

Chapter Seven Linguistic theory as metalanguage

Chomsky's theory aims to make grammar more than just language, but his model of the grammar narrows the range of what may properly be considered the object of linguistics; as R.A. Harris observes, 'it is rather easier to demonstrate what a Chomskyan grammar does *not* model than what it does' (1993:99). A grammar that focuses exclusively on structure and ignores social purpose, meaning and value cannot describe or explain natural language, and a grammar that ignores the role of the theorist's metalanguage in constructing that grammar is vulnerable to all the problems described in Chapter Four.

In Chapter Seven I look at three ways in which Halliday's theory models language: expanding the scope of linguistic theory (7.1), reconnecting language and society (7.2), and taking seriously the reflexivity of language, showing that the linguist cannot stand outside language but is obliged to make use of the resources of natural language when describing that language, including its evaluative resources. (7.3). Because Halliday's theory invites expansion (as Berry et al. observe in the festschrift introduction I have quoted from at the end of 3.3.2, above), I have referred to these three aspects of it in order to extend them and to explain how, as I see it, they make a place for evaluation in linguistic theory.

7.1 Expanding the scope of linguistic theory

The narrowness of much linguistic description, even when it purports to connect with the social, is remarked on by Singh in his introduction to a collection of articles in sociolinguistics:

I found that they threw new light on the specific phenomena they examined and on the questions they raised. And yet, they left me with a sad sense of incompleteness. In each case in selecting an event or a phenomenon for examination they had left out many more that were vital for a richer and more human explanation. ... The selection of domains and their systematic separation from the totality often leads to detailed answers to specific questions. What is regrettable, however, is the fact that every such effort seems to turn into its own kind of scientism. (1996b:3-4)

Halliday's model broadens the scope of linguistic inquiry by foregrounding motifs of opening up, expanding, and seeing things from multiple perspectives. He suggests we need to regain our respect for the power of language:

In talking of the power of language, I do not mean only its power as exploited in political contexts, but what it achieves at every institutional and personal level in human lives. What I find surprising, in this light, is the discrepancy between the potency of language and the trivial picture that is so often presented of it – not least by some of the folk who most strongly caution against its powerful effects. (1997:25)

The current preoccupation with finding a set of maximally constrained universal syntactic rules has drawn attention away from the size and complexity of language. Halliday suggests that 'How big is a language?' is a valid question (1997:6), and one answer he gives is to take a partial network of the English verbal group, with one lexical verb as point of entry, and look at the set of possibilities that arises from 'the intersection of a fairly small set of fairly simple choices' (such as finiteness, secondary tense, voice, polarity, intonation). This produces some 70 000 possible selection expressions (forms that result from the pathway through the system). Adding more choices at a further level of delicacy ('double negatives, special third person forms, ellipses, more subtle modalities and tense variants – let alone the causatives, inceptives, duratives, and other phrases construed as verbal group complexes') takes the number up into the millions. (Halliday 1995:15-16; 1996:10-13). We might compare this with Bryson's answer to this question, quoted in 2.1.1, above, which sees size in terms of number of *lexical items*. Halliday rebuilds the connection with the layperson's view of language by restoring the sense of wonder that Robinson complains Chomskyan generative linguistics lacks (1975:73), and extends it to take in the less easy to see *grammatical system*.

Halliday's vision of a language system as an indefinitely large space, in which comparatively few of the potential forms are actually instantiated, resembles Dawkins's vision of 'Biomorph Land': 'The actual animals that have ever lived on Earth are a tiny subset of the theoretical animals that *could exist*' (1986:73). Similarly, the linguistic system allows for many more choices than are actually made: meaning 'is intrinsically paradigmatic, as Saussure understood and built into his own definition of "valeur"' (Halliday and Matthiessen 1999:509). This view of language gives more weight to the paradigmatic axis than the syntagmatic and thus enormously expands the scope of the thing we have to deal with. It also enhances our understanding of meaning: the

choices that *are* made acquire meaning and value in relation to choices that are *not*. (An example of this is the meaning and value of *prescriptive* in linguistics, discussed in 3.2, above.)

There are other ways to visualize the ‘size’ of language. Halliday describes it as a system of ‘fourth order complexity’: it is at one and the same time physical, biological, social and semiotic.¹ Each of these four systems is harder to theorize than the one before it, because each contains the previous one(s), and thus at each step it becomes increasingly difficult to recognize the essential nature of the phenomenon concerned:

A biological system is a physical system with the added component of “life”; it is a living physical system. In comparable terms, a social system is a biological system with the added component of “value” ... A semiotic system, then, is a social system with the added component of “meaning”. Meaning can be thought of (and was thought of by Saussure) as just a kind of social value; but it is value in a significantly different sense – value that is construed symbolically. ... Semiotic systems are social systems where value has been further transformed into meaning. (Halliday and Matthiessen 1999:508-9)

If we take the view that the methods of investigation should be based on the nature of the object, then the ‘four orders’ picture of language makes it clear that those of the physical and biological sciences are not designed to deal with the whole of language. Including the social and semiotic elements means that the observer’s evaluations will be part of the investigation to a greater extent than they are in the ‘simpler’ sciences, and looking for the one right method will not work: we would do better to approach language from a variety of perspectives. As Halliday suggests, ‘Unless you are prepared to shift your angle you will distort the picture. You will not get an adequate picture of the text, no matter how elegant your analysis’ (2002). Shifting perspectives inevitably involves metalinguistic evaluation, making decisions about how best to see language.

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This picture of language owes a debt to Saussure: *Pris dans son tout, le langage est multiforme et hétéroclite; à cheval sur plusieurs domaines, à la fois physique, physiologique et psychique, il appartient encore au domaine individuel et au domaine social; il ne se laisse classer dans aucune catégorie des faits humains, parce qu’on ne sait comment dégager son unité* (1972 [1916]:25). ‘Taken as a whole, language has many shapes and forms. It spans many domains: being at once physical, physiological and psychological, it belongs as much to the individual as to the social domain. It does not permit us to classify it in any category of human facts, because we do not know how to tease out its unity.’ (My translation.)

A perspective neglected in the linguistics of recent years is the historical. Halliday identifies three parallel semiotic histories: the *phylogenetic* (evolution of language in the species), the *ontogenetic* (development of language in the individual), and the *logogenetic* (unfolding of language in the text); ‘three major processes of **semohistory**, by which meanings are continually created, transmitted, recreated, extended and changed’ (Halliday and Matthiessen 1999:17-18; Halliday and Martin 1993; Halliday 1995;1997). A synchronic perspective on language downplays or ignores change and so of course downplays or ignores the *values* that bring about that change. Phylogenetically, language evolves because it is a probabilistic system: each instance, that is, every piece of language that is actually spoken, or written, nudges the probabilities of the system, so that the system itself may change in the course of time in the direction of the valued instances. Ontogenetically, language develops because ‘learning to mean’ is of value to the child; for example, in obtaining goods and services, controlling the behaviour of others, building interpersonal relationships, and so on (Halliday 1975). Logogenetically, a text unfolds with a purpose; for example, movement in a scientific text will be away from verbal processes towards nominalisation (Halliday 1988b), a pattern of grammar that is valued for the way it sums up preceding information and moves the argument forward; in other words, it is valued because it is ‘functional in its context’ (Halliday 1988b:68).

The ‘incompleteness’ Singh describes results not only from taking a simplistic view of language but also from exaggerating dichotomies. Roy Harris has criticised orthodox linguistics for dwelling on ‘langue vs. parole, competence vs. performance, system vs. use, synchronic vs. diachronic, and linguistic community vs. individual speaker’ (1997:235) and privileging a single alternative in each case – generally the one, I would suggest, which is less likely to entangle the linguist in considerations of the speaker’s, and particularly the linguist’s, values. The generativist’s view is that the distinction between *competence* and *performance* ‘concentrates the mind’ (Burton-Roberts and Carr 1999:372), but Halliday’s opinion is that forcing these apart ‘as if they belonged to different orders of reality ... did considerable harm to linguistics’ (1997:14). It results in what Hasan calls ‘polarized one-sided vignettes’ (1999:52).

The *synchronic/diachronic* split is also problematic. Halliday and Martin observe that ‘Lacking a dynamic perspective, it would be impossible for us to appreciate how system can change; at the same time, lacking a synoptic perspective it would be impossible to appreciate the social fact of communities founded on the relatively unconscious intersubjective resources we construe as

semiotic systems' (1993:49), and Hutton, discussing the role of the diachronic perspective in many debates around language values, points out that 'in forgetting etymology we have forgotten why it was so important' (1998:198). (I would suggest that the reason we have forgotten is that anti-prescriptivists have over-emphasized the foolishness of 'folk' etymologies that are unfortunately typical of the 'curiosity' literature.) As a remedy for the problems the 'splitting' approach causes, Harris suggests neither a swing to the opposite pole nor 'an insistence that both elements of the dichotomy are equally important', but a re-integration of the two (1997:235-6), and Halliday builds this into his theory by treating dichotomies as complementarities, which makes for more coherent theorizing and gets back in touch with the layperson's values.

The most unprofitable split in linguistic theory is that between syntax and semantics. To put it in the simplest possible terms: 'Words come out of a head, not out of a hat'.² Heads make meaning; they do not just churn out syntax. SFG repeats the complementary rather than dichotomizing approach at clause level in the grammar: syntax and semantics work together, not separately, and lexis and grammar are considered to be two perspectives on the same phenomenon. Instead of saying a feature is *either* this *or* that, Halliday claims 'the grammar wants to have it both ways: not only does the system as a whole accommodate both perspectives but many processes are construed as a tension between the two' (1997:8). Some specific complementarities Halliday emphasizes are *aspect – tense* ('Is time a linear flow, out of past through present into future, or is it an emerging movement between the virtual and the actual? ... it cannot be both, yet the grammar insists it is, in some mixture or other according to the language'; Halliday 1997:8), and *transitivity – ergativity* ('agency is such a complex aspect of human experience that the grammar does not delineate it by a single stroke'; Halliday and Matthiessen 1999:559; also Halliday 1994a:161-175; Davidse, 1992b). The *count – mass* complementarity is another, which Halliday exploits in his own language use. For example, the word *complementarity* itself shifts between mass and count in *areas of indeterminacy and complementarity* and *Process and Medium as a complementarity* (Halliday and Matthiessen 1999:137;158).

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This remark is attributed to 'Professor Stoll' by J. Thompson in an article entitled 'Some Modern Misconceptions about Language', 1999, *The English Academy Review* 16:30.

There is of course a price to pay for the added scope that this vision of language gives us. One cost is that because ‘all phenomena are construed as being agnate to other phenomena – no categories are set up in terms of themselves alone’ we have to accept that there will never be a final, definitive picture: ‘All grammatical description is the product of compromise’ (Halliday 1997:10). This is difficult to accept for those who crave final answers. The separating approach (as mentioned in 5.2, above) holds out the hope of producing an account of language that is elegant, explicit and complete, while it is generally feared that theories dealing with the whole of language in its social context will be messy, vague and incomplete. This is indeed a danger: in linguistics there is always the risk of ‘lapsing into informal explication de texte’ or getting ‘bogged down in commonsense chat about social context’ (Martin 2000b:233;236n). Halliday insists, however, that ‘the functional aspects of language are not only just as important but also – and this is the critical thing – just as capable of being illuminated by a careful and systematic inquiry as the formal’ (1994b). This has to be true also of the most awkward of the ‘messy’ bits, the element of *value*, although the most recent attempt within SFL to deal with it, Appraisal theory, opens ‘a virtual Pandora’s box’, as Martin has put it (2000a:175). However, what matters is to put all the bits of language together again, no matter how daunting the task. In the next section I discuss the way the two most important ‘bits’ are put together in Halliday’s theory.

7.2 Linking system and use: the concept of the *metafunction*

Halliday’s view of language differs from that of orthodox linguistics in seeing system and use – essentially, language and society – not as two separate phenomena but one, as his analogy of climate and weather makes clear (discussed in 5.4, above); a view easy to acknowledge but difficult to build into theory in such a way that it can be applied in analysis of language. This is what the concept of the *metafunction* is designed to do. I have described this concept in some detail in the following, because it is basic to my understanding of how linguists might come to recognize value in language and evaluation in metalanguage.

In Halliday’s view, language is non-autonomous; it ‘has evolved as part and parcel of human history, not as some mysterious epiphenomenon coming into being on its own’ (1997:10). There is no language without a social context of use, and ‘it is the uses of language that, over tens of thousands of generations, have shaped the system’ (1994a:xiii). As Geoffrey Thompson puts it, ‘the basic assumption is that the structural configuration means something – it reflects, however

marginally, imperfectly or out-of-date conventionally, the language user's view' (personal communication, September 2002). Many theories of language admit the importance of social context, but it remains a setting for language rather than a part of it. Putting it baldly, Halliday observes that 'Language and society haven't really met yet, but I would like to think that systemic-functional linguistics could have something to say about that' (in interview with Thibault, 1987:623).

One of the things it has to say is that if we talk about language in terms of metafunctions we can talk about language and society 'in one breath', as it were. The metafunction is 'a way of conceptualising the understanding that 'language is a metaphor for social action: the forms of the language itself give us a metaphoric representation of the forms of social action' (Halliday, in Thibault 1987:613). This makes it possible to look very closely at the grammar while at the same time keeping the social context in view, and not, as usually happens, losing sight of the one while looking at the other. As Hasan points out, 'Much of the complexity of describing language lies in maintaining both the social and the semiotic perspectives simultaneously, something that the systemic functional linguists ideally attempt to do' (1999:52-3).

The term *metafunction* refers to three kinds of meaning which run through the whole of language (Halliday 1994a:35): the *ideational* (divided into *experiential* and *logical* components),³ the *interpersonal*, and the *textual* (the realizations in the grammar of the contextual variables of *field*, *tenor* and *mode* respectively). They can be concisely characterized as: '**ideational** (construing social action), **interpersonal** (enacting social relation), and **textual** (creating semiotic contact)' (Hasan 1999:62); or conceptualised from the point of view of the speaker 'as observer of life's experience, as intruder into other people's behaviour, and as maker of texts in situations' (Gregory 1987:96). As with many of Halliday's theoretical concepts, this one builds on an earlier grammarian's insight, in this case Pike's three kinds of grammatical resource: *particle* (ideational – building blocks), *field* (interpersonal – prosodic) and *wave* (textual – periodicity) (De Beaugrande 1991:238). All three are present in all instances of language: 'a clause is made up of three distinct structures combined into one' (Halliday 1994a:179). When analysing a text we

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The *logical* metafunction works differently from the other three. Its pattern is iterative rather than configurational, and it is inter- rather than intra- clausal, its function being to enable the speaker/writer to go on adding elements, cumulatively, so that the logical connections between clauses are made evident (Matthiessen and Halliday 1997:15).

may privilege one over the others, perhaps because for the particular purpose it seems the most interesting, or because of time and space constraints, but we always keep in mind that this is a partial picture and we will eventually have to bring in the other two perspectives to complete it.

The inclusion of the interpersonal dimension as a function of the *grammar* (rather than just as social background, or pragmatics) is perhaps the most innovative facet of Halliday's grammar. It means that, no matter how 'factual' a text may seem to be, the interpersonal meaning does not disappear, because 'the speaker is using language as the means of his own intrusion into the speech event: the expression of his comments, his attitudes and evaluations, and also of the relationship that he sets up between himself and the listener' (Halliday 1973b:106). The illusion that a 'factual' text is impersonal and impartial results from the orthodox linguist's (and the traditional grammarian's) habitual concentration on the propositional meanings of language, from our lack of practice in identifying the interpersonal grammar, and from the difficulty we experience in identifying and systematizing the evaluative features.

A seminal example of applying the metafunctional view of grammar is Halliday's analysis (1973b) of William Golding's visionary narrative *The Inheritors* (1955). He describes the way Golding uses transitivity patterns to contrast the largely ineffectual activity of a Neanderthal family ('the people') with the control over the environment displayed by a Cro-Magnon tribe (the 'new people', the 'inheritors'), showing that 'the syntactic categories are *per se* the realizations of semantic options' (1973b:134). The concept of *realization* is the linguist's more technical formulation of what the literary critic would describe as 'the unity of form and meaning'. Halliday and Matthiessen explain that there is 'no temporal or causal ordering between the strata' and therefore 'it makes no sense to ask which comes first or which causes which'; in SFG terms, 'the relationship is an intensive one, not a causal circumstantial one' (1999:25), because 'A semiotic system is not some kind of outer garment which may either reveal or conceal what is beneath' (1999:447). It is this concept of *realization* that drives the metafunction: the idea that the social meanings/functions *realize* and *are realized by* the grammar.

Golding's picture of the way language may have arisen in primitive man supports the metafunctional view of language. It represents in intuitive form what the linguist tries to capture in explicit technical language, and it may have confirmed Halliday's belief in the essential

validity of his concept: an uncommon example of a linguist learning from a work of literature.⁴ In my opinion, the linguist's work, far from being inimical to aesthetic appreciation – as Hasan says, there is a suspicion that 'such study would in some ill-defined way threaten or devalue the work of literature itself' (1989:vii) – can enhance the value of a literary work by inquiring more closely into the resources of the grammar that make it valuable, and of course at the same time improve the linguist's understanding – it is not only for the 'Hamlet factor' (described in 5.4, above) that the linguist should pay attention to literary texts.

Halliday (1973b) examines Golding's narrative primarily from the point of view of the experiential metafunction, focusing on transitivity. I believe, however, that it is possible to see in Golding's vision of the Neanderthals' language a representation of all three strands of meaning, which explains why it is such a convincing picture of how language might have begun. A scene in *The Inheritors* that I would analyse in this way is the one where Lok is obliged to become leader of, and hence speaker for, the people after the death of Mal (1955:94-96). The **experiential** metafunction is realized by what the people think of as 'pictures': *I have a picture; I do not see this picture*. To put the pictures together so that the others can see the order and connections he sees, Lok also needs the resources that realize the **textual** and **logical** functions: *The pictures went out of his head for a while. There were so many things to be said. He wished he could ask Mal what it was that joined a picture to a picture so that the last of many came out of the first*. The difficulty of getting **interpersonal** meanings right becomes evident where, under the pressure of new responsibility and in the glare of the limelight, the usually garrulous Lok finds words fail him: *He was at the head of the procession not at the back of it, and every picture went right out of his head*. The effect of a change in tenor on the interpersonal exchange is captured at the point where the others begin to respond to his attempts to explain: *Now Lok found*

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I have mentioned above (7.1) Robinson's wholesale dismissal of linguists. Prominent among his complaints is their alleged ignorance of literature: 'literary critics are often exhorted to learn from linguists; but I never hear linguists told to learn from critics' (1975:168); 'Judgement in literature is the only guarantee I can think of of judgement in general about language. ... Chomsky has never to my knowledge betrayed the slightest public interest in imaginative literature' (1975:180). At the time of writing *The New Grammarians' Funeral* (1975), Robinson had read the contemporary works of many linguists apart from Chomsky – Hockett, *The State of the Art* (1968); Berlin and Kay, *Basic Colour Terms* (1969); Lyons, *Chomsky*, (1970); Hymes (as editor of the journal *Language in Society* 1972); and Roger Fowler, *Understanding Language* (1974) – but seems unfortunately to have missed Halliday (1973b).

how easy it was to speak words to others who would heed them. There need not even be a picture with the words. This is a vivid representation of what the interpersonal strand of meaning is like: it is not particulate like the experiential strand, but nebulous and pervasive. It is easy for a speaker to produce, particularly when the tenor of the exchange is friendly (as Lok discovers), but very difficult for the linguist to describe.

Golding's vision of the problems experienced by a creature beginning to become human through language is admirably comprehensive. To become articulate, Lok must do several things: he must find a 'picture' to construe his experience of the new phenomenon (the sudden appearance of the new people), he must reason logically about it and draw conclusions from it, and he must present his message as authoritative speaker, in a fashion that the group will attend to. Language is not just a matter of 'reflecting' what we see and experience. Without the other strands of meaning – the textual, which allows us to string 'pictures' together in orderly sequence, combining given and new information in easily graspable patterns the listener can follow; the logical, which shows how one picture leads to another; and the interpersonal, which enables us to get others to listen to us and share our views, and do what we want them to do – it does not work. Pictures go out of Lok's head not just because he has – to use commonsense metalanguage – 'run out of words' to describe his experience but because he does not have a command of the resources that would enable him to structure the many 'pictures' as a coherent message, to add one 'picture' to the next in a way that will make others grasp his patterns of reasoning, and to find the right 'tone' to suit his new position as leader. Once he has this command, sophisticated combinations of the metafunctions will follow; so that he will be able to, in Halliday's words, 'put any spin on any topic at any discursive moment' (2002).

I note that Golding's picture of early language does not fail to include primitive metalinguistic evaluation: *That is a good picture*, when Lok's words evoke a positive response, and *I do not see this picture*, when they do not make sense to the others. Right from the beginnings of language (ontogenetically and presumably also phylogenetically) there are valued forms that people will pay attention to and valueless forms that gain the speaker no respect. Matthiessen and Nesbitt, for instance, note a mother's negative evaluation of 'her daughter's previous move in their dialogue': *Jessica, don't whinge!* (1996:52). Early experience of language includes large quantities of feedback from others on how they prefer you to do it, and part of one's own language learning is therefore learning to evaluate others' language oneself. It is a mistake

(stemming from inadequate or biased observation) to believe that language prescription is an artificially imposed language behaviour. Jessica's mother's assessment is, as Matthiessen and Nesbitt point out, a 'folk or commonsense theory' (1996:52). If our expert theory is a development out of this, as it must be if it has to use the same resources as natural language, then it is naive to think that this element might eventually disappear, or that its demise might be hastened by linguists.

Linguistics attempts to put into explicit technical language what it means to know the kinds of things an author like Golding knows intuitively about language. The really difficult task is to do this and yet not treat language as an autonomous object. Robinson does not hesitate to tell linguists what they must do to achieve this goal: 'Perhaps linguistics could be a discipline; perhaps it could grant us something like that new sight of the object of study which ... is the end of philosophy: but it could only do so by imitating literary criticism in holding the uses of language steadily in judgement' (1975:182). However, he offers no practical suggestions as to how this might be done. What 'imitating literary criticism' is likely to produce is only more literary criticism, not a powerful new vision of language. However, the match between what Robinson demands and what a metafunctional analysis sets out to achieve is striking. Halliday's metafunctions could well be described as an attempt at 'holding the uses of language steadily in judgement'. Yet the concept is easily misunderstood. The following is a brief discussion of what the metafunction is and is not, as I understand it. It is important not to be confused about it, because if it is treated as just another piece of linguist's technicality of the kind that disconnects the analyst from the social reality of language (like *competence/performance*), rather than making new connections, then it will not help us move towards a better understanding of value.

- (i) It is not something we 'discover' in language.

The metafunction is a *theoretical* rather than a *descriptive* category, as explained by Matthiessen and Halliday:

the basic concepts (things like stratum and metafunction, realization, instantiation, and delicacy and rank) are not empirically verifiable; they form an abstract framework, or model, set up as a means of exploring and explaining. Such a model is all the time being refined and elaborated in use.

By contrast with these general theoretical categories, the descriptive categories are set up by reference to specific features of given languages, and hence in principle are verifiable. That is to say, they can be characterized in ways which make it possible to decide whether or not something is an instance, and whether or not some category is present in the system at all. (1997:23)

Hasan explains that theoretical constructs ‘are not immanent categories (cf. Firth 1957)’; they do not have ‘a reality outside a descriptive framework’ (1996:107) She is referring here to Firth’s statement that the ‘constructs or schemata of linguistics ... are neither immanent nor transcendent, but just language turned back on itself’ (1957:190). Confusion can result from thinking that the metafunctions are part of the object of inquiry when they are more accurately part of the tool. However, because in linguistics the object *language* and the tool *metalanguage* are essentially the same, it is difficult to keep descriptive and theoretical categories apart. Robinson makes it sound easier than it is: ‘“Deep structure” can be a useful grammatical tool, part of a way of seeing clearly the syntactic structure of sentences. One has to object seriously, though, if the grammarian forgets that “deep structure” is an instrument he has created’ (1975:55).

(ii) It is not a hypothesis to be tested or falsified.

The desire to be ‘scientific’ prompts theorists to push the metafunctional concept in the direction of something more fixed and solid. Butler, for example, (in the argument referred to in 5.3.2, above) expresses doubts about the ‘functional components hypothesis’. He says that although it is ‘a useful pedagogical and practical convenience’, it ‘rests on very dubious foundations’ (1989:29). He suggests that Halliday and Fawcett are covertly admitting to the dubiousness of this hypothesis when they say that ‘The notion of metafunctions is ... most valuable in practice as an EXPOSITORY aid – both for oneself, in teaching students, and in introducing students to systemic theory’ (Halliday and Fawcett 1987:7). But this reference to their expository value should not be read as making excuses for the metafunctions: they are not posited as entities whose actual existence in language the theorist is called on to prove or disprove. They are simply a way of talking about language: a ‘frame of reference’ (Halliday 1997:4) or ‘something to think with’ (Halliday 2000:222). We can evaluate the concept and see how far it helps in solving problems, ‘but we cannot test it for being right or wrong’ (Halliday 1996:19).

As a counter-argument to Butler's, Gregory suggests that 'we ought to be cautious about attempting to PROVE the existence of the metafunctions ... Rather we should continue to USE them and see what they can do for us (1987:104). They should be tested in the second sense of *test* (mentioned in 5.3.4, above), the sense of 'try out, to ascertain the worth of'. In the end it is the extent to which they permit us to 'say sensible and useful things about any text' (Halliday 1994a:xv) that proves their worth. Among other things, by re-including the interpersonal dimension, they might enable us to say sensible and useful things about value and evaluation.

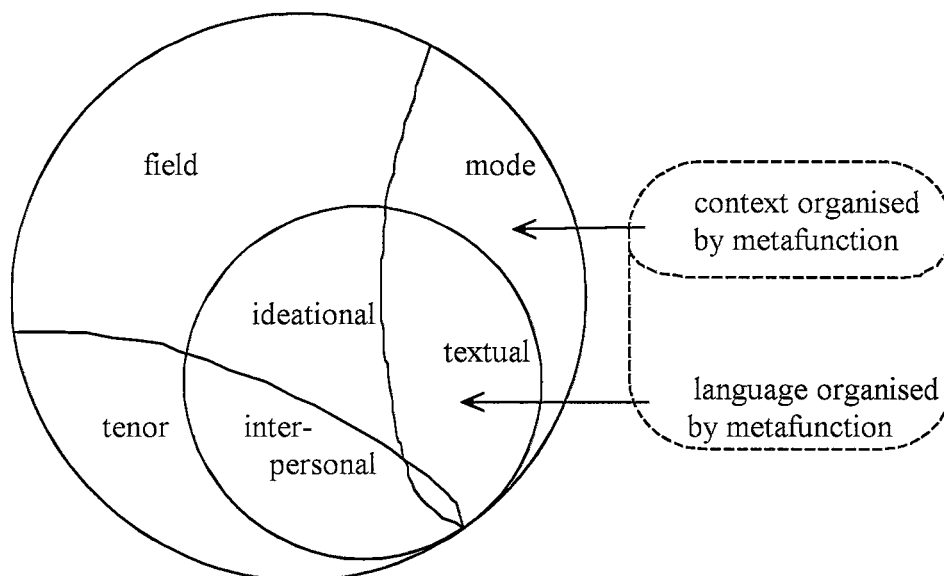
(iii) It does not imply that there is a simple one-to-one correspondence between social functions and linguistic features.

It is a misconception that the metafunction is intended to show only simple, unarguable one-to-one correspondences between form and function. This is the notion that each of the contextual variables (*field*, *tenor* and *mode*) determines choices in a particular metafunction (*ideational*, *interpersonal* and *textual* respectively), referred to by Hasan (1995) as the 'context metafunction hook-up hypothesis' (Thompson 1998:102). Thompson observes that the hook-up hypothesis tends to 'achieve elegance at the expense of explanatory adequacy' (1998:103). It is a simple piece of metalanguage that is satisfyingly neat, as FIGURE 7.2 shows, but has the disadvantage of accounting for only a limited amount of data. These correspondences are easy to demonstrate in simple texts (for example, a command, which is a *tenor* function, being realized by the imperative mood, which is an *interpersonal* function), but in more complex texts the task is more difficult. Thompson notes that 'the essential validity of the three-parameter view of context of situation does not necessarily entail accepting the hook-up hypothesis in its stronger forms' (1998:104-5). He suggests instead what he calls the 'configurational match-up hypothesis (1998:121-2), the idea that we recognize certain patterns (configurations) of social function as realizing and being realized by certain patterns in language. The use of the terms *stronger* and *weaker* should not suggest that the latter is a poorer version; it is in fact more complex and subtle. The two versions are suitable for different purposes: the 'hook-up' view for introductory texts and simple educational applications, and the configurational one for discourse analysis specialists.

The configurational idea is more complex, untidy, and difficult to manage, but able to account for more. Gregory suggests that 'a non-exact match between the register categories and lexico-

grammatical clusters of systems need not hamper the research; it will just make it a little more, perhaps necessarily, complex' and that the metafunctions will not be 'empirically less well-established if one component of the semantics (functional tenor) is variably hospitable in its relation to lexico-grammatical systems; mismatches of various kinds are rather what we should expect' (1987:103).

FIGURE 7.2 Contextual variables and metafunctions (Thompson 1998:104, redrawn)



Kies (1992), a study of *Nineteen eighty-four*, illustrates some of these 'mismatches'. Orwell's *field* – the powerlessness of the individual under a totalitarian government – is realized through a surprising variety of metafunctional resources. Kies identifies fourteen devices for suppressing agency throughout the novel. Not all are experiential: some are interpersonal, such as shifts in modality, and some are marked textual arrangements, such as cleft sentences of various kinds. All work together to form a pattern that produces the impression of powerlessness. Another example would be the case of a 'factual' text. Coulthard observes that 'One of the things that factual texts do is to **aver**, that is, to "assert that something is the case"' (1994b:5). Here the contextual variable is *tenor* – the relationship between the writer/speaker and reader/hearer, construed as persuader and persuadee. In this kind of text we may not find features that we could classify as dedicated interpersonal grammar. We could, however, point out a pattern of language that is associated with the social function of 'averring': a preponderance of unmodalized declaratives, attributive and identifying processes, and nominalizations. The patterns are hard to describe because they are statistical and probabalistic: a higher than usual count of these features

is what enables us to recognize the 'factual' register intuitively. Thompson's configurational view of the correspondences between context and metafunction helps us to recognize the hidden evaluative element.

(iv) It is a tool, not a final answer.

Another misconception is that the metafunctional concept can be clarified and refined to a point where it needs no more improvement. Butler says he thinks that 'the categories of field, tenor and mode need much clearer definition before we can justifiably use them in setting up and testing hypotheses' (1989:29). But the aim is to find a balance between a rigid definition of theoretical categories, which obliges the analyst to shape the data to fit them, and a vague one, which means that they fit any data, but in doing so lose credibility. The strength of the metafunction lies in its flexibility, which allows it to be adapted for specific purposes while retaining its 'essential validity' (Thompson 1998:104).

An example of what some might consider a lack of firm definition is the unsettled status of the logical metafunction. Martin shows how the metafunctions can be grouped in various ways, depending on the perspective from which they are being viewed: semiotic-functional ('from above'), paradigmatic ('from their own level') or syntagmatic ('from below') perspective (1992:12-21). It is possible to discuss the logical metafunction as adjunct to any of the other three: it can construe the logical connections of experience; it can organise the discourse into a coherent message through inter-clausal links; and it can, perhaps most importantly, add strength to an argument by using logical connectors to 'assume a common ground between reader and writer in terms of what is expected or unexpected at any given point in the discourse' (Thompson and Hunston 2000:9). This peripatetic status makes the concept usable in a variety of ways, to suit the purposes of the analyst. It is of course particularly valuable in analysing the evaluative stance in persuasive writing. To make good use of the metafunctional model requires tolerance of a certain amount of ambiguity and untidiness; as Gregory suggests, we should not 'make the mistake of over-neatness' (1987:104). Theoretical concepts, as Matthiessen and Halliday point out, are 'all the time being refined and elaborated in use' (1997:23). We should not expect them to reach a stage where they are at last perfect and complete and can stop evolving.

(v) It may be thought of as a built-in critique.

Hymes has expressed the need for a more socially aware kind of linguistics, and he blames the Chomskyan program for ‘the disarming of linguistics with regard to weapons with which to address serious problems of social life’ (1983:183). One weapon he recommends is ‘critique’: ‘use of linguistics must include a critique of linguistics’ (1983:183 quoted in Chapter One). It may be that he meant only that linguists within the discipline should write critical commentaries on its failings, but his wording suggests he meant more: that rather than being addressed from the sidelines criticism must be *contained within our practice of linguistics*. Against the background of autonomous linguistics, the metafunction can be seen as a kind of ‘critique in use’, sparing us some of the obligation to keep re-examining our methods and assumptions. Critique is thus transmuted into working method. It is a built-in safeguard against some of our most easily committed and most damaging errors, a continual reminder that we cannot talk sensibly about language without seeing it as a social process.

7.3 Re-categorizing linguistic theory

I have discussed in the previous sections, (7.1 and 7.2), two ways in which Halliday’s theory differs from current orthodox linguistic theory. By taking multiple perspectives, it is able to account for more aspects of language, and by talking in terms of metafunctions it is able to represent language as social semiotic rather than autonomous object. These theoretical approaches move in the direction of a complete and unified picture of language, which must of necessity include a re-assessment of the value of language and of the basic social function of evaluation.

In this section I discuss what I consider to be the most important way Halliday’s theory differs (as I observed in Chapter One, agreeing with Davidse, 1996): *it takes the reflexivity of language seriously*. Roy Harris states that ‘orthodox linguistics and philosophy have marginalized the reflexivity of language’ and that ‘No form of general linguistic theorizing which does not take this fact as its primum mobile can in the end make sense’ (1997:258). Because current orthodox linguistic theory proceeds from the basic assumption that the analyst is somehow outside language, to take reflexivity seriously requires a radical re-categorization of theory, standing orthodox theory on its head and reversing the most basic of its dictums. As in my discussion of

the metafunctions in 7.2, above, I have found it necessary to describe this facet of Halliday's theory in detail before moving on to my tentative extension of it.

Halliday has remarked that 'it is the demands of practice – of our own praxis and practice that we engage in with various forms of application – not the philosophers' models of how science should be done, that are important' (1994b). Nevertheless, a clear idea of 'how linguistic science should be done' must underlie the praxis if it is to have any validity, and many of his essays (1988a; 1992; 1996; 1997) are in essence meditations on just this subject. We need to proceed in the knowledge that we are suiting our theory to the data rather than fighting to make of that data something it is not in order to fit a preconceived notion of theory, and Halliday makes radical suggestions as to how this might be done. His rethinking of theory obviates the need to imitate either the sciences (as in Chomsky's 'pretend that we're doing elementary particle physics', Huybregts and van Riemsdijk 1982:30) or the humanities (as in Robinson's suggestion that it should 'imitat[e] literary criticism', 1975:182). His *Linguistics as metaphor* (1997) takes a fresh look at the nature of the data and considers what it implies for the nature of linguistic theory. In the 1996 paper, *On grammar and grammatics*, he observes that

Most of us are familiar with the feeling that there must be something odd about linguistics. ... The problem seems to arise from something like the following. All systematic knowledge takes the form of "language about" some phenomenon; but whereas the natural sciences are language about nature, and the social sciences are language about society, linguistics is language about language – "language turned back on itself", in Firth's often quoted formulation. So, leaving aside the moral indignation some people seem to feel, as if linguistics was a form of intellectual incest, there is a real problem involved in drawing the boundary: where does language end and linguistics begin? (1996:1)

This phenomenon has of course been much remarked on. Bolinger, for instance, observes that the linguist 'shares in the highest degree the handicap of all science which is expressed in the title of this essay [*Fire in a wooden stove*] and is variously likened to a physician's healing himself, to repairing a boat while remaining afloat in it, and to lifting oneself by one's own bootstraps' (1980:380). A proliferation of metaphor is one way out when trying to convey such a complex concept. Halliday's approach differs in that it attempts to put in non-metaphorical terms what is entailed in the inevitable self-reflexivity of linguistics. He explores the idea that, because 'linguistics is theory about the making of meaning', we may find that 'a linguistic theory shares, or mimics, some of the semogenic properties of language itself' (1997:3). It is itself a metaphor:

The grammatics thus retains a mimetic character: it explains the grammar by mimicking its crucial properties; The grammatics is parasitic on the grammar ...The grammatics evolves (or rather one should say the grammatics “is evolved”, to suggest that it is a partially designed system) as a metaphoric transformation of the grammar itself. ... a grammar about a grammar has the distinctive metaphoric property of being a theory about itself (1996:20;32).

In the 1997 paper he points out five features that give language its semogenic (i.e. ‘meaning-making’) power, and suggests that a linguistic theory might exhibit the same features. By implication, a theory lacking these features will lack this power: it will not be able to construe its object, language, in any meaningful way. The following is my understanding (a mixture of summary and personal interpretation) of this article, taking each feature first as it applies to language and second as it applies by extension to metalanguage. It is an attempt to put together in one place what seem to me its essential themes. If Halliday, as he says, found these ‘difficult to formulate’, I in turn have found them difficult to assimilate. Yet I do not think this difficulty has to do with the intricacy of Halliday’s writing style, nor with the difficulty of the ideas themselves. The basic idea – *as language is, so linguistic theory must also be* – is self-evident when grasped; it is its radical departure from currently accepted views of the nature of linguistic theory that makes it difficult. (Page numbers in this section refer to the 1997 paper unless otherwise specified.)

Halliday’s idea is that some of the features that give language its power to mean will also be those that can give a theory explanatory power, because a theory is itself a semiotic system. This will be particularly true of a linguistic theory, because of its closeness to its subject matter. He does not suggest that all the features of language must inevitably appear in metalanguage but identifies five that are significant, giving them five headings: ‘language is **comprehensive, extravagant, indeterminate, non-autonomous** and **variable**’. These he considers to be ‘really critical as the source of grammatical energy: features from which a language derives its semogenic power’ (5). They are the features of language that a formal theory – being restrictive, parsimonious, determinate, autonomous and uniform – cannot easily represent. By implication, he is saying that to be powerful a linguistic theory must be all that formal theory is not.

Language is *comprehensive*, Halliday says, because ‘it construes **all** of our experience, it enacts **all** of our interpersonal processes’ (6). In other words, language reflects/creates everything we experience, and it suits/produces the tenor of every interaction. He seems here to be saying not

only that language does these things but also that it is virtually the only means we have of doing them: that it has the resources to carry out all the human social functions and also that we can hardly imagine them being carried out other than through language (gesture being a more rudimentary means and hardly distinct from animal performance of these functions). Even at the very early stage of protolanguage 'children's personal engagements are mediated, and modulated, through language' (6). Another way to understand the comprehensiveness of language is simply by considering the size of the system, as detailed in (7.1).

The implication for linguistic theory is that it can and should construe **all** of language. It does this by taking as many different angles on it as possible, and by giving a picture not only of its size but also of its unity. It will lack semogenic power if it confines itself to construing only limited discrete bits, seen from one limited perspective, because this will 'create a very impoverished picture' (19) and make many things, such as the way the child learns language, unexplainable; in other words, our metalanguage will lack the resources to construe them.

Next, language is *extravagant*: it 'can afford to generate surplus power' (7). This is obvious to any speaker or writer: there are innumerable many different ways to construe experience. Lay metalanguage construes this as 'putting ideas in different words', whereas SFL theory would prefer to suggest that the different words and phrasing are in effect different meanings – something any struggling writer knows. The choice is not arbitrary, and complete synonymy is rare. However, this is not all Halliday has in mind; he is talking here about the way language likes to 'have things both ways' (8), its 'fondness for complementarities' (7). Languages offer alternative ways of seeing things; the aspect/tense and transitive/ergative ways of construing processes are two ways that it does this. In some cases these are distinct alternatives, but often 'processes are construed as a tension between the two', which he calls the 'principle of contradictory construal' (8). He mentions also the construal of entities, for example the complementarity of count/mass, and refers briefly to other forms of 'semiotic extravagance': redundancy 'in its technical, information theory sense' and metaphor (8-9). Space does not allow further elaboration here: the point he makes is that although there are 'leftover bits' in language – the bits that seem to serve no real purpose – the 'principle of contradictory construal is intrinsically a productive one' (8).

This has implications for linguistic theory in that it takes a constructive view of alternative ways of theorizing: extra ways of seeing may not be just unneeded baggage, because ‘The extravagance of modelling the same domain of experience in more than one way leads to a richer and more life-supporting account’ (8). We should not discard ways of theorizing that do not fit with our preferred construal, because the ‘extra bits’ may well turn out to enrich the picture. Like language, linguistic theory should ‘construe experience in terms of complementarities: models deriving from alternative perspectives which contradict each other and yet are both “true”’ (20). Linguistics recently has been too concerned to find the ‘one true path’ rather than make use of the contributions of a range of theorists, including those of past ages. Halliday suggests that extravagance in theory is a ‘positive feature’: it allows us to choose ‘the best tool for the job’ (20), giving us as it were a full toolkit rather than obliging us to tackle all the chores equipped with only a screwdriver.

The *indeterminate* nature of language is a related concept, perhaps a sub-category, taking the idea of extravagance to a further level of delicacy (from broad systems to more specific instantiations). Under this heading, Halliday talks about ordinary ambiguity, in which there are two possible interpretations and we choose one or the other, and particularly about the more interesting cases, the overlaps, borderline cases and blends, in which ‘the listener does not find it necessary to choose’ (9). He mentions in particular the modals. (I comment on the ambiguity of *must* in particular in 8.1, below.) He says ‘the grammar is constantly juggling with conflicting categorizations’ (9). It adopts a kind of ‘trinocular vision’, a ‘threefold perspective’ on the phenomena: from above, ‘according to their significance in some higher order construct’; from below, ‘by reference to how they appear and become manifest’; and from round about, ‘as being agnate to other phenomena – no categories are set up in terms of themselves alone’ (9-10).

The implication for linguistic theory is that, as with language, the ‘conflicting categorizations’ make it ‘highly elastic and receptive to new meanings’ (9), and theorizing from all three perspectives (above – semantic perspective; below – morphological and phonological perspective; round about – lexicogrammatical perspective) gives us a broader vision. It is not a case of one or the other perspective being the ‘true’ one: the categories are ‘inescapably the product of compromise’ (21). To represent this indeterminacy the theory has to work with systems, stratification, and probability (21-2).

Halliday takes it as self-evident that language is *non-autonomous*. It is 'bound up with all the other aspects of the human condition' and is 'the outcome of the ongoing dialectic between the material and the semiotic in human life' (10).

The implication for theory is that this would not need pointing out had formal linguistics not lost sight of these connections and tried to treat language as consisting of structures that exist for their own sake. Linguistic theory cannot be 'independent of a general theory of meaning' (22), nor can it be independent of other kinds of human history, or independent of theories of the nature and evolution of the brain. It is essential that it should be transdisciplinary. It cannot be 'an independent autonomous game' (23), but must contribute to (and learn from) applications such as education, medicine, law, and computational natural language processing.

Finally, language is *variable*. Here Halliday is talking about three kinds of variation: dialects, registers and Bernstein's 'codes'. (Space does not allow for summary of the distinctions he makes here, 10-17.) What he finds significant about variation is that the varieties are not all equally powerful. In particular, the grammar of childhood experience may not provide access to the grammar of educational knowledge: 'while the language creates new knowledge it also limits access to that knowledge' (13). There is another sense in which the varieties are not all equally powerful: the ones that have power are the varieties used by those who are in control; 'through the interaction between language and the historical processes which constitute its environment' (17). Command of a dominant variety is enabling; failure to command it is constraining: 'the grammar is liberating for some, but enslaving for others' (13). This has implications for the establishment and perpetuation of social systems, and also for the possibility of change. People in power can keep others 'enslaved' by restricting access to the grammar that conveys power. (The implications of the claim that 'all varieties are equally good' become clear here: transferred to the arena of education, this dogma plays into the hands of those who would control access to the powerful varieties.)

Halliday suggests that as a feature of linguistic theory variation is important not in the current form of the competing models that 'have sprouted and, in some cases at least, flourished since the beginning of the present century' but, more valuably, in the form of 'variation within one general model, which is where it becomes interesting and potentially positive' (23). It must have varieties capable of dealing with distinct problems and issues (in which the variety is like a

register) and also varieties capable of dealing differently with the same problems and issues (in which the variety is like a dialect or even a 'code'). Referring to these varieties within SFL theory as 'registers', 'dialects' or 'codes' indicates the degree of variation that can be positive: to split the model into different 'languages' would obviously be going too far and inhibit communication. It goes without saying – to complete the metaphorical resemblance of linguistic theory to language – that a variety of theory may achieve power, artificially, by 'the historical processes which constitute its environment' (17) rather than by how well it construes language.

Halliday completes this discussion by pointing out that although in one sense the grammar is 'not neutral' – because different varieties confer different degrees of power, and people are differently enabled to access the more powerful varieties – in another sense it is (perhaps *should be?*) *neutral*: 'It cannot be subject to random or trivial distortions, to the special interest of this or that section of society, however much they may control the material resources' (24). This applies to linguistic theory as well as to language.

The ultimate insight to be drawn from this discussion is that linguistic theory has the potential to be more powerful than has hitherto been the case. The problem has been 'the discrepancy between the potency of language and the trivial picture that is so often presented of it' (25). To gain this power, linguistic theory must replicate the power of language, it must be a metaphor for language – a transformation which will 'take a lot of theoretical energy' (25).

To sum up: the theory must be *comprehensive*, because it must have the resources to construe all of language; it must be *extravagant*, because it must have extra resources, more than seem strictly necessary, to deal with the inevitable extra 'bits and pieces' of language. (It must not be maximally constrained: Occam's razor is not a suitable or even necessary implement in linguistic theory, according to Halliday: 'I see no great virtue in simplicity – I prefer the criterion of "the best tool for the job"', 20.) It must be *indeterminate*, because it must be able to construe the indeterminacy of the grammar – to 'have it both ways', because there is no one 'correct', final, definitive way. It must be *non-autonomous*, in order to be transdisciplinary and connected to social context, and it must be *variable*, so it can develop varied approaches to suit varied calls on its resources. Adding to this list, I want to suggest it must also be *evaluative*, because it must have resources for evaluating language. TABLE 7.3 sets out my summary of Halliday (1997) and shows the additional feature I have suggested.

TABLE 7.3 Linguistic theory as metaphor, a summary of Halliday (1997), with my suggested extension of the interpersonal element

	LANGUAGE	LINGUISTIC THEORY	
comprehensive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - construes all of our experience - enacts all of our interpersonal processes - is very big - consists of enormous systems of choices 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - must accommodate different modes of being: physical, biological, social and semiotic - must interpret the grammar from a maximum number of different standpoints - must see grammar as a totality rather than a collection of discrete parts - must model the whole of the grammar 	IDEATIONAL (and INTERPERSONAL) ↓
extravagant	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - can afford to generate surplus power - is fond of complementarities, i.e. likes 'having things both ways' - offers alternative models of experience - has 'leftover bits' 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - must have more than one way of doing things, i.e. more conceptual resources than are necessitated for any particular task - must have models deriving from alternative perspectives - must accommodate complementarities - must take multiple perspectives 	
indeterminate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - has ambiguities - has overlaps, blends, borderline cases (which do not resolve by enforcing choice) - constantly juggles with conflicting categorizations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - must celebrate indeterminacy - must be able to operate with fluid and unstable categories and fuzzy sets - must have 'trinocular vision' (seeing the grammar from 'above', 'below', and 'round about') - must be able to compromise - must work with systems, stratification, and probability 	
non-autonomous	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - is part and parcel of human history - is bound up with all the other aspects of the human condition - is part of the eco-social system constituted by a human community and its environment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - must not be independent of a general theory of meaning - must be transdisciplinary - must be linked to general theories of the evolution and history of language, and to general theories of brain and mind - must be useful for applications of all kinds - must not be an autonomous intellectual game 	
variable	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - has local resettings of global probabilities (dialects, registers & 'codes') - has systematic semantic variation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - must allow variety of interpretation ('dialects', 'registers', and even 'codes') within a theory 	
evaluative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - evaluates experience - persuades others to share our evaluations, our values - enables interpersonal relationships - creates solidarity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>must evaluate language?</i> - <i>must persuade others to see language our way?</i> - <i>must enable sharing of knowledge through shared values and evaluations?</i> - <i>must create solidarity?</i> 	INTERPERSONAL ↓