



مختبر مقاربات الخطاب
Laboratory of Approaches to Discourse



Editors

Akila Sellami-Baklouti

Fatma Benelhaj

Sabiha Choura

Nadia Abid

This special issue compiles papers from the 48th Systemic Functional Congress (ISFC48) organised in March 2023 by the Systemic Functional Linguistics Association of Tunisia (SYFLAT) and the Laboratory of Approaches to Discourse (LAD-LR13ES15), under the auspices of the Faculty of Letters and Humanities at the University of Sfax. This special issue, which explores the theme of power and empowerment in relation to language and systemic functional theory, is divided into two volumes. The contributions in this first volume provide some reflections on SFL notions, which can empower both the theoretical apparatus and its application to different types of discourse. The papers in the second volume showcase how SFL language descriptions can empower pedagogical practices.

<https://recherches-universitaires-flshs.com>

Ce site permettra aux internautes qui s'y inscriront via l'«Espace Membre» de consulter ou de télécharger des articles déjà parus dans les numéros précédents de la revue ou alors de soumettre des articles pour évaluation à paraître après acceptation dans un prochain numéro.

Acknowledgements

The editors would like to express their sincerest thanks to the esteemed scholars who kindly contributed to the review process in this special issue.

- Radhia Bebes
- Maria Brisk
- Izaskun Elorza
- Najla Fki
- Lise Fontaine
- Sondes Hamdi
- Ameni Hlioui
- Imen Ktari
- Fayssal Maalej
- Anne McCabe
- Mimoun Melliti
- Dorra Moalla
- Nesrine Triki
- Zhenhua Wang

The editors would also like to express their sincere gratitude to Prof. Sadok Damak, Editor-in-Chief of *Academic Research*, for his invaluable support and guidance throughout the preparation and publication of this special issue.

<https://recherches-universitaires-flshs.com>

Ce site permettra aux internautes qui s'y inscrivent via l'«Espace Membre» de consulter ou de télécharger des articles déjà parus dans les numéros précédents de la revue ou alors de soumettre des articles pour évaluation à paraître après acceptation dans un prochain numéro.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements iv

Introduction – Power and Empowerment in SFL:
Theoretical insights and discourse applications – 1
Akila Sellami Baklouti & Sabiha Choura

1
Lexicogrammar: The powerhouse of language – 10
Lise Fontaine

2
The power of grammatical metaphor: How does it
differ from conversion and derivation? – 30
Miriam Taverniers

3
Multivariate exploration of instantial variation in
situational context: The powerful role of the
individual instance of language use – 68
Stella Neumann

4
MACUVIN: Features of ‘the Meant’ under the
constraint of genre – 89
Zhenhua Wang

5
A comparative study of substitution in chemical and
anthropological magazine news and journal
commentaries – 108
Sabiha Choura

6

Linking adverbials in Tunisian research articles across two disciplines: A comparative corpus-based study – 129

Donia Kaffel

7

(Dis)empowering Ukraine/Russia through journalese: A Transitivity approach – 148

Ameni Hlioui

8

“The woman who rode away”: A Transitivity reading that matches the Sufi understanding of the circles of the inner self’s journey in time and space – 166

Cyrine Kortas

9

Modality in court hearing transcripts: An SFL approach – 183

Ahlem Laadhar

10

A comparative analysis of the construal of real-world experiences in English translations of interviews with three speakers of Djerbi Berber – 210

Mohamed Elhedi Bouhdima

Lexicogrammar: The powerhouse of language

Lise Fontaine

Abstract

This paper presents a theoretical position on the nature of the lexicogrammar within systemic functional linguistics (SFL). It aims to offer new perspectives on our understanding of the lexical aspect of the lexicogrammar by extending the SFL concept of meaning potential. In doing so two different system-instance relations are differentiated, those of instantiation and actualisation. The paper argues that it is the concept of meaning potential that provides the main source of power within the SFL framework in terms of Halliday's view of the lexicogrammar as the powerhouse of language. It also argues that lexicogrammar needs to be further developed concerning the lexis part in order to avoid blind spots in the theory.

Keywords

Lexicogrammar; meaning potential; realisation; actualisation; lexis

Introduction

Even the experts do not understand it the way they would like to, and it is perfectly reasonable that they should not, because all of direct, human experience and of human intuition applies to large objects. We know how large objects will act, but things on a small scale just do not act that way. So we have to learn about them in a sort of abstract or imaginative fashion and not by connection with our direct experience. (Feynman 1963)

The above quote from the Feynman's lectures on Physics has been selected as a means of suggesting that, as in the field of Physics, we in Linguistics work with objects that we do not understand as fully as we would like. The statement that 'direct human experience and human intuition applies to large objects' can be seen to apply also to our experience with language; we can, in many respects, have a better understanding of large objects as compared to how things might work on a small scale. For linguists, this could be the difference between text or discourse and morphemes and phonemes, if we accept that these latter are small scale objects. Following Feynman, learning about language on a

small scale requires more abstract means rather than direct experience. In this paper, I will dissect the lexicogrammar as it is understood within the framework of systemic functional linguistics (SFL), a concept which considers grammar as a larger object of study, and considers lexis metaphorically on a smaller scale. Somewhat provocatively, I suggest that we cannot, as humans, have any direct experience of lexis.¹ For this reason, my account will be necessarily theoretical and imaginative.

Within SFL, language is modelled as a semiotic system, a complex system of meaning making. This system is an abstract representation of the meaning potential of language, where meaning is viewed as choice (Halliday 2013, 29). The model of language presented within SFL is one which is stratified, meaning that language in its most holistic view is distributed across different layers or strata.² Semantics is one stratum within the model, which functions as an interface between context and lexicogrammar. These three strata represent the content plane of language, in contrast to the expression plane which includes phonology, phonetics, and the signifying body as will be discussed below. This paper focusses on the lexicogrammar stratum as it is of particular relevance to issues of empowerment, due to its central role as the main resource for doing things with language and because it is at the heart of the language system. It is, according to Halliday (2005,74), the powerhouse of language.

Although the lexicogrammar has historically provided the foundation of SFL theory, this core area has remained relatively understudied. While the expansive development and use of SFL theory for multidisciplinary purposes is very welcome and indeed promising, the powerhouse itself should also be the focus of our attention; not instead of, but in addition to, the wealth of work being done on the understanding of its effects on people and society at large. Accepting that language is a semiotic system implies that we should also accept that while it is “made of meaning”, it has “to

¹ Space here does not permit a detailed discussion of this point but suffice to say for our purposes here that experience of lexis is always mediated.

² For a more detailed discussion of semantics and stratification see Taverniers (2011).

materialise – to become matter” (Halliday 2005, 68). The source of the energy which enables this materialisation is the lexicogrammar.

The description of the lexicogrammar itself has not been revisited substantially since Halliday’s early work (Halliday 1985). Given the advances in the area of lexicogrammar in other frameworks and also given the importance of the lexicogrammar to various applications of SFL, scholars working in this area need to pause, review, and ask whether (or not) an update to the lexicogrammar would be productive. At the same time, all theories should regularly take stock of their methods and evaluate the appropriateness and value of the visualisations they use. In this paper I will tease out some of the theoretical issues that I feel are important to furthering our understanding of the stratum of lexicogrammar. More specifically, the paper aims to examine the theoretical nature of the lexicogrammar and to develop the SFL concept of ‘meaning potential’ to further our understanding of ‘lexis’ within lexicogrammar. By shifting our focus to the lexis part of this stratum, we may shed more light on its grammatical energy.

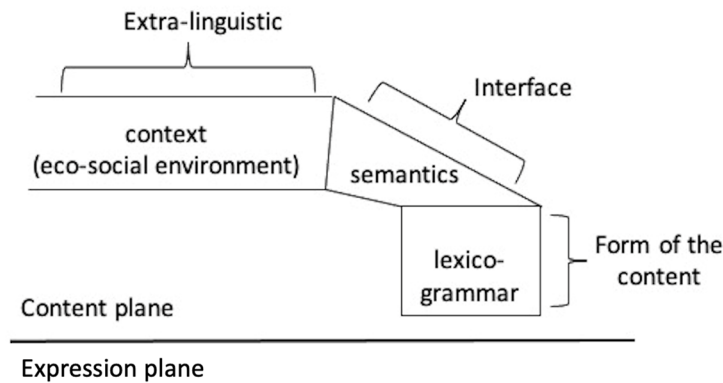
This paper is organised as follows. Section 2 briefly describes the lexicogrammar in the SFL model of language. Section 3 examines the concept of meaning potential and presents an argument for the need to differentiate two different system-instance relations. Section 4 argues for the need to evaluate and reflect on both the perspectives and the visualizations used in the treatment of lexicogrammar. The paper then concludes in Section 5 with the position that it is the concept of meaning potential that provides the main source of power within the SFL framework.

1. The lexicogrammar in a stratified model of language

Within the SFL framework, the lexicogrammar is the lowest stratum on the content plane (see Figure 1). Lexicogrammar represents a ‘construct of wording’ (Halliday 1981, 221), where lexis and grammar are viewed as two perspectives on the same object of study. The lexicogrammar is represented here as closest to the expression plane and is considered to interact directly with the semantics stratum. Perhaps because it mediates between semantics and expression, the lexicogrammar has somewhat of an identity crisis; sometimes seen as meaning, sometimes as form. According to Taverniers (2019, 66) “even a cursory reading of the systemic

functional literature will reveal that the familiar systems of the clause, viz. process type, mood and modality, and theme and information, are sometimes called ‘lexicogrammatical systems’, and sometimes ‘semantic systems’”. The problem may simply be one of terminology, depending on the intended use of the term ‘semantic’, as a stratum or simply as a general attribute.

Figure 1: The lexicogrammar situated in the content place



(Adapted from Halliday 2013)

The lexicogrammar can be thought of as the stratum which gives form to content; a “unified stratum of syntax and vocabulary” (Halliday 2005,74). The clause is, therefore, the central unit, providing the structural elements which serve to express semantic functions. In this sense, the lexicogrammar provides an ‘organizational space’ (Halliday 2003,14). What is special about this stratum is that this organization space has almost infinite power as the generator of the social semiotic system. As Halliday explains, “with a lexicogrammar interposed between meaning and expression, it is this more than anything which enables language to serve both as a vehicle and as a metaphor, both maintaining and symbolizing the social system” (Halliday 1975/2003, 83).

The usual way we talk about language is by saying that language ‘expresses’ meaning, as if the meanings were already there – already existing, in some formation or other, and waiting for language to transpose them into sound, or into some kind of visible symbols. But meaning

is brought about by language; and the energy by which this is achieved, the source of its semogenic power, is grammar. (Halliday 2005, 63)

We must not interpret this claim as a statement that the lexicogrammar is generative in any specific way. At best we can assume that Halliday is arguing that language is not a translational mapping of pre-existing meaning onto symbols. Exactly what is meant is difficult to know since the SFL model is not intended for modelling language production; it is not a language generation model. The SFL model has generally been developed as a declarative model in the sense that intends to capture the meaning potential of language, not to model how language works. However, the literature does suggest it is an active component, i.e., it is that part of language that brings about meaning (*ibid.*).

We will now briefly consider this stratum's internal structure. Given its label, the lexicogrammar includes both lexical and grammatical parts. The SFL model has always considered lexis and grammar as essentially the same but different depending on one's gaze (Halliday 1992/2005, 78). It has been called a continuum, originally by Halliday but propagated since, to describe the relationship between grammar and lexis. This imagery is difficult if we begin from the basis that lexicogrammar is one thing. The visual representation we get from the SFL literature is something of a cone shape. The 'grammar end' of the continuum is smaller, with bigger units and more binary systems and the 'lexis end' is bigger, with smaller units and a broader range of "looser, more shifting sets of features" (*ibid.*). There is a division between those aspects which are grammar-like and those which are lexis-like. Despite claims of a continuum relating the two, there does not appear to be any real evidence of such a continuum.³ The organising principles are quite different at the different 'ends' of the continuum and the middle points between the two ends are left quite unexplored as we will now discuss.

³ An anonymous review pointed out that phraseological units are ones which are best viewed as between lexis and grammar (neither purely one or the other). While this certainly seems to be the case, it does not (yet) provide evidence of a continuum.

In Halliday's early work, he pointed out that "the middle ranks of the grammar are often the most complex, presumably since they face both ways; so that a grammar which starts unidirectionally from the two ends will find it difficult to avoid leaving the middle ragged" (Halliday 1961/2002, 69). What can we understand from this? My own interpretation is that Halliday is referring to the rank scale of units of language, i.e. constituency. The middle ranks would be the group/phrase rank. Halliday (1992/2005, 79) later included in the middle "areas such as [which]⁴ are represented in English by circumstantial systems (prepositions), systems of modality and temporality (modal and temporal adjuncts) and so on, which can be illuminated more or less equally well from either end." However, it seems that rank is an organising principle not of the lexicogrammar but only of the grammar end. One question we are left with is what happens to rank at the lexis end? I think the answer to that question is that there is no rank at the lexis end. I am not convinced that there is one at any point along the continuum outside of the grammar end. If this is the case, then is the relationship between the two faces of the lexicogrammar best viewed as a continuum?

To explore this idea, we will consider briefly what has been said about the organisation of each end of the lexicogrammar continuum. We have much more information about the grammar end, which does seem to be equated with the clause. At this end "are small, closed, often binary systems, of very general application, intersecting with each other but each having, in principle, its own distinct realization" (1992/2005, 79). The organising principle here is that of rank, with the unit of the clause as the central or core unit. At the lexis end, we find the concept of set as the paradigmatic organising principle and collocation as the syntagmatic organising principle. The representations of meaning are seen as more specific and yet grammatically unrestricted (Halliday 1961/2002). A further distinction put forward by Halliday

⁴ The original states: There are obvious advantages in adopting a unified approach; and of course there are the bits in the middle, areas such as are (*sic*) represented in English by circumstantial systems (prepositions), systems of modality and temporality (modal and temporal adjuncts) and so on, which can be illuminated more or less equally well from either end.

(1961) is that the terms ‘lexis’ and ‘word’ are to be differentiated.⁵ The term ‘word’ is a unit of the rank scale, and therefore relates to the grammar end of the continuum. Lexis, on the other hand, is grammatically unrestricted and therefore not involved in the rank scale. In a sense, the treatment of lexis has, to some extent, been assumed to be situated at the end of system networks and this treatment assumes that the system networks are lexicogrammatical. However, we have already seen that grammar and lexis are, in the SFL model, organised differently following different principles. Despite the SFL claim that ‘lexis is most delicate grammar’ (Halliday 1961; Hasan 1987), there is no evidence that the same organising principles should work for lexis. In fact, as Asp (2013, 176) has suggested, “systems that present options from superordinate categories through to optimally delicate selections, while wonderful for displaying related data and excellent for computational implementations, do not look like good matches for neural processing models”. The SFL system networks were never intended as representations of processing, but we can infer that systems used to represent superordinate categories, as is done for the grammar end of the continuum, would not be good representations of the lexis end. Therefore, there must be a point at which the representation of each pole must change. As McGregor (2021, 8) states, “only grammar is organized around the semiotic components [‘the notion of metafunction’]”, which opens questions about lexis. I agree with McGregor that “lexicon and grammar emerge as semiotically separate resources” (ibid.). However, we must note that it is not clear that McGregor’s use of ‘lexicon’ can be equated with Halliday’s use of ‘lexis’. Opposition to the view of a grammar to lexis continuum has been articulated by Hunston and Francis (2000, 28), who claim “it is unsatisfactory to propose that each lexical item is the end-point of an individual bundle of systemic choices”, which is indeed one interpretation of the description of lexis in the SFL framework (see also Berber Sardinha 2020). Based on SFL literature and despite claims of a continuum, we have two semiotically separate resources which have yet to be reconciled.

⁵ See Halliday (1966/2002:167): “The lexical item itself is of course the “type” in a type–token (item– occurrence) relation, and this relation is again best regarded as specific to lexis.”

Perhaps part of the issue is due to traditions Halliday was dealing with at the time he developed his approach to the lexicogrammar. Much like Saussure, who had to oppose entrenched traditions of diachronic approaches to language and prescriptive critiques of written language, Halliday was opposing, to a large extent, notions of syntax versus grammar and lexicography as the domain of lexis. In our modern view of lexicology, we are far beyond a restricted focus on dictionary definitions. Halliday has claimed that “the lexicologist’s data are relatively easy to observe: they are words, or lexical items of some kind, and while their morphological scatter is a nuisance, involving some cumbersome programming and also some awkward decisions, it is not forbiddingly hard to parse them out” (Halliday 2020, 80), and yet this statement is not true. The lexicologist’s data is not easy to observe. We still do not have a firm understanding of what a word is (see Wray 2015 and Haspelmath 2023). The easy data is simple if the unit is the orthographic word but as anyone working within lexicography will tell you, the lexical unit is not easy to define. The degree of difficulty in such endeavours will no doubt depend on the language and the objectives of working with lexical data. One does not have to go far into the lexicologist’s data to find themselves in uncharted territory that is beyond ‘words’ but not yet in the land of grammar (depending, of course, on how one defines ‘grammar’).

If the metaphorical model for the lexicogrammar is a distinction between ‘grammars’ and ‘dictionaries’, then one is almost forced to assume that there is a way of reconciling these traditional approaches. If there is, as Hunston & Francis (2000) suggest, a mutual dependency between grammar and lexis, then it is difficult to imagine a continuum as the best metaphor for this relationship. Surely the reconciling approach is that of meaning-making. This leads us to the concept of meaning-potential, as developed within the SFL framework and how this concept itself may have the reconciling potential that is needed to address the lack of coherent theory between grammar and lexis.

2. Meaning potential

In earlier work (Fontaine 2017), I proposed that lexis be viewed as most local context rather than as most delicate grammar. The motivation for this was by extension of the concept of meaning

potential as developed by Halliday. My main motivation came from Hanks (2013, 65): “strictly speaking, words in isolation have meaning potential rather than meaning, and that actual meanings are best seen as events, only coming into existence when people use words”. I have since discovered work by Allwood (2003), who reached similar conclusions, although with different proposals. Allwood, like Hanks, was influenced by Halliday’s concept of meaning potential, both seeing it as a valuable means of better understanding lexical meaning.

The concept of meaning potential is most frequently used in the discussion of instantiation and to understand instantiation, we need to consider it together with stratification. Stratification accounts for the dimension of the model which involves “ordering language in context into subsystem according to the degree of symbolic abstraction” (Matthiessen et al. 2010, 205). In this sense, lexicogrammar, as the first strata of the content plane (see Figure 1 above), is less abstract than the semantic stratum, which is in turn less abstract than the context stratum. However, this is a view that we will come to challenge.

Stratification is itself a source of power in language. Taverniers (2019, 63) explains this well in the following excerpt:

[S]tratification makes it possible to create ‘meanings’ that are adapted to specific contexts and that are beyond what is (fixed or ‘codified’) in the (lexicogrammatical) system of a language. Stratification makes it possible to use ‘forms’ in ways that go beyond their valeurs in lexicogrammatical systems, for instance, to mean several things at the same time, i.e. to be creative in a myriad of ways with the finite means that are available in the formal units of the language. (Taverniers 2019, 63)

If the lexicogrammar, as a stratum, and in relation to more and less abstract strata, is a stratum of wording, then it must be here that new meanings are generated. As we noted above, meaning is not ‘there’ waiting to be given form, meaning is brought about by language. O’Donnell (2021, 14) explains how this idea works in relation to context:

[A]t each point of a text/interaction, we as interactants have the choice to affirm the contextual expectation, or to vary from it, either using novel means to achieve some situational goal, or by shifting to a distinct Context of Situation (as when the speaker in a conference talk makes small-talk with someone in the audience). Rather than focusing on the context-forms-text-with-dynamic-exceptions approach, I argue we should be taking the approach such that every act creates its own context, which sometimes is coherent to the context created by prior acts of the interactants. (O'Donnell 2021, 14)

As O'Donnell says, “every [language] act creates its own context”. In this sense, it is the role of the lexicogrammar to realise features in the semantics and so on. A given context of situation comes into being due to the lexicogrammar.

Turning now to instantiation,⁶ it is “the relationship between the system and the instance; the instance is said to instantiate the system” (Halliday 1996/2002, 411). This relationship is often viewed in terms of the higher stratum of context. Fontaine (2017) attempted to extend this use of instantiation to the lexicogrammar to account for the meaning potential of lexis, i.e. whatever a lexical unit is, it gains meaning potential from its use.⁷ This position is entirely in line with proposals made by Hanks (2000) and Allwood (2003). As Allwood (2003, 16) explains: “[t]he meaning potential is all the information that the word has been used to convey. ... Whether or not linguistically triggered, the activation of a meaning potential always takes place in a context which creates certain conditions for the activation”. Here we have a relationship of instantiation as described above (see also Fontaine 2017).

However, we must not lose sight of the fact that instantiation, like many theoretical concepts, is “constructed by the theorist, out of the dialectic between observation and theory” (Halliday, 1996/2002, 411). These constructs need to be evaluated at various points throughout the development of a theoretical model. For

⁶ See Berry (2017) for detail about for detail on other related concepts such as realisation and delicacy.

⁷ As one anonymous reviewer pointed out, phraseological units are evidence of this.

example, some issues have been noted in relation to register and instantiation. According to Butt (2008, 62) “register is a probabilistic account of which domains of the background system, or space, are actualized. Such an account 'sits' halfway along a cline of instantiation, that is, mid-way between a manifest instance and the potentiality of the system (when regarded in the abstract)”. The implication here is that register is instantial, but not necessarily actualized since it is midway between an actualized instance (a text) and the full potential of the system, i.e. there is a distinction to be made between potential, instantial, and actual.⁸ With this in mind, we turn our attention to how we might shift perspectives in our view of the lexicogrammar.

3. Shifting perspectives: a theoretical debate

Without entering into a phenomenological debate about the status of the theoretical constructs with which we work, suffice to claim that we have some degree of default conditioning at play, and that this cognitive status is generally unconscious. Although not referring to language, Senge (1990, in Ramalingam et al 2008, 42) makes an apt point:

most of us have been conditioned throughout our lives to focus on things and to see the world in static images. This [in turn] leads to linear explanations of ‘systemic phenomenon’. Understanding the perpetual flux in systems should lead us to see ‘interrelationships, not things, and processes, not snapshots’.

We are dealing with a systemic phenomenon and while it might be possible to assume that at any given instance there are some aspects of the language system that are not in flux, other aspects may always be so. Even those aspects which are viewed as stable, may in fact not be, given that we are constantly engaged in different activities, possibly in different locations with different people, etc. For various understandable reasons, visual representations, and to some extent also descriptions, limit our ability to really understand the interrelationships and processes.

⁸ As pointed out by Wegener (p.c.), register is a relationship not an entity, which is easy to overlook since ‘register’ is a noun.

There is certainly no harm, and there may be considerably good, in evaluating our theoretical metaphors. Fontaine & Wegener (2022, 177) made this position explicitly clear:

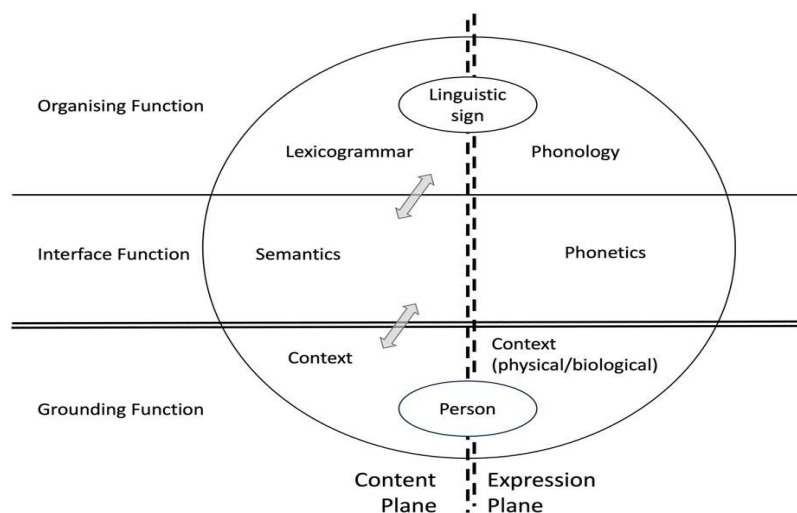
Within SFL, the claim is often made that the approach is ‘top-down’. What is generally meant by this is that the more abstract semantic layers of the model lead the analysis (context > semantics > lexicogrammar). This approach is nevertheless analysis. [...] Theoretical metaphors can be useful since they ‘enable the analyst to enter into an explicit discourse on how language as a semiotic system becomes a powerful resource for the exchange of meanings in social contexts’ (Hasan 2013, 298). The use of these metaphors is not always evaluated within the theoretical model. While they serve an important purpose as powerful and productive aspects of research, we also need to take care with such metaphors since they alter the way we think about the model, as do our visual representations of the model.

Not (re-)examining our metaphors may lead to missing important opportunities to change them. For example, representing the stratified language system as smaller to larger embedded circles might suggest that one stratum is bigger than another. Fontaine (2017, 2) suggested that lexis is “bigger on the inside”, meaning lexis is not necessarily smaller than context. The claim within the SFL literature is that lexis, as a part of the lexicogrammar, is less abstract than context. Perhaps it is because we feel that lexis ‘fits into’ grammar that we consider it smaller. We know considerably more about text and grammar than lexis. In terms of scale, it may be sensible to think of lexis as small, but bigger on the inside. It is the meaning potential of lexis that inflates its size. Perhaps smaller things are more difficult to grasp, perhaps more interesting to some of us. This perspective would, however, suggest that at least the lexis part of the lexicogrammar is not necessarily less abstract.

In Wegener’s model of stratification, shown in Figure 2, the speaker (person) is represented most closely to context, almost as if context is the least abstract of the strata. Importantly, here both semantics and phonetics are equally represented within their roles of an interface function (see Halliday & Matthiessen 2014). At the

very least, this visualisation of the SFL model of stratification offers an opportunity to reassess our understanding of the strata in relation to the individual (see Wegener, forthcoming) and it helps me explore the concepts that I am interested in. Of particular significance is that the stratum of lexicogrammar is represented at the frontier between the content and expression planes within an organising function.

Figure 2: Wegener's (2011) model of stratification



(Adapted with permission)

Returning to issues related to instantiation, following Butt (2008) and Wegener (2011), a distinction is needed to account for contextualized instantiation and de-contextualised, or rather non-contextualised instantiation. What we have to imagine is that meaning potential is different, perhaps we could say limited, in a given context. Therefore, if we are considering meaning potential for a given context, it is necessarily different from the full range of meaning potential of language, which is theoretically at least (although impractically) infinite.⁹ To address this issue, Wegener (ibid., 98) defines actualisation as “the relation between the actual and either the potential or the typical”. The primary reason for the

⁹ It is of course also possible to consider that meaning potential is also infinite for a given context, but it would be necessarily a smaller infinity.

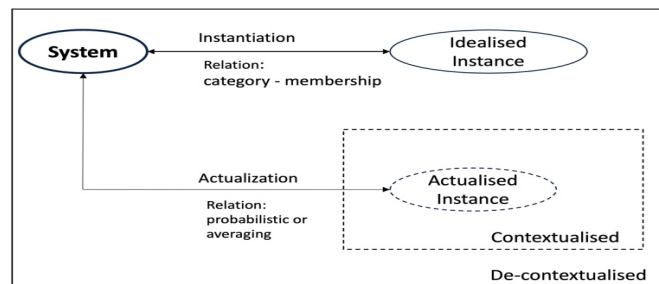
need to make this distinction is explained by Wegener (ibid., 95) as follows:

[I]t may be that an uninstantiated class in a system is the ultimate example of choice or potential. ... Because [instantiation] is intrastratal it does not reach the actual. The actual is interstratal and thus is contextualised. Instantiation is the relation that exists between the theoretical abstract and an instance of that abstraction.

The concept of instance, then, can be modelled in two ways. In the de-contextualised model, the instance is an idealised instance, where meaning potential is an intra-stratal relation. In a contextualised model, the instance is actualised, and this contextualized meaning potential forms an inter-stratal relation, i.e. an actualised instance. It is register that brings a system-instance model into a contextualised probabilistic relation.

The concept of actualization has received very little attention in the SFL literature. It is one of three approaches to semantics in SFL (Taverniers 2019). In the actualization approach, “semantics is a gateway between the language as potential, as a general code, and a specific context, and a register is what is relevant, what is ‘activated’ in a context” (ibid., 84). Using an adapted version of Wegener’s (2016) model, Figure 3 illustrates this distinction, where the instance activated in a given context is considered the actualised instance through a relationship of actualization as compared to the relation of instantiation, which is a non-contextual, and therefore hypothetical, model.

Figure 3 Instantiation and Actualization



(Adapted from Wegener 2016, 99)

Given that ‘system’, as meaning potential, is an abstraction from instances, but with the instantial end of this relation taken as the text, we will want to ask whether meaning potential, as a concept, can be used to determine meaning potential of lexis, as argued by Fontaine (2017). Non-contextualized lexis can be modelled in terms of instantiation, i.e. the potential to (theoretical) instance. We can describe the meaning potential for a given lexeme as being constituted of the full range of semantic features associated with it, for example following Hanks (2013). Contextualized lexis can be modelled in terms of actualization, i.e. the potential (possible) to actual instance. This perspective would allow us to account for the actualized instance in relation to the instantiated instance. If we add here the position put forward by Taverniers (2019) as discussed above, how language creates meanings, or in Halliday’s terms how it brings about meaning, we can posit that it is the concept of meaning potential that affords this power. As Williams, Russell & Irwin (2017, 13) explain, “[t]he notion of potentials is fundamental in systemic theorising, because it allows the linguistic model to apply not just to previously encountered linguistic utterances, but also to additionally try to explain how speakers produce and interpret novel instances of language”. It is at the heart of the power of language.

In shifting the perspective, as suggested here, by reconsidering different types of system-instance relations and by rethinking the way in which relations between strata are visualised, we are in a better position to seek out different solutions to the gaps in the model. The gap in terms of where lexis sits and how it can be modelled needs to be addressed. I have argued that this can be done using existing concepts and principles for SFL theory, as outlined above, but it will require some degree of compromise and a willingness to explore what other approaches have to offer.

Concluding remarks

This paper argues for the need to further development of lexis in lexicogrammar to fully understand this stratum. The SFL account of lexis is under-developed relative to other areas. Specifically, I have implicitly suggested working on it from the lexis part. The principles given by Neumann (2013; 2020) for register are also relevant here in that priority should be given to “the collection of

empirical facts”. We can use a similar approach in exploring lexis and discover how it can find its place within the SFL model. The notion of ‘bundles of features’ may in fact be useful in terms of sets and collocations, building on Halliday’s early proposals (1961), without ignoring important developments in cognitive linguistics and constructional/pattern-based approaches.

As shown by Taverniers (2023), most recent approaches to lexis are converging on lexical flexibility and a lexical account based on homonymy seems less plausible. I am convinced that lexical flexibility has the concept of meaning potential as its basis. Increasingly, approaches to lexis are adopting versions of ‘meaning potential’ (Hanks 2000; Allwood 2003; Recanati 2004; Polguère 2015; Fontaine 2017). It is perhaps time for those working with the SFL model to consider its relevance to the stratum of lexicogrammar. The answer to the question ‘what constitutes a lexical item’ is non-trivial. It is surely not the orthographic word, but what we encounter, or believe we encounter, in a material way is some kind of instantiation of a lexeme in any given use of language. The current SFL model leaves too many questions unanswered and to fully appreciate the powerhouse of language, which is for Halliday the lexicogrammar, we must turn our attention to such questions.

In the introduction I suggested that it is not possible for us to have any direct experience of lexis; it must be accessed empirically through actualisation. The use and exploitation of meaning potential is what drives the powerhouse of language and what empowers both individuals and different fields. Without developing our understanding of lexis, we are left with a blind spot.

References

- Allwood, J. (2003). Meaning potentials and context: Some consequences for the analysis of variation in meaning. In H. Cuyckens, R. Dirven & J. Taylor (Eds.) *Cognitive approaches to lexical semantics* (pp. 29-66). Mouton De Gruyter.
- Asp, E. (2013). The twin paradoxes of unconscious choices and unintentional agents: What neurosciences Say about choice and agency in action and language. In L. Fontaine, T. Bartlett

- & G. O'Grady (Eds.) *Systemic-Functional Linguistics: Exploring choice* (pp. 161-178). Cambridge University Press.
- Berber Sardinha, T. (2020). Lexicogrammar. In C.A. Chapelle (Ed.). *The concise encyclopedia of applied linguistics*. Wiley Blackwell.
- Berry, M. (2017). Stratum, delicacy, realisation and rank. In T. Bartlett & G. O'Grady (Eds) *The Routledge handbook of Systemic Functional Linguistics* (pp. 42-55). Routledge.
- Butt, D. (2008). The Robustness of realizational systems. In J. Webster (Ed.) *Meaning in context: implementing intelligent applications of language studies* (pp. 59-3). Continuum.
- Feynman, (1963 [2013]). Quantum Behavior. In M. Gottlieb & R. Pfeiffer (Eds.) *The Feynman's Lectures on Physics* Vol 1 Chapter 37, California Institute of Technology. https://www.feynmanlectures.caltech.edu/III_01.html
- Fontaine, L. (2017). Lexis as most local context: towards an SFL approach to lexicology. *Functional Linguistics*, 4 (17). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40554-017-0051-7>
- Fontaine, L. & Wegener, R. (2022). Epilogue. In M. Aldridge & E. Asp (Eds.) *Empirical evidences and theoretical assumptions in functional linguistics* (pp. 170-179). Routledge.
- Halliday, M.A.K. (1961/2002). Categories of the theory of grammar. In J. Webster (Ed) *On grammar, Volume 1 of the collected works of M.A.K. Halliday* (pp. 37-94). Continuum.
- Halliday, M.A.K. (1966/2002). Lexis as linguistic level. In J. Webster (Ed.) *On grammar, Volume 1 of the collected works of M.A.K. Halliday* (pp. 58-72). Continuum.
- Halliday, M. A.K. (1975/2003). The context of linguistics. In J. Webster (Ed.), *On language and linguistics. Volume 3 of the collected works of M.A.K. Halliday* (pp. 74-91). Continuum.
- Halliday, M. A. K. (1985). *An Introduction to functional grammar*. Edward Arnold.
- Halliday, M. A. K. (1992/2005). Language as system and language as instance: The corpus as a theoretical construct. In J. Webster (Ed.) *Computational and quantitative studies. Volume 6 of the collected works of M.A.K. Halliday* (pp. 76-92). Continuum.
- Halliday, M. A. K. (1996/2002). On grammar and grammatics. In J. Webster (Ed.) *On grammar, Volume 1 of the collected works of M.A.K. Halliday* (pp. 384-418). Continuum.

- Halliday, M. A. K. (2003). On the “architecture” of human language. In J. Webster (Ed.) *On language and linguistics. Volume 3 of the collected works of M.A.K. Halliday* (pp. 1-29). Continuum.
- Halliday, M.A.K. (2005). On matter and meaning: The two realms of human experience. *Linguistics and the Human Sciences*, 1(1), 59–82.
- Halliday, M.A.K. (2013). Meaning as choice. In L. Fontaine, T. Bartlett & G. O’Grady (Eds.) *Systemic Functional Linguistics: Exploring choice* (pp. 5-36). Cambridge University Press.
- Halliday, M.A.K. & Matthiessen, C. (2014). *Halliday’s introduction to functional grammar*. Edward Arnold.
- Hanks, P. (2000). Do word meanings exist? *Computers and the Humanities*, 34 (1/2), 205–15.
- Hanks, P. (2013). *Lexical analysis: Norms and exploitations*. MIT Press.
- Hasan, R. (1987). The grammarian’s dream: Lexis as most delicate grammar. In M.A.K. Halliday, & R. Fawcett (Eds.) *New developments in systemic linguistics. Vol. 1: Theory and description* (pp. 184-211). Pinter.
- Haspelmath, M. (2023). Defining the word. *WORD*, 69 (3), 283-297.
- Hunston, S., & Francis, G. (2000). *Pattern grammar: A corpus-driven approach to the lexical grammar of English*. John Benjamins.
- Matthiessen, C., Teruya, K. & Lam, M. (2010). *Key terms in Systemic Functional Linguistics*. Continuum.
- McGregor, W. (2021). *Neo-Firthian approaches to linguistic typology*. Equinox.
- Neumann, S. (2013). *Contrastive register variation. A quantitative approach to the comparison of English and German*. de Gruyter Mouton.
- Neumann, S. (2020). On the interaction between register variation and regional varieties in English. *Language, Context and Text*, 2(1), 121-144.
- O’Donnell, M. (2021). Dynamic modelling of context: Field, Tenor and Mode revisited. *Lingua*, 261.
- Polguère, A. (2015). Lexical Contextualism: The Abélard Syndrome. In N. Gala, R. Rapp & G. Bel-Enguix (Eds).

Language Production, Cognition, and the Lexicon, 48, (pp. 53-73). Springer.

- Ramalingam, B., Jones, H. & Young, J. (2008). Exploring the science of complexity: Ideas and implications for development and humanitarian efforts. Working Paper 285, Overseas Development Institute, London. Available online: <https://odi.org/en/publications/exploring-the-science-of-complexity-ideas-and-implications-for-development-and-humanitarian-efforts/>
- Recanati, F. (2004). *Literal meaning*. Cambridge University Press.
- Senge, P. (1990). The leader's new work: Building learning organizations. *Sloan Management Review*, 32(1), 7–23.
- Taverniers, M. (2011). The syntax-semantics interface in systemic functional grammar: Halliday's interpretation of the Hjelmslevian model of stratification. *Journal of Pragmatics*, (43), 1100–1126.
- Taverniers, M. (2019). Semantics. In G. Thompson, W. Bowcher, L. Fontaine, & D. Schöenthal (Eds). *The Cambridge handbook of Systemic Functional Linguistics* (pp. 55–91). Cambridge University Press.
- Taverniers, M. (this issue). The power of grammatical metaphor: How does it differ from conversion and derivation?
- Wegener, R. (2011). *Parameters of context: from theory to model and application*. [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. Macquarie University, Sydney.
- Wegener, R. (2016). Studying language in society and society through language: Context and multimodal communication. In W. Bowcher, & J. Liang, (Eds.) *Society in language, language in society* (pp. 227-248). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Wegener, R. forthcoming. A person-centric view of multimodal language in context. In J. Williams (Ed.) *Systemic Functional Linguistics and the individual*. Routledge
- Williams, J., Russell, N. & Irwin, D. (2017). On the notion of abstraction in systemic functional linguistics. *Functional Linguistics* 4 (13).
- Wray, A. (2015). Why are we so sure we know what a word is? In Taylor, J. (Ed.) *The Oxford handbook of the word* (pp. 725-750). Oxford University Press.

About the author

Lise Fontaine is a Professor at the Université du Québec à Trois-Rivières. Her research interests centre on functional grammar theory and lexical semantics. She is the author of *Analysing English Grammar: A systemic-functional introduction* (CUP) and co-editor of several volumes including *Perspectives from Systemic Functional Linguistics: An Applicable Theory of Language* (Routledge, 2018); *The Cambridge Handbook of Systemic Functional Linguistics* (CUP, 2019); *Approaches to Systemic Functional Grammar: convergence and divergence* (Equinox, 2020) and *The Routledge Handbook of Transdisciplinary Functional Linguistics* (Routledge, in preparation). She recently co-authored a monograph entitled *Referring in Language: an integrated approach* (CUP, 2023).

بحوث جامعية
دورية تصدر عن كلية الآداب والعلوم الانسانية بصفاقس
ISSN – 2811-6585 – ر.د.م.م

Recherches Universitaires

رئيس هيئة التحرير
صادق ديمق
أعضاء هيئة التحرير
حافظ عبدولي — هنده عمار قيراط — سالم العيادي — علي بن نصر — نجيبة شقير — حمادي ذويب — ناجي العونلي —
محمد الجربي — منصف المحواشي — رياض الميلادي — فتحي الرقيق — عقيلة السلامي البقلوطي — مصطفى الطرابلسي —
— سعدية يحيى الخبو

كلية الآداب والعلوم الانسانية بصفاقس
صندوق بريد 1168 ، صفاقس 3000 تونس
الهاتف: (216) 74 670 557 - (216) 74 670 558
الفاكس: (216) 74 670 540
الموقع الإلكتروني: www.flshs.mu.tn

العدد 19 خاص في جزأين باللغة الإنجليزية
أشرف على اعداده مخبر البحث في مقاربات الخطاب
الجزء الأول
(أبريل 2025)

Academic Research

N°19, Vol.1, Special Issue

Published by the **Laboratory on Approaches to Discourse** (LAD/LR13ES15)
and the **Systemic Functional Linguistics Association of Tunisia** (SYFLAT)