

Book Review

Discourses of Southeast Asia: A Social Semiotic Perspective, by Kumaran Rajandran and Shakila Abdul Manan (eds.). Singapore: Springer, 2019. xiv + 254 pp. ISBN 978-981-13-9883-4

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Discourses of Southeast Asia is a volume published as part of the M.A.K. Halliday Library Functional Linguistics Series, so named as Halliday is regarded as the founding father of Systemic Functional Linguistics (Pakir 2019). The volume is made up of an introduction by the editors and 12 chapters by contributors who draw on Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) to examine texts and events in the region. SFL approaches language as a societal phenomenon and therefore calls for the analysis of language in context. For this reason, SFL provides an ideal framework for discourse analysts to examine semiotic engagements and the construction of meaning through interaction. However, applying SFL theory in discourse analysis requires careful consideration of how lexicogrammatical choices can be made from the resources available in a language.

While there are several very comprehensive publications on SFL which contain exhaustive descriptions of the functions of grammar, grasping the underpinning concepts of SFL as they are presented in these books can be challenging. In describing Halliday and Matthiessen's nearly 700 pages of *An Introduction to Functional Grammar* for example, Flowerdew (2008) cautions that negotiating SFL may overwhelm some. I believe that appreciation of SFL as a framework for discourse analysis is greater when its workings are understood within the context of applied research. In research papers, discourse analysts present specific components of the broader SFL framework as they work towards achieving specific objectives and this offers readers the opportunity to better digest the theory. The chapters in *Discourses of Southeast Asia* work in this way. Every chapter draws on key constituents of the theory and for this reason, I believe that

the book will appeal to novice researchers who are keen to embark on discourse studies. The chapters will of course also be of equal interest to seasoned discourse analysts, particularly those in the Southeast Asian and wider Asian region as each chapter provides insights into how researchers continue to push the boundaries in investigating texts and happenings in the domains of politics, business, education and translation. The application of SFL for examining regional languages such as Tagalog, Bahasa Indonesia and Mandarin would also make the chapters relatable to a broader research community which works with languages other than English. The chapters in the book are organised thematically, presenting readers with SFL studies focusing on the discourse of politics, before moving to business, then education and finally translation. As such, this book explores the workings of language in shaping social identity and membership as well as communicating cultural representation and reality.

In Chapter One, Shakila Abdul Manan undertakes a transitivity analysis to illustrate how linguistic choices within clause structures favour certain ways of seeing and reading female politicians in Malaysia. In so doing, she draws attention to the dialectical relationship between a discursive event and the social structure which frames it. As a first chapter, it serves to initiate readers into the analysis of transitivity schemes before they arrive at other chapters in the book which also draw on this “cornerstone” of semantic organisation (Halliday 1981, 134). Chapter Two follows by expanding the analysis of language to also include visuals in multimodal texts. Carl Jon Way Ng reveals how affective governance in Singapore is discursively realised when promoting government policies on higher education, skills development and life-long learning. His analysis of talk-shows and university wall murals brings to surface the systematic use of language and visuals to construct the notion that success and well-being is dependent on the individual rather than the conditions and demands of neoliberal capitalism. Next in Chapter Three, Ingrid Wijeyewardene also draws on transitivity analysis to examine degrees of agency and the staging of power relations involving actors in Thailand’s military coup. Collectively, the first three chapters reveal the reasons why SFL serves as a strong framework for examining the role of language in the legitimisation of power relations to assure conformity, gain social approval and secure acceptance of the status quo.

The next three chapters shift to a focus on business discourse. In Chapter Four, Debbie Guan Eng Ho draws on SFL principles to carry out a genre analysis of cross-border promotional advertisements as she examines how socio-cultural differences impact the presentation of information to consumers. The study provides evidence of differences in British and Bruneian food promotion advertisements and the major premise is that socio-cultural norms contribute to these differences. While there

are attempts at discussing the findings in relation to social and cultural differences, I feel that the discussion should have extended to how this knowledge would serve practical applications in the advertising industry, particularly in relation to the psychology of food marketing. Building on earlier chapters which explored multimodal texts, Kumaran Rajandran introduces readers to Systemic Functional-Multimodal Discourse Analysis by examining the way corporations construct and convey a positive identity through both language and visuals in corporate social responsibility (CSR) reports. He also highlights the practical implications of SFL research for those tasked with corporate communication as he makes a case for discursive competence and how this knowledge can help corporations present themselves to stakeholders. Chapter Six pushes the boundaries of multimodal analysis further as Yusnita Febrianti draws on SFL to examine the coordination of language, image and sound in movie trailers. The analysis reveals how these semiotic modes are used to engage the audience and persuade them to return for more. The chapter, however, could have better expounded the analysis of sound resources, including music and voiceover narration, in achieving communicative purposes. Readers keen on learning more about the ideational, interpersonal and textual metafunctions of sound will find this chapter of interest but will likely have to source for information externally to learn more about how sound serves a semiotic purpose. Collectively, the three chapters illustrate the capacity of SFL's theoretical and descriptive power for examining language use in multimodal business texts. In so doing, the chapters analyse and present texts as social acts which shape and are shaped by a variety of forces in an evolving and fluid business environment.

Chapters Seven to Nine turn to the application of SFL in education research. In Chapter Seven, Van Van Hoang examines interpersonal resources in a Vietnamese middle school science textbook and reveals how linguistic choices in the presentation of information provide little space for critical engagement by learners. Instead, they are positioned as passive recipients of scientific knowledge. In the following chapter, Harni Kartika-Ningsih examines the use of *bahasa* Indonesia in the teaching of English as well as the use of English in content subjects within a broader curriculum framework informed by written genres and text-based language teaching. Analysing the implementation of an SFL-informed programme in several lessons, her findings reveal the capacity of SFL for informing pedagogic practice in language teaching. This chapter draws attention to the contributions of SFL in debates about methodological orientations in language teaching, particularly on the grammar-translation and communicative approaches. Next, in Chapter Nine, John Knox examines student-teacher interaction by drawing on SFL to report differences in the discursive independence of Thai university students when engaging in conversations with Thai as well as non-Thai academics. His analysis

considers the SFL position that learning an additional language is a communicative process shaped by context and the dimensions of “Field”, “Tenor” and “Mode”.

The final three chapters illustrate the important contributions of SFL to research on translation. The translation of texts is a meaning-making process and translators are essentially negotiating two sets of grammatical resources as they convey the intended meaning presented in one language through another. SFL theory serves to guide evaluators of translations as they diagnose the encoding of experiences and interactions across languages, as shown in chapters ten and eleven. In Chapter Ten, Bo Wang and Yuanyi Ma examine two English language translations of a classic play originally written in Mandarin. Drawing on SFL to examine the translations, they highlight inaccuracies in the representation of relationships between interactants and in the way attitudes are grammatically construed through the system of mood. The analysis reveals how knowledge of systemic differences between Mandarin and English can support translators in making the right interpersonal choices. In the next chapter, Zulprianto, Rebecca Fanany and Ismet Fanany examine two Indonesian translations of the George Orwell classic, *Animal Farm*. Based on an analysis of topical themes as represented in initial sentences of paragraphs, as well as markedness and complexity, they too draw attention to choices made in conveying meaning and discuss how differences in thematic structures across languages require translators to make changes that affect meaning-making. The final chapter moves away from diagnosing translated texts to presenting the transitivity scheme of Tagalog. J.R. Martin and Priscilla Angela T. Cruz undertake a systematic analysis of relational clauses in Tagalog and reveal how transitivity schemes can be reasoned despite the absence of processes marked by verbs. This chapter serves to highlight the capacity of SFL for documenting languages because it is a theory which is not tied to the structure of any one language.

There are several reasons why this book would serve as an excellent resource for students and researchers interested in discourse studies. First, as I explained earlier, the research-driven chapters in this book serve to provide the context for understanding the application of SFL theory in discourse studies. In this way, the book serves as a foundation for novice researchers before they probe the extensive descriptions of the functions of language as presented in other SFL publications. Second, I believe that the chapters which are contextualised in Southeast Asia, provide readers in the region with highly relatable content. This is particularly true with respect to chapters which apply SFL theory to examine the influence of regional languages. The hope is that such studies will encourage further systematic documentation of the functional grammar of other languages. Several chapters which examine multimodal texts also contribute to the strength of this book. Meaning is increasingly conveyed through a combination of two or more

modes and it is therefore only right that examinations of text and talk consider the convergence of these semiotic modes. Finally, I find the thematic presentation of the chapters appealing and believe that it will be a useful resource for students and researchers of discourse analysis, second or foreign language acquisition, political science, business and translation.

References

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