

Power and Empowerment in SFL: Language description and pedagogical applications

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SFL: Power and Empowerment is the theme of the 48th Systemic Functional Congress, which took place in 2023 in Sousse, Tunisia. Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), as a theory of language, has been a source of power for other communities. The power of the theory originates in its consideration of language as a resource for meaning making in context. SFL, unlike previous theories, sees that “the power of language is vested in the act of meaning” (Halliday 1993, 7): language allows its users to produce meanings that construe the outside physical world and that enact their social relationships with the people around them. This consideration of language as a meaning making resource in context has made SFL a theory of language that can account for the wide range of meanings and social functions that individuals can perform in different situations.

The theory’s account of language is unique as it allows the deciphering of the language user’s message while taking into account the context of production. Volume 1 has shed light on SFL’s organization of grammar into syntagmatic relations and paradigmatic meanings and how they can be applied to the interpretation of the choices made by the language user in discourse. This volume (Volume 2) focuses on the theory’s descriptions of languages, and their application mainly in pedagogical contexts. In fact, the power of SFL can be seen in its interaction with different communities and applications across various contexts. Halliday (2009, vii) explains that SFL “derives its main impetus from outside, from its application to very varied problems, both practical problems and research problems”. The major purpose of SFL as a general theory of language is to offer “particular descriptions” of individual languages (Halliday 2009, 59) that are comprehensive enough to account for their meaning potential and to solve the problems their users might face.

This consideration of language results in descriptions of language that are rather powerful: the power of these descriptions lies in the fact that they can be applied to different contexts, and they can solve the problems raised by speech communities. In this sense, SFL is an ‘applicable’ linguistics that has the potential of producing descriptions of languages that can empower other communities (Matthiessen 2012). One of the fields where these descriptions are highly needed, is that of education, and actually, Halliday’s main purpose for his theory was to respond to problems raised by language learners (Halliday & Hasan 2006). Volume 2 has been compiled first, to highlight the power of language descriptions and second, to present their pedagogical implications.

The contributions in this volume can be classified into theoretical descriptions and applications of the theory. The first two papers present theoretical descriptions that can empower the linguists in their study of language. Matthiessen’s paper presents a detailed methodology for linguists interested in describing any language from an SFL perspective, while Martin proposes a framework for analysing infographics and text. The second set of papers aims to highlight the power of SFL’s descriptions of language to influence language teaching theories and practices. Examples from language teaching include the use of cohesion in the business field (Ben Amor and Derbel), mood and multimodality in two Tunisian EFL textbooks (Moalla, Benelhadj and Abid), cohesive markers in EFL learners’ writings (Fki), transitivity in poetry classes (Besbes), multimodality in EFL classrooms (Rabhi), and grammatical metaphor in students’ emails (Aribi).

Volume 2 opens with a paper on “empowerment through language description and empowering language description” by Matthiessen. The paper highlights the role of the language descriptions offered by SFL in empowering other communities and in empowering the linguists, who can find in SFL the necessary tools to analyse language. The paper presents a clear and detailed methodology that can be applied in the description of languages, including how to identify the sources to be used as data for the development of the theory. Matthiessen also tackles the issue of coming across alternative descriptions of the same phenomena while working on a language description. He ends up the article with an application,

where he gives a description of a few areas in Modern Standard Arabic.

In the second paper, Martin applies the description of evaluation, following Martin and White's (2005) APPRAISAL framework, on infographics used in science education together with their accompanying texts. Martin deals with the problem of including too much or too little information in these infographics, and how this might challenge the development of the theory. He highlights the power of SFL in explaining the link between image (as in infographics) and verbiage (the accompanying text) and he calls for future research on the topic.

In their paper on the use of reference and conjunction in business texts, Ben Amor and Derbel apply Halliday and Hasan's (1976) system of cohesion and Hunston's (1989) evaluation parameter of relevance to a corpus of journal articles and students' theses from the business field. Quantitative (NooJ software) and qualitative methods are used to analyse the corpus and authentic examples respectively. The authors conclude that teaching these features in a Data Driven Learning (DDL) mode of instruction can empower students through making them aware of the interaction between the lexicogrammatical choices and their evaluative functions. In this way, SFL can empower students by making them aware of the genre features, thus highlighting the role of the theory in language instruction.

The use of SFL as a tool for analysis has also been the subject of a study by Moalla, Benelhadj and Abid on two Tunisian EFL textbooks. The study uses a multimodal approach to study the representation of self and other in the intercultural encounters between characters. The study analyses conversations, dialogue balloons and visuals using the mood system, and the Grammar of Visual Design (GVD). The analysis has revealed that textbooks failed to construct balanced, informative and authentic interpersonal exchanges, emphasising the differences between 'self' and 'other' in terms of roles. The study highlights the important role of SFL and GVD in unveiling the textbooks' simplistic unbalanced representation of Self and Other, which could negatively influence the students' development of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) and preparation for future intercultural communication outside the classroom.

In her article about cohesion in argumentative essays, Fki proposes a textual analysis of cohesive markers to trace the progress of Tunisian EFL students. Her corpus is a collection of argumentative essays written by B2 Tunisian high-schoolers that is compared to a corpus of model essays. Fki's analysis of her corpus is based on a Scheme of Cohesion (based on Halliday & Matthiessen 2014) using UAM CorpusTool. Additionally, some examples from her corpus are qualitatively analysed. The comparison is based on the frequency, variety and appropriateness of the cohesive tools, and aims at enhancing students' writings by pointing to their inappropriate use of such markers. In this way, Fki has shown that the SFL analysis of cohesive markers can empower Tunisian EFL students.

In order to enhance her students' ability to analyse poetic texts, Besbes relies on a transitivity analysis in her class to produce a linguistically based interpretation of Eliot's (1917) poem "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock". The study has shown that a transitivity analysis can empower poetry students' analytical skills and raise their awareness of the usefulness of linguistic analysis in understanding how language constructs meaning and achieves specific purposes.

As a context for learning, multimodal learning environments are studied by Rabhi in terms of their potential to empower a group of Tunisian EFL university students. The study highlights the role of these environments in enhancing the meaningfulness of the online learning experience and promoting students' competence and impact. It also addresses the challenges that hinder the success of online multimodal environments in empowering EFL learners. This study can be considered as a contribution to the ongoing debate on the relationship between online learning and students' empowerment as one of the main objectives of modern education.

SFL has been shown to empower the analysis of discourses produced in academic and educational contexts. Aribi, for instance, analyses university students' emails to their professors combining systemic functional linguistics and pragmatic tools, namely grammatical metaphors (Halliday & Matthiessen, 1999) and politeness Theory (Brown and Levinson, 1987), respectively. The study investigates the ways email requests written by a group of

Tunisian postgraduate students in English to their professors are realized, and examines the lexico-grammatical choices made by requesters to enact personal/social relationship with the requestees. This study showcases how SFL tools empower the analysis of a specific corpus that is frequently produced by university students and is important for establishing a good relationship between students and their professors.

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