

Introduction to Special Issue: Systemic Functional Linguistics and the Description and Teaching of Chinese

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Dr Wang Pin and I are delighted to have the opportunity of introducing this special issue of the *International Journal of Chinese Language Teaching* on systemic functional linguistics (SFL) and the description and teaching of Chinese. When we put together the call for papers in mid 2020, we were not sure what kind of response we would receive. On the one hand the area of SFL and Chinese grammar has been experiencing something of a resurgence in recent years: with a regular series of conferences under that title in China, in which we have both had the honour of participating (Central China Normal University, 2018; East China Normal University, 2019; Shenzhen University, 2020); and an increasingly flow of publications both within China and abroad (Wang, 2020, 2021; Yang, 2021; Fang, 2022). On the other hand, although SFL has long had a major presence in the area of English language teaching, its application to Chinese language teaching has been less consistent.

A recent state of the art account of “Linguistic theories and teaching Chinese as a second language (TCSL)” (Jing-Schmidt & Peng, 2018) comments in rather general terms on the “parallel” and “instructive” influence SFL has had on the field, using its earlier label of systemic functional grammar (SFG):

In parallel to the thriving of discourse-oriented functionalism, a functional theory with European origin – Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG) in the tradition of M.A.K. Halliday... has also inspired the field of TCSL, though perhaps with less impact. Its integration of the textual, the interpersonal, and the experiential aspects of language is instructive for TCSL (McDonald 1999). (Jing-Schmidt & Peng, 2018, p. 68)

In this regard, we might add work carried out over a decade from the early 1990s by a number of scholars looking at pedagogical grammar from an SFL perspective: McDonald (1992), Hasan & Perrett (1994), Loke (1997, 2002); and then from around a decade later, a couple of complementary SFL-inspired studies on teaching Chinese, McDonald (2011) and Duff et al. (2013).

So Dr Wang Pin and I were very pleased to receive a range of proposals that included a stimulating mixture of close analyses of teaching materials and critical evaluations of the social and cultural contexts of teaching, alongside detailed descriptions of aspects of Chinese grammar and historical comparisons of technical discourse in the European and Chinese traditions, as seen in the following list of the contents of this special issue (arranged according to alphabetical order of surnames):

- Gabbianelli, Gloria. A systemic functional linguistic approach to the analysis of CFL textbooks
- Hsu, Fu-Mei & Wang, Pin. The Structure and Function of Implicit Subjects in Chinese

- Tai, Chung Pui, Kong, Tse Ching & Yung, Wan Shan. The application and effectiveness of systemic functional linguistics in the teaching of expository writing for ethnic minority middle school students in Hong Kong
- Xia, Li. Knowledge construction from the perspective of instantiation: Using the example of the representation of the “Pythagorean theorem” in ancient documents

It should be clear from the range of topics covered here that what we are offering is not a “thematic issue” in the ordinary sense, not a focused exploration of a well-defined area, but rather a demonstration of the broad scope of concerns explored within SFL, and the inspiration provided by the “extravagant grammar” first presented to the world almost 40 years ago now in M.A.K. Halliday’s *Introduction to Functional Grammar*, 1st edition 1985.

Professor Halliday, who was a long term guide and support to both of us in our continuing journey into and beyond SFL, would I am sure have been intrigued by the contents of this special issue. The foundational role of Chinese linguistics in Halliday’s career is well known, and SFL is arguably unique among contemporary linguistic theories in having been founded by a scholar whose initial interest in linguistic description was sparked by the challenges of language teaching. One of Halliday’s first major descriptive works (1956) clearly grew out of his teaching experience, at the same time as revealing the systematicity and comprehensiveness that were to be a hallmark of his later work; and his early interest in how linguistics could be made relevant to the whole gamut of issues raised by language teaching (Halliday et al., 1964) remained an abiding concern throughout his career.

To revert to first person singular for the moment, I, Edward McDonald, must acknowledge with regret the fact that this special issue was originally intended also to contain a contribution from myself, but constraints of time and the pressures of operating outside the supportive context of an academic institution have sadly made this impossible at present. My very first academic job was in teaching Chinese, my first academic publication was on teaching Chinese grammar, and in a professional career of over thirty years, the teaching and learning of Chinese grammar within the whole context of a Chinese language program, and using the guiding framework of Systemic Functional Linguistics, has been a consistent preoccupation. So I, first person singularly, was thus particularly pleased to have been invited by Dr Liu Xinghua to collaborate with Dr Wang Pin on bringing together this special issue; and we, first person plurally, are hopeful it will spark some interesting conversations in this increasingly fertile and significant field.

References

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Edward McDonald gained his BA (Hons) from Sydney University in 1988, his MA from Peking University in 1992, and his PhD from Macquarie University in 1999, with theses on the clause and verbal group grammar of modern Chinese. He has taught linguistics, Chinese language, translation, semiotics, and music at universities in Australia, China, Singapore, and New Zealand. His recent research interests include the application of systemic functional theory to a range of languages including modern Chinese and Scottish Gaelic (*Meaningful Arrangement: exploring the syntactic description of texts*, Equinox 2008); Chinese language teaching and the hybrid concept of "sinophone" (*Learning Chinese, Turning Chinese: challenges to becoming sinophone in a globalised world*, Routledge 2011); and the comparative history of European and Chinese traditions of language scholarship (*Grammar West to East: The investigation of linguistic meaning in European and Chinese traditions*, Springer 2020). He currently runs the academic editing company The Compleat Wordsmith.