

# Introducing M.A.K. Halliday



Bo Wang and Yuanyi Ma



# INTRODUCING M.A.K. HALLIDAY

M.A.K. Halliday (1925–2018) was the founder of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) and, undoubtedly, one of the most influential linguists of his time, credited with changing the way language and linguistics have been taught. SFL, as an applicable theory that approaches language as social semiotic, is the study of the relationship between language and its functions in social settings. Moreover, SFL conceives of language as a resource for making meaning and organizes language systemically as a huge network of interrelated choices of meaning.

This book is an introduction to the life and seminal works of Halliday. Targeting both SFL and non-SFL scholars, this book introduces Halliday's life and work in simple terms, expounds his theoretical conceptions, illustrates how his theories have been applied to various areas of linguistics and offers additional readings for researchers who want to explore this area further.

Divided into six sections covering Hallidayan connections, theory and architecture of language, Hallidayan conceptions of language, systems and the modes of meaning, and applications of SFL, this accessible introduction is a key resource for researchers and students within the fields of linguistics and applied linguistics.

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*Bo Wang and Yuanyi Ma*

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For Prof. Christian M.I.M. Matthiessen, who continues to inspire  
and enlighten us



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# FOREWORD

The authors of this impressive volume have a quite distinguished calling card. To begin with, they are two young scholars who did their PhD theses under the supervision of Christian Matthiessen. They also have already published various noteworthy books on SFL and translation in collaboration (e.g. the recent Wang & Ma 2020, 2021; Ma & Wang 2021). Now I have the honor, and pleasure, to present their latest effort, this fine introduction to one of the foremost researchers on language and linguistics of our times: M.A.K. Halliday, the “founding father of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL),” as the authors rightly point out. With the recent passing of Michael Halliday, the very idea of such a work is not just well-timed, it is also essential. The volume is definitely attractive – also to SFL scholars who, despite being experts, perhaps know less about the growth of the scholar, Halliday, than about his linguistics. However, the authors knowingly aim to reach scholars outside the SFL community who may be even only vaguely interested in Halliday and Hallidayan SFL as well.

The task the authors set themselves was not an easy one: constructing a book merging ample coverage of Halliday himself, along with the diachronic development of his linguistics and its key theoretical conceptions, as well as the influences of other scholars upon Halliday – both Western and Eastern – and his influence upon not only Systemic Functional Linguists, but also scholars outside the community. Moreover, a welcome chapter is dedicated to SFL as an applicable linguistics. The areas covered are many and varied, as were Halliday’s own copious writings, including translation studies; language description and typology; child language development; computational linguistics; educational linguistics; text analysis; and verbal art. And although we have Halliday’s collected works in print, this book offers a conceptually and methodologically rigorous and stimulating pathway into his work. More than a rough guide, however, at every turn, it displays the necessary knowledge of the linguist, Halliday, and his model,

which receive laudable coverage, as does the relevant literature on all topics. It also organizes its contents in a logical and systematic fashion.

In sum, despite the challenging aims that the authors set themselves, they have done a fine job of meeting them. With all that has been written by and about M.A.K. Halliday, there is really nothing quite like this volume available today.

Donna R. Miller  
*University of Bologna*

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# ABBREVIATIONS AND SYMBOLS

ADA	applied discourse analysis
AILA	Association Internationale de Linguistique Appliquée (International Association of Applied Linguistics)
ASFLA	Australian Systemic Functional Linguistics Association
CDA	critical discourse analysis
CG	Categorial grammar
CIC	Chinese Industrial Cooperatives
CLRU	Cambridge Language Research Unit
DDG	Daughter Dependency Grammar
FSP	Functional Sentence Perspective
FUG	Functional Unification Grammar
GPSG	Generalized Phrase Structure Grammar
GURT	Georgetown University Roundtable
GSP	generic structure potential
HPSG	Head-driven Phrase Structure Grammar
<i>IFG</i>	<i>Introduction to Functional Grammar</i>
IPA	International Phonetic Alphabet
ISI	Information Sciences Institute
LFG	Lexical Functional Grammar
PASS	passive
PDA	positive discourse analysis
SBCG	Sign-based Construction Grammar
SFG	Systemic Functional Grammar
SFL	Systemic Functional Linguistics
SFS	Systemic Functional Stylistics
SLA	Second Language Acquisition
SOAS	School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London

TAG	Tree Adjoining Grammar
UCLA	University of California Los Angeles
↘	realization
/	conflation
^	ordering (followed by)
< >	enclosed group/phrase
<< >>	enclosed clause
<<< >>>	enclosed clause complex
ø	ellipsis
	clause complex, boundary markers
	clause (not rankshifted), boundary markers
	phrase or group, boundary markers
[[[ ]]]	rankshifted (embedded) clause complex, boundary markers
[[ ]]	rankshifted (embedded) clause, boundary markers
[ ]	rankshifted group/phrase, boundary markers
α and other small Greek letters	elements of hypotactic interdependency structure
1 and other Arabic numerals	elements of paratactic interdependency structure
+	logico-semantic relation of extension
=	logico-semantic relation of elaboration
×	logico-semantic relation of enhancement
‘	projection of idea
“	projection of locution

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# INTRODUCTION

## Why did we write this book?

The idea of writing this book comes from our stroll in a bookshop in Zhuhai City where we found a booklet titled *Introducing Chomsky* (Maher & Groves 1996) by chance. It suddenly occurred to us that there should be a book titled *Introducing M.A.K. Halliday* in the market. In our plan, the book will serve as a brief introduction to both the life and the seminal works of Halliday. It will aim at both beginners of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) as well as established scholars in this research area. On the one hand, our target readers of this book may be undergraduate students or postgraduate students who begin their journey of research and know nothing about Halliday and SFL. On the other hand, we hope that this book can serve as a mini-encyclopedia for SFL scholars and can eventually cover a wide range of topics, so that our readers can browse or leaf through the book to get a general idea of who Halliday is and what his linguistic theory is like.

In general, in this book, we plan to achieve the following purposes:

- to introduce Halliday's life and work to non-SFL scholars and beginners of SFL in simple terms;
- to briefly expound Halliday's theoretical conceptions;
- to illustrate how SFL has been applied to various areas of linguistics;
- to offer additional readings to novice researchers of SFL.

## How to use this book?

The book is different from textbooks or introductions to SFL, notably Halliday and Matthiessen's (2014) *Halliday's Introduction to Functional Grammar (IFG)*,

Thompson's (1996, 2004, 2014) *Introducing Functional Grammar*, Bloor and Bloor's (1995, 2004, 2013) *The Functional Analysis of English*, Butt et al.'s (2000) *Using Functional Grammar* as well as Martin, Matthiessen and Painter's (2010) *Deploying Functional Grammar*. To read this book, one does not have to start from the very beginning, but can instead focus on the topics that he/she is interested in. In that sense, this book is more similar to de Joia and Stenton's (1980) *Terms in Systemic Linguistics* and Matthiessen, Teruya and Lam's (2010) *Key Terms in Systemic Functional Linguistics*, as it is arranged according to terms or topics. However, our book is also different from the two books in that the language we use is simpler and the topics we select are wider in coverage.

In this way, we divide this book into six sections, each focusing on a specific "theme" and attempting to cover the following topics:

- a short biography of Halliday;
- scholars and schools of linguistics that had influenced Halliday;
- scholars and schools of linguistics that are being influenced by Halliday;
- different stages in SFL development;
- the semiotic dimensions of language according to SFL theory;
- the important theoretical conceptions proposed by Halliday;
- the important systems and functions of language;
- the major areas of SFL application.

Then, after discussions in each entry, we provide information on some additional reading for readers who would like to explore the topic further.

## Conventions in spelling

Since it is a book that introduces Halliday, it makes sense that we adopt the conventions developed by Halliday and followed by most systemic functional linguists despite the fact that not all books follow this convention, and one has to be aware of such differences (cf. Eggins 2004).

For a beginner of SFL, the technical terms written in different ways may look confusing, e.g. some terms are in all capitals (MOOD), some in small capitals (MOOD), some are with an initial upper-case letter (Mood), and some are in all lower-case letters (mood). However, once one understands the principles behind rather than trying to capitalize the first letters of all the terms, it will be very rewarding and helpful to check whether a term is used correctly or not. Take the conventions in the spelling of "mood" for example: **MOOD** (also **MOOD**) is the name of the major grammatical system of the clause, i.e. the system for realizing the semantic system of **SPEECH FUNCTION**; the primary system is **MOOD TYPE**, with the two contrastive terms being "indicative" versus "imperative". When the first letter M is capitalized, **Mood** then indicates the structural function of a clause, namely the element in the interpersonal structure of the English clause. In Table 0.1, we summarize the terms and the capitalization conventions.

**TABLE 0.1** Examples of terms and capitalization conventions

<i>Term</i>	<i>Name of system</i>	<i>Name of feature in system</i>	<i>Name of structural function</i>	<i>Other</i>
mood	MOOD		Mood	mood Adjunct
theme	THEME	unmarked theme/ marked theme	Theme	
finite	FINITENESS	finite/non-finite	Finite	
conjunction	CONJUNCTION			conjunction [word class]
phenomenon, phenomenality	PHENOMENALITY	phenomenal/ macro- phenomenal/ meta- phenomenal	Phenomenon	

Adapted from Matthiessen et al. 2022: Chapter 4.



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# 1

## THE HALLIDAYAN CONNECTIONS

In this section, we first present a short biography of M.A.K. Halliday by describing his life as a linguist, introducing his family background, how he began to study linguistics, and his motivation for doing research. Then we introduce two of Halliday's teachers, i.e. Wang Li and J.R. Firth, who had significant influence on Halliday and shaped his career in important ways. Further, we discuss Marxism's influence on Halliday. In terms of Halliday's influence on various systemic functional linguists, we find the topic too vast to be pursued here; thus, we choose to narrow down the topic and focus on Halliday's influence on Christian M.I.M. Matthiessen – one of Halliday's closest friends and a long-time collaborator since the 1980s. Finally, we briefly discuss the relationship between Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) and some other approaches to language, especially some of the functional approaches, highlighting the influence of Halliday on a family of unification grammars.

### Who is M.A.K. Halliday?

**Michael Alexander Kirkwood Halliday** was born in Leeds, Yorkshire, England on Easter Monday 13 April, 1925. He was the only child of two teachers (see Williams & Lukin 2001; O'Donnell n.d.). His father – **Wilfrid Joseph Halliday** taught English and Latin at the secondary level at Pudsey Grammar School. In addition to being a teacher, Michael Halliday's father had an “equal love for grammar and for Elizabethan drama, and [was] also a dialectologist and dialect poet” (Halliday 2002a: 117).<sup>1</sup> Michael Halliday's mother – **Winifred** – taught French at Pudsey Grammar School. After she left her job upon getting married, she was also involved in language teaching in various ways, such as teaching French at the University of Leeds during World War II.

## 2 The Hallidayan connections

The young Michael Halliday was called “Mick” early in his life and he changed it to “Michael” later. From his boyhood, he grew up with two passions: (i) **China** and (ii) **language** (Webster 2005, 2015). For the first passion, while he was at the age of 4, he even wrote a story about how a little boy went to China. And for the second passion, he pursued it throughout his life as a linguist and a grammarian.

At the age of 4, Halliday went to West Leeds Elementary School. When he was 13, he was enrolled in Rugby School – one of the leading boarding schools in the UK. In a local newspaper, Halliday was honored as the “youngest boy to win the scholarship to Rugby” (O’Donnell n.d.: 5). However, Rugby School paid special attention to classical languages, and Halliday felt on the one hand that he was trapped in a system that was so over-specialized in nothing but classics (Kress, Hasan & Martin 1992). On the other hand, Halliday enjoyed studying modern languages, but he did not like the way languages were taught, as he discussed in an interview (Kress, Hasan & Martin 1992: 176–177 original emphasis):

The English part was literature, and I enjoyed it very much – except when the teachers started telling me something about the language in literature. What they said made no contact with what was actually there. And this worried me...

... I felt that literature was made of language so it ought to be possible to **talk about** that language. After all, my father was an English teacher and a grammarian, so I knew from him that there **were** ways of talking about language.

Halliday thought what his teachers said about the language of **literature** made no sense, so he searched in the library and discovered a subject called “**linguistics**” as well as a book about language, i.e. Leonard Bloomfield’s (1933) *Language*. But the book seemed difficult for him at that time, so he did not understand Bloomfield (Halliday 2002a).

In early 1942, Halliday volunteered for studying the foreign language course for the armed services. The course was initiated by J.R. Firth, with a purpose of training more servicemen to speak Asian languages. Halliday passed a test that included two parts: (i) a language aptitude test that involved the decoding of made-up languages and (ii) a memory test focused on the four languages offered (i.e. Chinese, Japanese, Turkish, and Persian), e.g. to repeat an increasingly long list of monosyllables with various tones. Then, shortly after his seventeenth birthday, Halliday had his first lesson in Chinese given by Dr. Walter Simon. As a learner, Halliday was often puzzled by the grammar of Chinese. He wanted some explanations on what could be said and what could not be said.

After the training, Halliday joined the services and did counterintelligence work for the Chinese Intelligence Unit in Calcutta. In 1945, the war against the Japanese continued and more servicemen were needed, so Michael Halliday was

pulled back to London to teach Chinese to the new recruits (see e.g. Halliday [2014a] for his reflections on teaching Chinese to foreign learners). According to his recollection, he began his teaching on May 13, 1945 and then he began to gradually discover something about linguistics.

In 1947, Michael Halliday finished his military service. He decided to go to China to study Chinese. When he arrived at Peking and met Hu Shih (胡适) – the president of Peking University, Hu Shih said to him: “Good. You start teaching next week in our English Department.” Through teaching at Peking University, Michael Halliday earned his living and gained more experience as a language teacher. He reflected on this in an interview (Kress, Hasan & Martin 1992: 181):

I'd never taught any English before; but they were very desperate for speakers of English because, of course, English had been totally banned under the Japanese occupation and most of their students were pretty well beginners. So, in 1947, at the beginning of classes, I enrolled as a student in Peking University, in the Chinese Department, and began teaching English in the English Department. And in the Chinese Department I went to everything that I could find – literature, classical Chinese and all – still not knowing what I wanted to do afterwards ...

For his studies in China, Halliday planned to further extend his external BA degree, having already completed the first-year exam in London. Yet he still needed to pass an additional exam. Halliday then went to read everything he could find – literature and classical Chinese, but he still did not know what he wanted to study afterwards (Kress, Hasan & Martin 1992). After staying for one year at Peking University, Halliday flew to Nanking to take part in the exam organized for him by the British Council in June 1948. The exam was “a combination of language of literature – including History of Chinese Literature from the year 500 BC to the present day” (Kress, Hasan & Martin 1992: 182). In the exam paper, there was a question that required him to write about an author of his choice. Halliday had already prepared for that question very well after spending a whole day with Cao Yu (曹禺) (1910–1996) in Shanghai, who was an important Chinese playwright famous for his plays titled *Thunderstorm*, *Sunrise*, *The Wilderness*, and *Peking Man*.

After completing his undergraduate studies, Halliday stayed on in China, working as a volunteer for the Chinese Industrial Cooperatives (CIC) – a Western-supported movement aimed to help the Chinese fight against Japanese imperialism. After several months, Halliday successfully obtained a Scarborough Scholarship for Advanced Study and Research, which could support him to continue his postgraduate study in China. He was then once again enrolled at Peking University and was assigned to study Chinese phonology, lexicography, and comparative historical linguistics with Professor Luo Changpei (罗常培) (see also Hasan & Martin 1989). However, Luo's research area was the diachronic studies of language, and Halliday was more interested in synchronic studies; thus

#### 4 The Hallidayan connections

Luo recommended Halliday to Professor Wang Li (王力) who was working at Lingnan University in Canton at the time. With Wang Li, Halliday conducted research on dialects spoken in the Pearl River Delta. Halliday benefited from the research method that Wang Li taught him and was heavily influenced by Wang Li (see entry on **influence from Wang Li**).

Two years later, Halliday obtained his MA degree from Lingnan University.<sup>2</sup> It was also in this period that Halliday had read extensively, pursuing his interest in sociolinguistics and grammar and becoming familiar with the Prague School and the Marr School of Linguistics in Soviet Russia. He was meanwhile acquainted with Firth's (e.g., 1950) ideas on language in society. He was looking forward to going back to the UK and to studying further with Firth (see entry on **influence from J.R. Firth**).

When Halliday was back to England in 1950, he originally planned to study under Firth's supervision and to teach at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS). However, due to the prevailing McCarthyism at the time, he was asked to make the commitment that he would not become a member of the Communist party in the future. He refused and did not get the offer. Eventually, he was admitted to Cambridge University as a PhD student to be supervised by Professor Gustav Haloun. Halliday tried to conduct a study on the grammar of the dialects based on the data he collected in China under Wang Li's guidance, but this study was rejected as inappropriate. As a result, Gustav Haloun suggested that Halliday work on the grammar of early modern Chinese, thereby leading to Halliday's PhD thesis on the *Secret History of the Mongols* (元朝秘史) (Halliday 1955, 1959).

When Gustav Haloun passed away suddenly, Halliday transferred the supervision to J.R. Firth. Firth then arranged for R.H. Robins to instruct Halliday for tutorial sessions and writing assignments. In this period, Halliday was also influenced by other linguists such as Eugénie Henderson, Eileen Whitley, and Louis Hjelmslev (see entry on **influence from J.R. Firth** for more discussions).

In addition, Halliday was in those days active politically. He applied the Marxist principles he learned in China to his linguistic investigations (see entry on **influence of Marxism**). He eagerly engaged with the local Communist party and set up a branch of the Britain–China Friendship Association. However, after finding that the two roles of being a linguist and a political activist would clash, he chose to be a linguist. As Halliday recalled:

The trouble was that I found it too much to be both politically active and a scholar. I couldn't do both, and I thought I [would] do better and [would] make more of a contribution as a linguist than as a politician.

(Webster 2015: 9–10)

At the same time, Halliday joined the **Linguistics Group of the British Party**, thus having a chance to meet regularly with scholars such as Jeffrey Ellis, Dennis Berg, Jean Ure, Trevor Hill, and Peter Wexler and to discuss Marxism

and linguistics with them. The topics they worked on include “the emergence and development of national languages, the status of linguistic minorities, functional variation (register) in language [e.g. Reid 1956; see entry on **register**], unwritten languages and dialects, conceptual-functional grammar, and linguistic typology” (Halliday 2002a: 118).

While Halliday was at Cambridge, he joined the **Cambridge Language Research Unit** (CLRU), which was founded by a philosopher named Margaret Masterman together with Frederick Parker-Rhodes and R.H. Richens. Assembling scholars from linguistics, mathematics, and other different backgrounds, the group worked on machine translation, which was then still called “**mechanical translation**” (see entry on **translation studies**). Some early ideas of SFL are seen in Halliday’s (1956a) contribution on the use of the thesaurus in mechanical translation, such as the organization of lexis as a resource and the paradigmatic organization of language. Halliday (2002a: 121) has made the following reflections on how the work on machine translation done at CLRU was different from that done by computer specialists:

The CLRU’s approach was different; machine translation obviously depended on the machine, but it was no less centrally a linguistic problem, requiring powerful theoretical tools for analysing and synthesizing text, and this meant that it was also a field of research likely to enhance our understanding of the workings of language. We spent many interesting hours anatomizing a sentence about axillary buds, in English, Chinese and Italian; and at least as many arguing about principles for the representation of linguistic structure. It seemed to me that in order to relate target language to source language we had to be able to formalize paradigmatic as well as syntagmatic relations; but I wasn’t convincing enough to persuade my colleagues of this notion.

In 1958, Halliday moved to **Edinburgh University** as a lecturer in general linguistics. At that time, David Abercrombie was head of the Department of Phonetics and Angus McIntosh was head of the Department of English Language. With hindsight, we can say that Edinburgh University had since then been a center for exporting great linguists, including Michael Halliday, Ruqaiya Hasan (as a PhD student), J.C. Catford, and Peter Ladefoged. It was indeed a university that had made a huge contribution to linguistics around the world by exporting Halliday to London and later to Sydney, Ladefoged to Los Angeles, and Catford to Michigan. Halliday, after having taught Chinese for most of the past 15 years, had to change gears to learn how to teach linguistics, which was an easier job compared with teaching language, as he admitted. He also taught intonation, which was a job given to him by David Abercrombie and which led to the publication of his *Intonation and Grammar in British English* (Halliday 1967; see also entry on **phonology**). It was also in this period that Halliday got to know Basil Bernstein, who was then invited to give a talk at Edinburgh on educational

failure and social class. Halliday collaborated with Bernstein and studied codal variation, trying to help schoolteachers with whom Halliday was interacting, trying to explain education from a sociological perspective (e.g. Bernstein 1971, 1973, 1975, 1990; see entry on **codal variation**).

In 1960, Ruqaiya Hasan arrived in Edinburgh from Pakistan. She was the first PhD student supervised by Michael Halliday and later she became another important systemic functional linguist as well as Halliday's wife. Coming from a background of teaching English literature in Pakistan, Hasan (1964) had produced her thesis on the linguistic study of two contemporary English writers.

In 1963, Halliday moved back to London to become the Director of the Communication Research Center that was set up by A.H. Smith and Randolph Quirk at University College. He worked with various teachers at the primary, secondary, and tertiary levels, initiating projects such as "Breakthrough to Literacy," "Language in Use," and "Language and communication." As stated by Halliday (2002a: 124; see e.g. Mackay, Thompson & Schaub 1970; Mackay & Simo 1976; Pearce, Thornton & Mackay 1989; see also entry on **educational linguistics**),

[t]his was the 1960s: rich in ideas, rich in research funds, rich in initiatives for reshaping the social order [...] The materials developed by the teachers in our project [...] were, I thought, a monument to linguistics as a democratic force, a theoretically informed activity being put to community service and itself being notably enriched as a result.

In this period, Halliday (1961) published the first paper on SFL, i.e. "Categories of the theory of grammar" – the paper that introduces his scale-&-category theory (see entries on **influence from J.R. Firth** and **scale-&-category theory**). Also, Halliday began to produce his systemic description of English grammar. His "Notes on transitivity and theme in English" (Halliday 1967/1968) was published in three parts in the *Journal of Linguistics*, building a foundation for describing experiential and textual systems and eventually leading to the publication of the first edition of *An Introduction to Functional Grammar (IFG)* (Halliday 1985a)<sup>3</sup>. Halliday regarded these descriptions as a grammar for educational purposes and a development that addressed the needs of social accountability. As stated by Halliday, "although it wasn't directly political, it was, as [I] saw it, trying to make a contribution to society" (Webster 2015: 13).

Halliday continued to explore and to be in dialogue with the mainstream linguistic theories of the day, i.e. Noam Chomsky's (e.g. 1957, 1965) theories. However, Halliday came across a range of obstacles. The two scholars were basically from the same generation: Michael Halliday was born in 1925 and Noam Chomsky in 1927. But even before Chomsky's theories became popular, Halliday already had his questions very clearly framed. Unlike Chomsky, whose questions on language arose from Western philosophy, epistemology, empiricism, and rationalism, Halliday chose to pay attention to real-life discourse and to