

# Social Semiotics

KEY FIGURES,  
NEW DIRECTIONS

Thomas Hestbæk Andersen,  
Morten Boeriis,  
Eva Maagerø, and  
Elise Seip Tønnessen

ROUTLEDGE



# SOCIAL SEMIOTICS

M.A.K. Halliday's work has been hugely influential in linguistics and beyond since the 1960s. This is a collection of interviews with key figures in the generation of social semioticians who have taken Halliday's concept of social semiotics and developed it further in various directions, making their own original contributions to theory and practice. This book highlights their main lines of thought and considers how they relate to both the original concept of social semiotics and to each other. Key themes include:

- linguistic studies, multilinguality and evolution of language
- text, discourse and classroom studies
- digital texts, computer communication and science teaching
- multimodal text and discourse analysis
- education and literacy
- media work and visual and audio modes
- critical discourse analysis.

Featuring interviews with leading figures from linguistics, education and communication studies, a framing introduction and a concluding chapter summing up commonalities and differences, connections and conflicts and key themes, this is essential reading for any scholar or student working in the area of social semiotics and systemic functional linguistics. Additional video resources are available on the Routledge website ([www.routledge.com/9780415712101](http://www.routledge.com/9780415712101)).

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Key Figures, New Directions

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Eva Maagerø, and Elise Seip Tønnessen*

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# PREFACE

In an interview that two of the editors of this book conducted with Michael A.K. Halliday in 1998 he underlined the importance of a versatile approach to the study of language and semiotic processes. Even though he regarded his systemic functional description of language as a coherent whole, he was well aware that not all aspects were fully developed, and anticipated further work to move in different directions in the future.

This book aims to present ideas from a generation of scholars who have been inspired by Michael Halliday and his social and functional approach to language and semiotics, and who have added their own ideas and academic interests, developing original works of their own. By presenting their thoughts and ideas in the form of interviews, we want to highlight their main lines of thought and discuss how they relate to both the original concept of social semiotics and to each other. It is our hope that the dialogical form of the interview can serve as a door opener to complex theories and make connections across fields. Some of these connections we shall discuss in the final chapter.

The interviews have been carefully prepared, videotaped, transcribed and edited, and in the end the final version of each interview has been approved by the interviewee. We wish to express our profound gratitude to the five scholars who so generously shared their time, knowledge and experiences with us, and responded to our questions in the meticulous follow up procedures. They have strengthened our belief that academic work is not primarily about competition, but rather about sharing.

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August 2014

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# 1

## INTRODUCTION

*Social Semiotics: Key Figures, New Directions* contains interviews with five scholars, who have all contributed immensely to the expansion of Michael A. K. Halliday's ideas about semiosis, i.e. human meaning making. What the scholars have in common is that Halliday's theory of a social semiotics has inspired them to do ground breaking work themselves. In other words, the scholars are *key figures* in social semiotics, and their work represents a plurality of *new directions*. The scholars in question are Christian M.I.M. Matthiessen, James R. Martin, Gunther R. Kress, Theo J. van Leeuwen and Jay L. Lemke. In this book, we present their thoughts and ideas in the form of five separate interviews followed by a discussion of their similarities and differences. The dialogical form of an interview is particularly apt for making inroads into complex theories and making connections among the scholars and across fields. With the interviews in this book, we highlight the main lines of thought of each of the five scholars, and we discuss how they relate to Halliday's original concept of social semiotics, as well as to each other.

In order to establish a context for the remainder of the book, we shall provide below a concise introduction to the intellectual legacy from Michael A. K. Halliday (in the section *What is Halliday's social semiotics?*). This section is no more than a brief outline of the fundamentals of Halliday's social semiotics; the main aim of the book is to present and discuss how our five scholars have taken Halliday's ideas to new frontiers, and how they have redefined and reshaped several of his original ideas, not to present Halliday's ideas themselves. After the brief introduction to Halliday's social semiotics, we shall provide an overview of the academic careers of each of our interviewees (in the section *Who are the scholars?*); in this second section of this introduction, we shall also sketch out their main contributions to social semiotics. The final section of this chapter contains some remarks on the way in which we have gathered and edited the interviews, i.e. some remarks on the methodology behind the book.

## What is Halliday's social semiotics?

“Language is as it is because of what it has to do”, Halliday states in his *Language as Social Semiotic*, and in a concise and typical Hallidayan down-to-earth way, the statement conveys the axiomatic hypothesis that language (and other semiotic systems) has developed and is as it is because of the meanings that people have perceived the need to create in order to communicate; semiotic systems (such as language) reflect, construe and enact our reality.

In a social semiotic approach, therefore, semiosis is not done by minds, but by social practices in a community. Meanings do not arise in the individual; meaning is a superindividual and intersubjective activity, and consciousness is approached from a Vygotskian perspective, whereby consciousness is a social mode of being. The functionality of any semiotic system is based on a social understanding of meaning and meaning making, as signalled with the notion of social semiotics. The social understanding of meaning is, in fact, also a cultural understanding of meaning, since Halliday – inspired by Malinowski – equates social with cultural, whereby all meanings are cultural. With a social and cultural foundation for semiosis there is no need for the concept of mind, or for the idea of some extra-semiotic knowledge base in the Hallidayan approach. Meanings do not exist or arise in a separate cognitive universe of concepts or ideas; instead Halliday sees them as patterns of semantic organization, which are realized through grammar.

Halliday suggests that a semiotic system can be located as a fourth order of complexity in an evolutionary typology of systems, i.e. in a typology representing the emergence of grammar (through time). The most basic system type is a physical system. If we add life to a physical system, we have a biological system. If we then add value to our biological system, we have a social system. To the social system, we can then add meaning, and thereby the typology culminates in a semiotic system.

A semiotic system is a fourth order of complexity, since it is at the same time semiotic *and* social *and* biological *and* physical. Semiotic systems can be of two kinds: they can be primary, consisting of content/expression pairs (i.e. of signs), or they can be of a higher order, involving a stratification of content into a dual layering of semantics and grammar; language is a higher order semiotic system. Higher order semiotic systems are not systems of signs (pairings of content and expression), they are meaning systems in which entities function along different dimensions in complex “grammatico-semantic” relations to each other.

Being a linguist, Halliday is primarily concerned with language, and he only occasionally reaches out to other semiotics systems. In effect, social semiotics is a notion seldom used by Halliday himself, he prefers the notion of systemic functional linguistics (SFL). Part of the reason is that his original use of the notion of social semiotics was intended to cover only higher order semiotic systems (systems with a distinct grammar) but, in its contemporary use, the notion is associated with any semiotic system, i.e. also with systems that Halliday as a linguist would regard as primary semiotic systems.

Halliday upholds the Whorfian idea of a close connection between thinking and language. Whorf describes this connection as follows:

... thinking is most mysterious, and by far the greatest light upon it that we have is thrown by the study of language. This study shows that the forms of a person's thoughts are controlled by inexorable laws of pattern of which he is unconscious. These patterns are the unperceived intricate systematizations of his own language ( ... ). And every language is a vast pattern-system, different from others, in which are culturally ordained the forms and categories by which the personality not only communicates, but also analyses nature, notices or neglects types of relationship and phenomena, channels his reasoning, and builds the house of his consciousness.

(Whorf, 1956, p. 252)

Halliday's approach is multifaceted and rich in detail, and different aspects of semiosis and different parts of language are described with a varying emphasis on the many different theoretical and descriptive concepts. However, we can single out three major organizing principles, which are crucial in every aspect of his approach: stratification, instantiation and metafunction.

Language is regarded as being stratified, which means that language is organized in four strata: semantics, lexicogrammar (both of these are "content" strata, meaning that they organize the content part of meaning), phonology and phonetics (both of these are "expression" strata, organizing the resources for expressing meaning). Language is context sensitive, both in the sense that its categories are motivated by the (social) context, in which language has a function, and in the sense that its categories reflect back on context by imposing a certain understanding of reality. Halliday therefore embeds the four linguistic strata in a stratum for context, as it is illustrated in Figure 1.1.

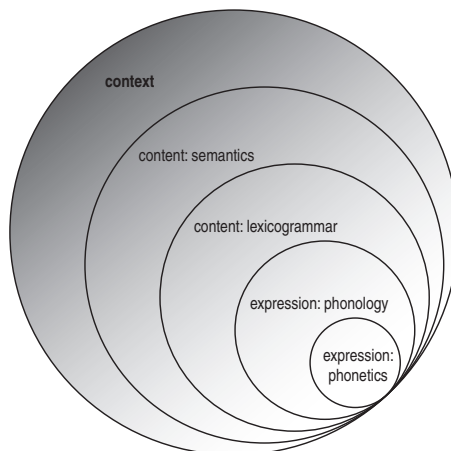


FIGURE 1.1 Stratification (language)



metafunction, and Mathesius's work to the idea of the textual metafunction. Halliday pays tribute to these scholars as follows:

For Malinowski, language was a means of action; and since symbols cannot act on things, this meant as means of interaction – acting on other people. Language need not (and often did not) match the reality; but since it derived its meaning potential from use, it typically worked. For Whorf, on the other hand, language was a means of thought. It provided a model of reality; but when the two did not match, since experience was interpreted within the limitations of this model, it could be disastrous in action ( ... ). Mathesius showed how language varied to suit the context. Each sentence of the text was organized by the speaker so as to convey the message he wanted at that juncture, and the total effect was what we recognize as discourse. Their work provides the foundation for a systemic functional semantics.

*(Halliday, 1984, p. 311)*

Halliday's conceptions of stratification, instantiation and metafunction have been used by our five scholars in their work with varying loyalty to Halliday's original formulations; in one scholar's work, the concepts have to a very large extent been adapted as intended by Halliday, in others' work, the concepts have been reshaped (beyond recognition, nearly, in some cases). Common for all, however, is that the three concepts (and Halliday's work at large) have functioned as an undeniable source of inspiration and frame for exploring semiosis.

## Who are the scholars?

### *Christian Matthias Ingemar Martin Matthiessen*



Photo by Hong Kong Polytechnic University

Christian Matthiessen was born in Sweden in 1956. He credits his mother, Christine Matthiessen, for inspiring his interest in language, an interest also nurtured by the

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fact that he grew up in a family whose members were dispersed all over the world, speaking numerous languages. Matthiessen completed his candidate's degree (Phil. Cand.) in English and Linguistics at Lund University in 1980, and he took his MA at UCLA (completed in 1984). He holds a PhD from UCLA (1989); his thesis was entitled *Text generation as a linguistic research task*, and this signifies one of his major interests, namely in computer-helped descriptions of language(s). He held various positions at the Information Sciences Institute at the University of Southern California during his time in Los Angeles, in the years from 1980 to 1988. Whilst there, he met and worked with Halliday, who functioned as a consultant on the Penman project (which produced a large-scale systemic functional grammar of English (the Nigel grammar)), in which Matthiessen was involved; this work was so fruitful and inspiring that he followed in Halliday's footpath and moved to the Department of Linguistics at the University of Sydney (a department originally set up by Halliday in 1976) in 1988, where he worked first as Lecturer, then as Senior Lecturer. He moved to the Department of Linguistics at Macquarie University in 1994 to take up a position as Associate Professor. He became Chair Professor there in 2002, and he worked at Macquarie University until 2008, when he moved to Hong Kong to take up a position as Chair and Head of the Department of English at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University.

Since he moved to Sydney, Christian Matthiessen has been Halliday's closest associate and, in collaboration with Halliday, he has extended and revised Halliday's seminal *An Introduction to Functional Grammar (IFG)*. Matthiessen's influence on this work, which for the last 30 years has functioned as a reference work for the systemic functional description of English, is clear in the third and fourth edition, which appeared in 2004 and 2014, respectively; in these editions of *An Introduction to Functional Grammar*, Matthiessen's devotion to the system network as a representational tool is apparent, and to a large extent the third (and fourth) edition of IFG incorporates much of the systemic description known from Matthiessen's *Lexicogrammatical Cartography: English Systems* (1995), albeit still upholding Halliday's more functionally, less systemic oriented disposition in terms of the whole presentation. One could say that Matthiessen is the key exponent of the systemic part of systemic functional linguistics; in all his works, the relational-dimensional thinking is salient. In other words, Matthiessen defines every systemic functional category in terms of its location in a multidimensional network of relationships (its "semiotic address", as he coins it); the dimensions conjoined in this multidimensional network are the global dimensions: stratification, instantiation and metafunction, and the local dimensions: rank, axis and delicacy.

As a systemicist, Christian Matthiessen has approached and worked within a number of linguistic research domains, most notably with (computer-based) grammatical and semantic description of particular languages – not least English – language typology, text and register analysis, and translation.

Below are listed the publications that Matthiessen regards as his most important:

1995. *Lexicogrammatical cartography: English systems*. Tokyo: International Language Sciences Publishers.

1998. Construing processes of consciousness: from the commonsense model to the uncommonsense model of cognitive science. In: J.R. Martin & Robert Veal (eds.), *Reading science: critical and functional perspectives on discourses of science*. London: Routledge, pp. 327–57.
2004. Language typology: a functional perspective. Amsterdam: Benjamins. (With Alice Caffarel & J.R. Martin.)
2006. *Construing experience through meaning: a language-based approach to cognition*. London & New York: Continuum. (With M.A.K. Halliday.)
2007. The “architecture” of language according to systemic functional theory: developments since the 1970s. In: Ruqaiya Hasan, Christian M.I.M. Matthiessen & Jonathan Webster (eds.), *Continuing discourse on language*. Volume 2. London: Equinox, pp. 505–61.
2009. Ideas and new directions. In: M.A.K. Halliday & Jonathan J. Webster (eds.), *A companion to systemic functional linguistics*. London & New York: Continuum, pp. 12–58.
2009. Systemic Functional Grammar: A First Step into the Theory. In: Christian M.I.M. Matthiessen & M.A.K. Halliday (eds.), *English and Chinese*. Higher Education Press. Available at <http://web.uam.es/departamentos/filoyletras/filoinglesa/Courses/LFC-SFL/FirstStep.html> (accessed 6 January 2015).
2010. *Key terms in systemic functional linguistics*. London & New York: Continuum. (With Kazuhiro Teruya & Marvin Lam.)
2014. *Halliday's Introduction to Functional Grammar*. 4th revised edition. London: Routledge. (With M.A.K. Halliday.)
- Forthc. *Rhetorical System and Structure Theory: the semantic system of rhetorical relations*. Book MS.

### **James Robert Martin**



Jim Martin was born in Canada in 1950. He enrolled in Glendon College at York University in 1968, wishing to pursue a career in politics or foreign affairs. However, thanks to Michael Gregory, his lecturer in English, he was soon hooked on linguistics. In his interview, Martin says that Glendon College was probably the only place in North America where a Hallidayan perspective on linguistics was taught at that time. Martin completed his BA (hons) from Glendon College and took his MA at the University of Toronto; here his interest in Tagalog began, since this language was used in a course for field methods. In 1974 Martin was awarded a scholarship to study with Halliday; this brought him to Britain, and he completed his PhD at the University of Essex. His thesis was on the development of

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storytelling by primary school children, focusing on participant identification and conjunction; the thesis lays out two tracks that have been salient in Martin's work ever since: a concern for pedagogy and an interest in cohesion. In 1977 he followed Halliday to Australia, and became first a lecturer and later professor in linguistics at the University of Sydney, where he today holds a personal chair.

Jim Martin participated, as most of the other interviewees in this book, in the Newtown Semiotic Circle in Sydney in the 1980s, where social semiotics came in contact with critical theory and European linguistic thinking. The works of Hjelmslev (1899–1965) were discussed and Hjelmslev's ideas had a deep influence on Martin (and on others in the Newtown Semiotic Circle). Hjelmslev stressed the importance of language as a stratified system. Stratification has also been a main issue in Martin's linguistic thinking.

Martin's fields of interests are functional linguistics, systemic theory and discourse semantics. One of his main contributions to SFL has been to rework Halliday's grammatical theory into a theory of discourse semantics. The lexicogrammar has the clause as focus. Martin's primary focus is on the text as the unit of meaning. With his notion of discourse semantics, Martin emphasizes the importance of cohesion in text analysis and text production; at his stratum for discourse semantics, he organizes cohesive resources according to metafunctional diversity. Martin's work on discourse semantics was first published comprehensively in his seminal *English Text: System and Structure*. With his work on context – i.e. with his stratification of context into the two strata: register and genre – he simultaneously reinterprets the notion of register, making it a term for a context stratum and not for linguistic variation (as it is understood by Halliday), and emphasizes purpose and the extrinsic functionality of language as key to understanding language use. He has also developed a linguistic appraisal theory based on SFL together with Peter White.

In 1979 Halliday organized a language in education conference in Sydney where teachers and university professors were brought together. At the conference Martin met Joan Rothery, and they started a long lasting cooperation on writing development in primary school. This was the beginning of genre pedagogy, a genre-based literacy programme that has inspired teachers all around the world. Martin has taken part in several school projects, in recent years most notably with David Rose.

Martin has, in addition, published papers on Tagalog and English, also in an educational context, and on children's picture books. In 2010–12 eight volumes of his collected papers were published by Shanghai Jiaotong University Press, and in April 2014 the Martin Centre for Applicable Linguistics at Shanghai Jiao Tong University was opened.

Below are listed the publications that Martin regards as his most important:

- 1979. *Crazy Talk: a study of the discourse of schizophrenic speakers*. New York: Plenum (Cognition and Language: a series in psycholinguistics). (With S. Rochester.)
- 1985. *Factual Writing: exploring and challenging social reality*. Geelong, Vic.: Deakin University Press (ECS806 Sociocultural Aspects of Language and Education).
- 1992. *English Text: system and structure*. Amsterdam: Benjamins.

1993. *Writing Science: literacy and discursive power*. London: Falmer (Critical perspectives on literacy and education) & Pittsburg: University of Pittsburg Press (Pittsburg Series in Composition, Literacy, and Culture). (With M.A.K. Halliday.)
- 1997/2010. *Working with Functional Grammar*. London: Arnold. 2nd edition 2010. *Deploying Functional Grammar*. Commercial Press: Beijing (The Halliday Centre Series in Applicable Linguistics). (With C.M.I.M. Matthiessen & C. Painter.)
- 2003/2007. *Working with Discourse: meaning beyond the clause*. London: Continuum. (With D. Rose.)
2005. *The Language of Evaluation: appraisal in English*. London: Palgrave. (reprinted by Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press. 2008). (With P.R.R. White.)
2008. *Genre relations: mapping culture*. London: Equinox. (With D. Rose.)
2012. *Learning to Write, Reading to Learn: genre, knowledge and pedagogy in the Sydney School*. London: Equinox. (With D. Rose.)
2013. *Reading Visual Narratives: image analysis of children's picture books*. London: Equinox. (With C. Painter & L. Unsworth.)

## **Gunther Rolf Kress**



Photo by Robert Taylor, [www.taylor-photo.co.uk](http://www.taylor-photo.co.uk)

Gunther Kress was born in Germany in 1940, and moved to Australia at the age of 16. Encountering a new language and culture as a teenager, he decided to study English literature “because it seemed most difficult and a challenge”, as he puts it. He received his first degree in Literature from the University of Newcastle in Australia, but decided to move on to Linguistics in search for more rigour in his approach to texts. After finishing a second degree in Linguistics with Michael Halliday at University College London, his plans for a PhD with Halliday were stopped when Halliday moved to Australia. Eventually Kress also returned to Australia and obtained his Doctor of Letters (D. Lit.) from the University of Newcastle. He also holds an Honorary Doctorate from the University of Technology in Sydney.

Before entering into the academic world Gunther Kress was an apprentice and worked as a furrier, and this has affected his way of thinking within an academic

setting, alternating between practical and theoretical perspectives. His first University appointment took him back to Europe to teach English at the University of Kiel. After only a year in an environment dominated by transformational grammar he moved on to work as a research fellow in applied linguistics at the University of Kent in Canterbury, at the same time commuting to London to work with Halliday. His next job was at the University of East Anglia in Norwich, where he met Robert Hodge with whom he co-authored works that proved to become significant steps on his academic path, such as *Language as ideology* (1979) and *Social semiotics* (1988). The cooperation with Hodge continued after they both moved to Australia, Kress in 1978 to take up a position in Adelaide at what is now known as the University of Southern Australia. From there Kress moved to the University of Technology in Sydney, and in his years in Sydney he played a vital part in the Newtown Semiotic Circle. Through his twelve years in Australia Kress worked in departments of Communication and Culture, and also held positions as Dean. This was also where he started his cooperation with Theo van Leeuwen on images and multimodality, which continued when they both moved to Britain, to London and Cardiff respectively.

Coming to London as Professor of Semiotics and Education at the Institute of Education in 1990 led to a certain shift in focus for Gunther Kress. His move into the field of Education at a time of profound social changes in Britain called for an integration of his previous interests in language and social power, with educational matters of vital importance for social futures on a cultural as well as an individual level. Through his years in London, Kress has worked extensively with classroom research, investigating communication and meaning making processes in the science classroom as well as in English teaching. He has worked with text book design and the move from page to screen. Also he has extended the notion of education to new fields, such as the operating theatre.

Looking back, Gunther Kress concludes that his work has been in semiotics more than in linguistics, and that an important aim for him has been to account for the whole domain of meaning. From Hallidayan linguistics he has taken the social foundations and the close connection between form and meaning. This has inspired his approach to the semiotic and social aspects of multimodality. His interest in the social consequences of semiotic change ties in with an engagement with the personal interests involved in meaning making, resulting in a strong commitment in multimodal learning as well as the politics of education.

Below are listed the publications that Kress regards as his most important:

1979. *Language as Ideology*. London & New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul. (With Bob Hodge.)
- 1982/1994. *Learning to write*. London & New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul. 2nd edition 1994. London: Routledge.
- 1984/1989. *Linguistics Processes in sociocultural practices*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
1988. *Social Semiotics*. Cambridge: Polity Press. (With Bob Hodge.)
1993. Against arbitrariness: the social production of the sign as a foundational issue in critical discourse analysis. *Discourse Society*, April 1993, 4(2): 169–91.