

BOOK REVIEW

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A review of J. R. Martin (ed.), *Interviews with M.A. K. Halliday: Language Turned Back on Himself*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013. xiv + 288 pp. £70.00 (hbk), £22.99 (pbk)

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Abstract

This book review provides a chapter-by-chapter overview of a collection of interviews with M.A.K. Halliday, the founder of systemic functional linguistics (SFL), and comments on its special features and relevance to linguists and students in the field.

This volume is a collection of 14 interviews with Professor M.A.K. Halliday, the founder of Systemic Functional Linguistics (hereafter SFL). In these interviews, recorded over four decades, Halliday recounts and discusses his own experience as a student of language and linguistics in Britain and China and his career as a linguist, and explores key notions and concepts of SFL, the evolution of the theory around the world, its place in the field of general linguistics, as well as its many sites of application. The subtitle of the collection, as the editor explains, adapts a well-known saying of Firth's, which characterises linguistics as language turned back on itself, and very fittingly describes the general spirit of this volume.

The interviews are presented chronologically, in the sequence in which they were originally conducted. Interview 1, conducted by Herman Parret in 1972, was originally published in 1974 in *Discussing Language* – a collection of interviews with leading influential linguists of that time (Chafe, Chomsky, Greimas, Hartmann, Lakoff, Lamb, Martinet, McCawley, Saumjan). This interview explores in particular the theoretical context and the social semiotic orientation of Halliday's linguistic theory, its European heritage and North American connections, as well as some key concepts in the theory.

Interview 2, conducted by Noboru Yamaguchi and Shun'ichi Segawa in 1977 at the University of Sydney, reveals some of Halliday's views about Chomskyan linguistics and its place in the history of the study of language. It also clarifies some concepts in SFL and compares the theory with the various perspectives deriving from the Chomskyan paradigm. The strength and courage of Halliday's convictions (at a time when SFL was still marginalized) are very much in evidence here. The interview also discusses Halliday's work on child language development.

Interviews 3 and 4 both have a focus on the language in education themes. In Interview 3, published in *The English Magazine* in 1981, Halliday maintains that language is rooted

in social meaning and that learning a language is learning the significant social meanings of a society. The positioning of his work in relation to educational concerns further illuminates the orientation of his theory. In Interview 4, conducted by Dr M. L. Tickoo in 1985 at the Regional Language Centre in Singapore, also focuses on the exploration of language in education, particularly his unifying notion of language across the curriculum – that of learning language, learning through language and learning about language.

Both Interviews 5 and 6 are in-depth interviews conducted by well-established fellow systemic functional linguists. Interview 5 (by Paul Thibault in 1985) was originally published as a chapter in the two-volume festschrift, *Language Topics*, prepared for Halliday upon his retirement from University of Sydney. This interview thematises the systemic, the functional and the social semiotic bases of Halliday's work and explores the epistemological and theoretical criteria on which these are based. It clarifies the position of Halliday's thinking in relation to other contemporary theoretical positions in linguistics and semiotics.

Interview 6, conducted by Ruqaiya Hasan, Gunther Kress and Jim Martin at the University of Sydney in 1986, is another in-depth interview. It opens with a section (Semogenesis) covering biographical details relevant to the development of Halliday's career, the influence of his teachers such as Luo Changpei, Wang Li and Firth, and then picks up on and further develops several of the themes introduced in previous interviews (grammatical theory, language in education, language and context, etc.). Of particular interest is the discussion of Halliday's interest in the development of a Marxist linguistics, and the need of the "backing-off movement", and how these have impacted on his career path as a linguist.

Interview 7, conducted by Michael O'Toole at Murdoch University in Perth at the '3D: Discipline – Dialogue – Difference' conference in 1989, also includes Gunther Kress, who was also a participant at this conference. Apart from issues under the general heading of language in education, this interview adds the theme of multimodality to the discussions, reflecting the emerging concern of the interviewers with the grammar of other semiotic systems. Halliday discusses the potential of exploring other semiotic codes, pointing out that as linguists, "we can then feed back into our understanding of the grammar precisely what we learn by applying these to other forms of semiotic" (p141).

Interview 8 was conducted by Caroline Coffin in 1998 in support of a masters-level course in Applied Linguistics. In this interview, Halliday explains how his theory came to be called systemic functional linguistics, and discussed the notion of context with reference to the work of Malinowski and Firth, and comments on the development of work on context in SFL.

Both Interviews 9 and 10 were conducted during the 25th International Systemic Functional Congress at Cardiff University in 1998. Interview 9 (conducted by Manuel Hernández) returns to and develops a number of themes introduced in Interviews 1, 5 and 6. Halliday's discussion of the influence of his teachers in China and the UK (Wang Li and Firth in particular) and of colleagues (Bernstein, Hasan, etc.) is of particular interest. Interview 10, conducted by Geoff Thompson and Heloisa Collins, focuses on the development of the theory, SFL and other schools of linguistics, critical linguistics, linguistics and cognition, register, practical analysis issues and computer-aided analysis.

Interview 11 was conducted by Anne Burns in 2006. It explores Halliday's position in the field of Applied Linguistics, language in education in particular. In this interview, Halliday articulates his view of SFL as an applicable linguistics, involving a dialectic of

theory in practice, as well as his concern that this dialectic should evolve in an expanding range of applied contexts. Concerning studies on multimodality, Halliday emphasizes the importance of maintaining language itself “at the centre of attention, as being in some way the key” (p187).

Interview 12 was conducted by Hu Zhuanglin and Zhu Yongsheng in a plenary session at the 36th International Systemic Functional Congress at Tsinghua University in 2009. In this interview, Halliday discusses issues concerning the developments of SFL, the concept of applicable linguistics, SFL studies in China, grammatical metaphor, language generation and machine translation.

Interview 13, conducted by Bilal Ibne Rasheed in Pakistan in 2010, explores a range of issues, including the relationship between Halliday’s politics and SFL (its consequences for his career path, both institutional and theoretical), the relationship between language and literature, Halliday’s views on the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis and his criticism of Chomsky’s Transformational Generative Grammar.

The final interview, conducted by Jim Martin and Paul Thibault at Halliday’s home in Sydney in 2011, serves as “a capstone chapter” for this volume. It explores, again from an ‘insider’ perspective, a range of contemporary theoretical and descriptive concerns in SFL. The interview also fills in bibliographical details missing from previous interviews.

Overall, this volume is an extremely valuable resource for those working in SFL, and complements Halliday’s *Collected Works* and other SFL publications. Although many of the interviews have been published elsewhere, some may not be so easily accessible. For me, what is most important is that it provides a delightfully rich reading experience – a useful surrogate for readers who have not had the privilege of discussing language and linguistics face-to-face with Halliday. For students and novice linguists of the field, it is learning by dialogue at its best. The dialogic mode enacted in the interviews allows Halliday to touch on details of his personal history and intellectual challenges that have not been addressed in other publications.

The interviews in this collection, from different angles, also help us understand more deeply the contexts and commitments that have long guided Halliday’s applicable linguistics and the humane qualities that make it so appealing as a theory of language and its relevance to the many areas of application. Moreover, as the editor rightly comments in the Introduction, these interviews reflect “Halliday’s enduring spirit of generosity as far as alternative points of view are concerned, a generosity not always afforded him by others with respect to either his political beliefs or his evolving model of language and social context” (xiv).

Competing interests

The author declares that he has no competing interests.

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