

Round table discussion: Systemic functional linguistics in France
15 March 2019, Université Paris Nanterre

How does SFL compare with other theoretical approaches that have developed within France? What does SFL offer compared to other theories? How does its “applied” vocation sometimes conflict with the French theoretical tradition? These are some of the issues that linguists from three different countries came together to debate in Paris in March 2019. The discussion rounded off the one-day conference on the same theme, which had begun with Miriam Taverniers’ plenary, “Exploring Halliday’s view of linguistic interfaces in SFL against a landscape of European theories”, during which she especially confronted SLF and French “enunciative” theory.

Participants of the round-table session:

David Banks, *Université de Bretagne Occidentale*, France

Shirley Carter-Thomas, *Institut Mines-Télécom*, France,

Agnès Celle, *Université Paris-Diderot*, France

Lise Fontaine, University of Cardiff, Wales

Clive Hamilton, *Université Paris-Diderot*, France

Fiona Rossette, *Université Paris Nanterre*, France

Miriam Taverniers, Ghent University, Belgium

Transcript by Fiona Rossette

Agnès Celle: Functional approaches to the study of language developed in France via Martinet in the 1970s. Martinet’s theory grew into a different functional model from that of SFL. And around the same time, Culioli started developing the “enunciative” framework. But functional and enunciative approaches are very different. And enunciative theories are not homogeneous. It depends on what trend you look at in enunciation. Bally and Benveniste are concerned with language itself, with its cognitive aspects. Enunciative theory is more connected to cognitive linguistics and to construction grammars. SFL has more connections with discourse analysis and conversation analysis (such as that developed by Kerbrat-Orecchioni) than with enunciative theory. SFL is concerned with “what we do with language” – and also with what goes on outside the language itself – that is, the context. Also, SFL is associated more with applied linguistics. Being “applicable” is part of the agenda. This is not the case for enunciativ theory. It is true that enunciativists and SFL don’t talk like they could. I don’t know if this is result of a conscious resistance, or simply a contextual resistance. I don’t think there is an institutional resistance in 2019 – it has more to do with how our institutions developed historically.

David Banks: I agree. But I would say that you have to go a lot further back. You could say that it’s all Descartes’ fault! Unlike Newton, who was an empiricist, Descartes put theory first. He formulated hypotheses, he was inductive rather than deductive. Voltaire sold Newton to the French, and finally took the empirical approach on board. But this did not extend to the field of the humanities. The starting point for Halliday was the data - he first worked on Chinese text. Later, the notion of constrained meaning was developed by Matthiessen, starting from language

and going towards cognition. There is less resistance to SFL in France in the field of ESP – ESP has to deal with data. Beginning with the data is also a premise of French discourse analysis – as exemplified by Kerbrat Orecchini’s new book on the Le Pen-Macron debate.

Shirley Carter-Thomas: I come from a functionalist background – I discovered Martinet’s theory in the 1980s before then expanding out to text linguistics – and therefore to SFL. I think there are a number of reasons why SFL hasn’t taken on in France. A lot of people quote its Anglocentricity. Everyone knows Halliday and Hasan’s “Cohesion in English” - which is precisely about *English*. A lot of people dip into this book – it’s very easy to dip into, and you can’t do that with formal linguistics. All linguistic approaches share boundaries with other disciplines. SFL is very comprehensive, and this is perhaps a problem. Some people are prepared to adapt the theory, and others not. Also, perhaps French linguists do not adhere to the social aspect of SFL. Sociolinguistics tends to have a bad press in France. I find there are some problematic aspects to SFL – for instance, the concept of congruency is not always easy to apply, just like certain categories of transitivity – starting simply with the classification of certain process types as “material”. I find that another problematic category is that of “prepositional phrases”, defined by Halliday and Matthiessen as “almost always optional augmentation”, but how can we decide what is “optional”?

Fiona Rossette: I think that in the French context, it’s worth distinguishing between linguists working on English and linguists working on French or other languages. It is true that within English departments, sociolinguistics has traditionally had a bad press, but this is not the case in general linguistics or in French linguistics departments – and French discourse analysis provides a striking example of the impetus placed on the social. The fact is that research conducted in linguistics in English departments in France has tended to be conditioned by the competitive teaching exams, the *Capes* and the *Agrégation*, which are very much grammar-based, and require candidates to analyse underlined syntactic segments fairly much irrespective of social context. English departments also tend to consider “applied” as a dirty word. Halliday and Hasan had run into similar problems in the early 1970s but for completely different reasons: they said that back then, in English-speaking countries such as Australia, grammar (and the teaching of grammar) was considered a “dirty word”. As Shirley said, SFL is all-comprehensive, it offers a “complete model” of language. This is a strong point because it provides a useful analytical toolbox, but it’s also negative, particularly in France, because it can be interpreted as pushing an over-simplified view of the complexity of language.

Miriam Taverniers: In Belgium, the situation is similar to France. SFL is also very marginal, because other models are more popular, but not necessarily “Belgian” models. Culioli carried out very careful analysis, in slow steps. When Chevalier interviewed Culioli in 2010, he asked him why he had not published more than he had; for instance, why didn’t he start a journal as Martinet did? Culioli replied that he needed time to think. For him, linguistic analysis was like a form of meditation in a way, he had a self-sufficient perspective. It is only at a high meta level that we connect with the theory. Resistance in France is not just applicable to SFL. It also applies to construction grammar and to cognitive linguistics. Other theories tend to be neglected. For instance, in terms of statistical models, France has its own model. Also, did Martinet make connections with other frameworks? The answer is no.

David Banks: Yes, and this is reflected in publications. Often even articles about English are only published in French – which can only have an isolating effect.

Lise Fontaine: Yes, but this is not a bad thing. France is the “last frontier” as it were. There is merit in transmitting knowledge in the local language. There are similar stands in publication policy being taken in Canada and in Wales. But this does mean missing opportunities to be well-read. Does this matter? Unfortunately, yes, because if you’re not read, you will not survive. Regarding SFL, one point worth underlining is that the theory has not evolved for some time now. Multimodality and appraisal theories are exceptions. But the basic theory, such as that of process types, has not evolved. Have other theories evolved a lot in the past years? For instance, has cognitive linguistics theory developed over the past twenty years? Cognitive linguistics has definitely become more popular. These days, you need cognitive and/or computational linguistics to get a job in a linguistics department. SFL is not robust enough. It doesn’t exist as a department. It exists in foreign language or applied language departments.

Miriam Taverniers: In Ghent and in Leuven, it exists in a linguistics department but it is not necessarily taken seriously.

Lise Fontaine: A valid question is whether we should expect that a theory we work on be taken up by others.

David Banks: if there is a barrier, it’s a good thing to talk over the cause of the problems.

Clive Hamilton: What’s interesting is that AILA (“*Association Internationale de Linguistique Appliquée*”) was founded in France. And at one point Culioli was at the head of it. But now it’s run from outside France. Applied linguistics programs used to be part of linguistics programs in French universities. This is now rarely the case. As applied linguistics, SFL can no longer take off in France. Presenting SFL as applied linguistics is precisely what is holding it back.

Shirley Carter-Thomas: we look at whole texts. That’s a big thing SFL offers.

Agnès Celle: yes, the text analysis is what it offers.

Shirley Carter-Thomas: but this is also what gives it a bad press.

Lise Fontaine: There is value in looking at what makes a text a text. There’s now an impetus on artificial intelligence, but I still want to understand how language works. Big data won’t help us understand how language works. SFL needs to take some aspects of enunciative theory, and develop the human, cognitive side.

Concluding remarks: what purpose can the AFLSF serve?

Lise Fontaine: The French association can fulfil a similar role to what we are trying to do in Cardiff: for instance, organise conferences and signal our open-mindedness. SFL also serves as a home for functionalists who want a community, a place to discuss and debate. Events like today’s conference, where there are SFL linguists and one or several non-SFL linguists, is very valuable. It’s important to open the dialogue. Establishing bridges between SFL and enunciative theory would be worthwhile. For instance, we could invite an enunciative linguist to give a 2-

hour workshop on enunciative linguistics for the SFL community. Alternatively, we could bring people from different theoretical backgrounds together to discuss a topic, or to address specific data, such as a specific text.

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