we would not include the particle of surprise *pala*, which seems counterintuitive.

6) si Aquino pala ay pinatay ni Marcos
 SPEC PN surprise FT kill:RUT REL PN
 'Surprisingly Aquino was killed by Marcos'

I don't have a good answer to this, and in fact on rereading the Prague School writings, it seems we may not need to draw a clear line. Their view was that there was a continuous progression, and not a clear break between the two. As Geoff Thompson pointed out in his plenary talk, Theme "tails off". If we take Theme as those elements which aid projection, then we also do not need to draw a clear line, as throughout the utterance the hearer is projecting what is to come.

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