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Meaning Making in Text: Multimodal and Multilingual Functional Perspectives

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“The times they are a-changing” (Bob Dylan, 1964)

Indeed, the times have been changing, but *Meaning Making in Text: Multimodal and Multilingual Functional Perspectives* (hereafter *Meaning Making in Text*) makes a strong case that Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) can inform critical analysis of many of the types of discourses which are prominent in this second decade of the twenty-first century. The first three sections of the book, focusing on multilingualism, provides examples of how the concepts of SFL on their own, or in tandem with other approaches such as cognitivism (Plemenitas, Chapter 4) and corpus linguistics (Bulc & Gorjanc, Chapter 3), can serve as powerful analytical tools for a wide variety of languages and discourses. The second section, which focuses on multimodality, broadens the concept of “text” to include various forms of multimedia, and uses SFL and other approaches, such as visual analysis (Nord, Chapter 6; Stoian, Chapter 8; Starc, Chapter 11) and neuroscience (Starc, Chapter 11), to analyze how the individual modalities that compose a multimedia text can work to create separate, parallel discourses (Maiorani, Chapter 7) or a unified, dynamic discourse (Nord, Chapter 6; Taylor, Chapter 9). The third section builds upon the concepts and issues raised in the earlier discussions of multilingualism and multimedia by describing SFL-based pedagogy (Jones, Chapter 12) and SFL-informed examinations of textbooks (Karagevrekis, Chapter 10), teacher-student interactions (Martin & Dreyfus, Chapter 13), and national curriculum goals (Starc, Chapter 11). The choice of the themes for the three sections reflects an effort on the part of the editors to portray SFL as a relevant and effective tool for critical analysis of the types of linguistic issues and discourses prominent in the twenty-first century.

The first section of the book provides evidence of SFL’s versatility in delivering analytical insight into a wide variety of languages, discourses, and linguistic features, such as academic Finnish (Rahtu, Chapter 2); the use of connectors in Croatian and Slovenian (Bulc & Gorjanc, Chapter 3), and 17th-century French (Banks, Chapter 1). However, the first section also addresses an issue of broader importance in this century: tensions between *centrifugal* forces for

the expansion of English as the lingua franca of academia and *centripetal* forces seeking to develop linguistic scholarship in local languages and cultures (Bakhtin, 1985). Discussions of multilingualism are particularly relevant in this century as English steadily expands its role as a prominent, or as some would say “hegemonic” (Guo & Beckett, 2007, p. 125), global language. However, in addition to improving the scholarship of local languages and cultures, the issues and concepts covered in this book can also serve to improve the level of persuasive rhetoric of advocates of multilingualism in countries where many people speak English as their first language, such as the United States.

Expanding upon the previous section’s discussions of multilingualism, the second section of *Meaning Making in Text* addresses a major issue in 21st century language scholarship, which is whether the linguistic analysis tools developed in the past century, which might have performed satisfactorily for the analysis of written or transcribed oral text, are still relevant in a time when mono-modal media are steadily being replaced by multimedia that offer written text, audio, static and moving images, and user interaction functions. Not only do various combinations of these multiple *textual* elements enable authors to embed meaning in various complementary or even contrary ways (Maiorani, Chapter 7), they also result in products offering multiple entry points (Nord, Chapter 6) that allow consumers to traverse non-linear paths throughout them. Accordingly, the experiences and interpretations of one consumer can vary greatly from another’s.

Meaning Making in Text puts forward a case that SFL and SFL-informed analytical methods, such as Kress and Van Leeuwen’s (2006) “model for analysing images” (Stoian, Chapter 8, Section 2, Subsection 1, para. 1), provide insight into the dynamic discursive outcomes created by the interactions of orthographic, aural, and visual elements in multimedia. However, the authors fail to provide a sufficiently detailed explanation of the visual theories and their rationale, which leaves the reader to take a theoretical leap of faith that these concepts are actually capable of elucidating the detailed semiotic analysis that SFL can provide for written or oral text, such as delineating meaning at the level of the three metafunctions of language (*ideational, interpersonal, or textual*; Thompson, 2013). *Meaning Making in Text* would be much more convincing in this respect if it made more effort to validate the visual theories it relies upon in some of its chapters.

Part III, continuing with the themes of multilingualism and multimodality, is particularly informative not only for the SFL-based analytical and instructional methods it discusses, but also for the broader issues each chapter raises. For example, in her discussion of how even native speakers can struggle to interpret multimedia, Starc (Chapter 11) drives home the point that merely including the acquisition of multimedia literacy skills as a goal in a national curriculum is not any sort of guarantee that learners will actually acquire them. And in their discussion of face-to-face and synchronous classes that employ a genre approach to literacy, Martin and Dreyfus (Chapter 13) stress the need for educators to acquire a better understanding of the macro-discourse of teacher-student interactions beyond simpler understandings such as *IRF* (initiate-respond-feedback). In this sense, Martin and Dreyfus are tying SFL and Sociocultural Theory closer together as they call for better understandings and better applications of the ways teachers mediate their students’ learning through interaction. Similarly, Karagevrekis’s analysis (Chapter 10) of how visuals in an economics textbook improve learners’ acquisition of complex economic concepts turns into a general call for increasing both the quantity and quality of multimedia elements in textbooks designed for L2 learners. Jones (Chapter 12) similarly takes an inductive approach by using an analysis of coherence and cohesion elements in medical

journal articles to advocate for explicitly instructing graduate students in how to improve their compositions' thematic flows so that their readers can comprehend better. Citing convincing evidence and using well-reasoned arguments, the third section of *Meaning Making in Text* not only shows how SFL can be used as both a pedagogical and analytical tool, it also raises broad important issues in the field of education.

Meaning Making in Text makes a strong case that SFL, on its own or with other approaches, represents a powerful semiotic analysis tool that can provide critical insight into a wide range of languages and discourses, multimodal media, and pedagogical methods and materials. Those who are likely to benefit from reading this book include not only linguists interested in SFL, but also educators and researchers who perceive a need for tools that are more responsive to the semiotic analytical needs of the twenty-first century. *Meaning Making in Text* argues convincingly for increased use of SFL and SFL-informed concepts by providing evidence of its responsiveness to current multilingual issues; its capacity to analyze the individual and sum effects of the various modalities that compose 21st-century multimedia; and its usefulness in identifying and creating effective teaching materials and methods. The times are indeed changing, but this scholarship on SFL contributes to the evidence that it is keeping up.

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