

# A Conceptual Perspective on Systemic Functional Linguistics

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## Abstract

*This conceptual paper explores and compares the foundational concepts of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) as developed by Michael Alexander Kirkwood Halliday and expanded by Christian Matthias Ingemar Martin Matthiessen. SFL divides language use into metafunctions, which are the ideational meaning, interpersonal meaning, and textual meaning. Language uses these metafunctions to manage how we capture experience, express interaction, and place content in a particular fashion. The text introduces main aspects of language, such as the transitivity system, MOOD, modality, and the thematic structure, to point out how they convey meaning in everyday use. For Halliday, language is mostly about representing human experiences, but Matthiessen proposes a broader approach using different scientific perspectives called 'window', which means an interdisciplinary view through the blending of social, biological, and physical systems. Diagrams, system networks, and the trinocular principle are tools used by Matthiessen to widen SFL's usefulness in science and education. In all, their studies back SFL serve as a comprehensive framework for understanding how language constructs meaning, bridging linguistic theory with real-world communication and analysis.*

**Keywords:** *Conceptual Perspective, Metafunctions, Systemic Functional Linguistics*

## Introduction

A language is a semiotic system, which is a system of meaning. Such a system creates and exchanges meanings, as the word “semiotic” means having to do with meaning (semiosis) (Halliday, 2003). An “architecture” based on semiotic dimensions has been proposed by Halliday and other systems functional linguistics to provide a comprehensive explanation of language, or more specifically, language in context. This architecture allows for the definition of various interactions. Systematic functional linguistics or SFL serves as the framework for understanding the “architecture” of language in context (Matthiessen & Teruya, 2023). SFL is a powerful theoretical model that helps us comprehend the intricate relationship between language and social systems and offers profound insights into how language functions in a range of contexts (Zhao, 2024).

The basic ideas of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), as put forth by Halliday and expanded upon by Matthiessen, will be explored in this paper. It will examine the ways in which the textual, interpersonal, and ideational metafunctions function inside the clause's structure and aid in the construction of discourse meaning. In order to comprehend how these components encode experiential, interactive, and textual meanings, the article will also look at the transitivity system, MOOD, modality, and thematic structure. The purpose of this paper is to explore and compare the ideas of Halliday and Matthiessen in Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), advancing our knowledge of how language works as a semiotic system that creates meaning in a variety of contexts through its ideational, interpersonal, and textual metafunctions. This paper will also consider the function of language as a tool for advancing social understanding and scientific knowledge, drawing on Matthiessen's view of SFL as a meaning-centered, semiotic paradigm.

Since most earlier research only looked at Halliday's metafunctions without considering how Matthiessen's semiotic and scientific viewpoints further develop and broaden the application of SFL across various fields, this paper fills a gap in the literature by comparing Halliday's foundational theory of Systemic Functional Linguistics with Matthiessen's extended, interdisciplinary framework. To fill this gap, this paper proposes a research question: “What are the concepts of Systemic Functional Linguistics by Halliday’s and Matthiessen’s frameworks?” And “How are the two concepts compared?”

## Halliday's SFL Concept (2004)

According to Halliday, the founder of Systemic Functional Linguistics, the clause's representational purpose is to interpret a process, a change, or in the limiting instance, no change, in the internal or external environment as a quantum of human experience. Three categories of components make up a process: (i) the actual process; (ii) the participants; and (iii) any extra elements, including cause, time, or manner.

## Ideational Meaning

Language offers a philosophy of human experience, and each language's lexicogrammar has resources specifically devoted to that purpose. Halliday refers to it as the ideational metafunction and divides it into two parts: the logical and the experiential. Groups of events are organized into distinct moments, each represented by a figure for changes in happening, doing, sensing, speaking, being or having (Halliday & Matthiessen, 1999). Experience is divided into process types by using the transitivity system: material, behavioral, mental, verbal, relational and existential.



Diagram 1 Types of processes in transitivity system (Halliday, 2004)

In the transitivity system, experience is modeled as areas within a continuous, circular space rather than between two poles. Figure 1 shows process types as regions within this semiotic space, where core areas represent prototypical processes, while overlapping borders reflect the fuzzy boundaries between types. Like other system networks, this creates a continuous meaning space. Diagram 2 illustrates several overlapping systems, including process types, agency, and circumstantial systems.

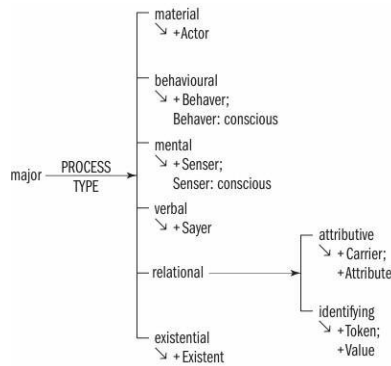


Diagram 2. Transitivity represented as a system network (Halliday, 2004)

### Interpersonal Meaning

The grammar clause does more than show a process; it also allows us to inform, ask questions, give orders, make offers, and state our opinions or feelings about people or things. If the ideational function of the grammar is “language as reflection,” then this type of meaning is more active: “language as action.” To imply that it is both interactive and personal, Halliday refers to it as the interpersonal metafunction.

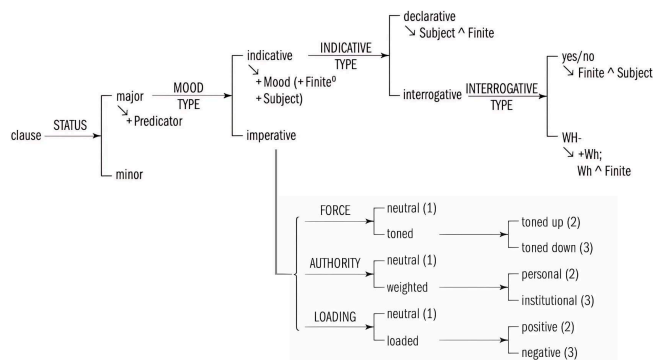


Diagram 3. The MOOD system network (Halliday, 2004)

In English, statements and questions utilize a certain rule; part of the clause is changed, but the rest stays the same. It’s called the MOOD element, which consists of: (1) a nominal group as the Subject and (2) a Finite operator as part of the verbal group. MOOD is responsible for choosing the mood for the clause. Information is commonly shared through the indicative grammatical category, which is defined by a statement in the declarative and a question in the interrogative. Under

interrogative sentences, a difference can be found between WH-interrogatives used for content questions and yes/no interrogatives for polar questions.

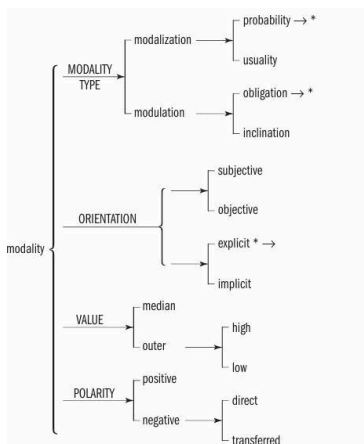


Diagram 4. System network of Modality (Halliday, 2004)

Giving something a point of reference in the present is a smart method to make it debatable, and the Finite provides just that. It connects the proposition to the speech event's context. Modality denotes whether a notion is likely or unlikely (if a proposition), as well as whether it is desirable or undesirable (if a proposal). When a proposition or plan is evaluated according to the level of probability or responsibility attached to it, it may become debatable. Finiteness is thus represented by a verbal operator that is either temporal or modal.

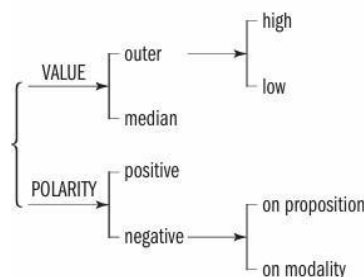


Diagram 5. The System of Value and Polarity (Halliday, 2004)

Polarity is a key feature of finiteness, marking the choice between positive and negative, e.g., “*is*” vs. “*isn't*” (proposition) or “*do!*” vs. “*don't!*” (proposal). Finite elements link both what is happening and how that event is viewed by the speaker. Grammar allows operators such as *did/didn't* or *can/can't* to be used in both ways. There are three values in the probability system: certain, probable and possible. At the median level of the scale, the negative form doesn't change, but other levels may require different wording for both the hypothesis and the level of certainty applied.

## Textual Meaning

Grammar also reveals a third meaning-related element tied to text production. Sticking together and acting things out with others does not happen without some kind of language organization and unity, which helps support communication skills. This specific function of discourse is called the textual metafunction. Its main characteristic is thematic structure, which supports all the metafunctions. Prague School terms explain that Theme is where the message begins, and it situates the clause in relation to other messages. The starting Theme in a clause is followed by Rheme, and this way, the message can form a logical progression.

The Theme is the first phrase that carries a meaning in how a clause unfolds. Often, if the Theme appears as an adverbial, prepositional phrase or a non-subject nominal group, it's emphasized with a different intonation pattern in speech to indicate it's less anticipated. An identifying clause with a thematic nominalization is known as a thematic equative, or "pseudo-cleft sentence" in formal grammar. It aims to show how the Theme-Rheme structure makes it possible for the Theme to consist of any part of the clause. The thematic equivalent recognizes two unique semantic properties; the theme is identified, conversely, it is equated with the Rheme.

## Matthiessen's SFL Concept (2010)

Christian M.I.M. Matthiessen was a significant contributor of Systemic Functional Linguistics who worked closely with M.A.K. Halliday, the originator of the theory. In his work, Matthiessen included what he called the 'window' in SFL or Systemic Functional Linguistics. Using scientific language, this concept looks at the different uses and needs of language. Afterward, so-called approaches to SFL use the concept in Figure 6, where several meanings are brought together to create a given structure. So, using this idea of a window, it becomes easier to show these ideas through programming or diagrams.

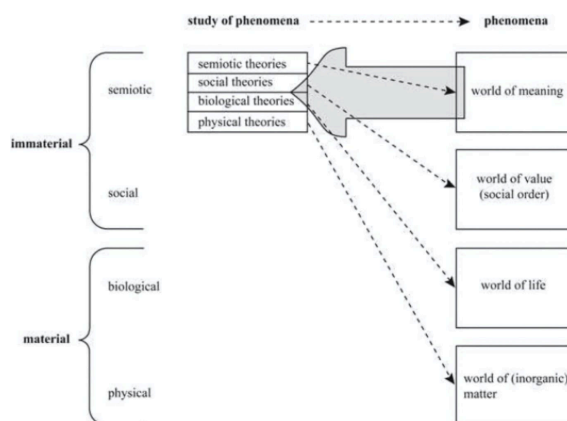


Diagram 6. Theories as semiotic constructs are made of meaning (Matthiessen, 2010)

Based on SFL, clauses can generally express three things, namely experiential or experiential meaning, interpersonal meaning, and also textual meaning, and the structure is obtained from the system of transience, mode, and also theme that determines the information can be organised and each will contribute. The systemic terms, which are merely contrasts or values in the systems they are a part of, can be phonetic, phonological, lexicogrammatical, semantic, and even contextual. By nature of their prerequisites, these “atomic” systems create system networks.

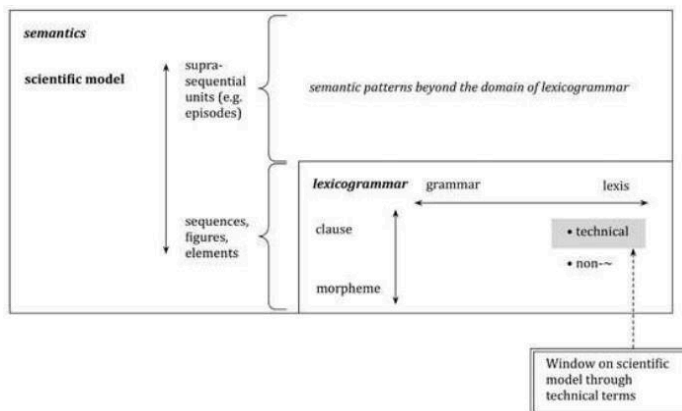


Diagram 7. Scientific model as a model made out of meaning, partially realized by lexicogrammar, including technical terms (Matthiessen, 2010)

Another fact is that SFL has a model based on meaning expressed through lexicograms or combinations of vocabulary and grammar. This model will also include broader semantic patterns and rely on specialised vocabulary and broader meaning structures. With this, SFL also employs data presentation strategies that can be used to make the point more clearly, such as Martin’s (1992) very brief definition of the term ‘metaredundancy’, or Martin and Rose’s (2007) definition of the term with longer language and explanations, as well as visualisations that make it easier to understand, and this shows how the formation of logical and semantic relationships are fused. There is also the formation of scientific meanings, such as the meaning of terms that are connected with their explanatory meanings, to produce more complex language.

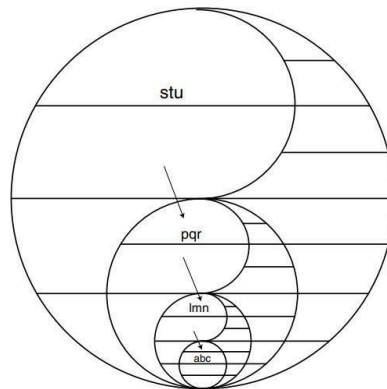


Diagram 8. Halliday's (1992) diagrammatic representation of metaredundancy

Some authors, for example, Martin and Rose (2007), use a nominal group and display pictures as part of their explanation. They show logico-semantic elaboration through making comparisons or giving names and definitions, which is usually done by apposition or identifying clauses. The structure of definitions usually involves matching a term (Token) with a meaning (Value), and it may also use extra technical terms. It explains how scientists make and explain meanings in science with the support of language and symbols.

Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) can be used as a dictionary that will give the actual meaning and definition of a word, or as a thesaurus that will give synonyms and opposite words, as well as the relationship between the meanings of the word being searched. The thesaurus will also provide a larger and broader semantic structure of the word. As for the concept that will provide a matrix for describing relationships, it faithfully organises terms in a broader system that can be understood by Halliday's trinocular principle, called 'semiotic address'.

With the SFL approach, we can also consider language in social, biological, and physical settings. In SFL, all the components of the setting are addressed collectively, and from that, systems such as phonology, the approach of social constructionism in linguistics, biological functions, and physical processes like phonetics are produced, each being multifaceted.

Matthiessen (2004) has organised the terms in SFL alphabetically and added diagrams and matrices that clarify the resulting relationships and interactions within a wider network of concepts, and will avoid a fragmented view. Then he focused on the terrain he was using; he emphasised the experiential meaning part of it, and it turned out that Matthiessen had shown the development of social, biological, and physical aspects in a systemic framework.

In addition, what can also be found is that SFL is a combination of two categories, reflective work and practical application that are intertwined and interrelated, such as Halliday's concept of applied linguistics, and also theoretical ideas such as rank.

satisfaction, and metafunction that are often shown in matrices to understand elements such as MOOD, TONE, and SPEECH FUNCTION.

Therefore, Halliday’s and Matthiesen’s theories are designed to help describe a wide range of practices, like expressing experiences, forming relationships, and organizing texts (ideational, interpersonal, and textual), and both thinkers believe that language structure grows or shrinks due to a system’s influence. But the key difference lies in that while Halliday focuses on social contexts with his well-known ideational, interpersonal, and textual metafunctions, Matthiesen sharpens these by offering additional aspects that are not always used in general education or text analysis. Since Matthiesen’s perspective is aimed at theory, it is suitable for a wide range of studies, cross-disciplinary use, and statistical and computer modelling.

## Conclusion

In Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics, language is a complex semiotic system in which the ideational, interpersonal, and textual metafunctions all work together to create meaning. Language uses the system of transitivity to represent experiences and processes through the ideational metafunction. There are several processes of transitivity, including material, behavioral, mental, verbal, relational, and existential. While the textual metafunction structures messages for logical communication by topic organization, the interpersonal metafunction is concerned with how speakers interact and express attitudes by using MOOD and modality. Within Halliday's design, grammar is a meaning-making resource that embodies the dynamic interaction between language, cognition, and society rather than a collection of rules.

**Table 1.** Comparison of SFL Aspects by Halliday and Matthiesen

Aspects	Halliday	Matthiesen
<b>Key Contribution</b>	Introduced three metafunctions: ideational, interpersonal, and textual	Extended SFL with semiotic modeling, system networks, and trinocular perspective
<b>Ideational Metafunction</b>	Divided into experiential and logical meanings; explains processes via the transitivity system.	Focused on experiential meaning in broader systems (social, biological, physical)
<b>Interpersonal Metafunction</b>	Explained MOOD and modality to show interaction, stance, and subjectivity	Connected interpersonal meanings to broader semantic networks and scientific elaboration
	Emphasized Theme-Rheme	Demonstrated how thematic organization aids in

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<b>Textual Metafunction</b>	structure for information flow in text	constructing scientific or technical discourse
<b>Model Type</b>	Primarily linguistic and educational applications	Interdisciplinary and computational use; supports corpus linguistics and modeling.

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Matthiessen, on the other hand, presents SFL as a thorough and scientific model meant for understanding meaning. He describes linguistic theory as the way meanings are formed using grammar and words and made explicit through the help of systems, networks, and classifications. Because he used “semiotic address” and a trinocular view that analyzes language by function, appearance, and how words and phrases connect, there is a clearer picture of how words and expressions are related in the SFL framework. Thanks to Matthiessen’s work, we can use SFL to benefit students, patients, and people working in science. This paper’s benefit is that it gives readers and researchers a more thorough and lucid understanding of how Halliday’s and Matthiessen’s theories work in tandem, allowing Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) to be applied not only in linguistic analysis but also in scientific research, education, and interdisciplinary studies.

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