

# THE BATTLES OF SYSTEMIC FUNCTIONAL LINGUISTICS: LEARNING FROM THE PAST TO RESPOND TO CRITIQUES OF TODAY

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## Learning from History: Addressing “new” Critiques of SFL

As the popularity of SFL increases throughout the U.S., it continues to clash with practices of traditional linguistics. Traditional practices exclude groups of learners, primarily students of historically marginalized groups, yet they still permeate our school settings. While SFL implementation aims to combat biased practices, it has been critiqued as promoting “a modernist and sometimes racialized divide between academic language development and the hybrid social interactions of multilingual learners” (Flores & Rosa, 2015; as cited in Harman & Khote, 2015, p. 2). Further, SFL pedagogies have been criticized as running the risk of stifling students’ creativity, pushing minoritized students to speak like their White peers, and positioning culturally and linguistically diverse learners to have inferior academic language (AL) skills (Flores, 2015; Flores & Rosa, 2015; Hyland, 2007).

Receiving criticism has the potential to make people stronger or better as there is always room for improvement. The same argument applies to theories and their ongoing development. When we consider new questions, new perspectives, and see phenomena in new light, theories evolve, become more refined, and more explicit (Christie, 2010). From this, new pedagogies can be developed and enacted. While some critiques are more helpful than others, we must not ignore any critiques that emerge. To do so, would defy the basis of the criticality

from which SFL was developed. Since many past critiques of SFL mirror the ones currently emerging in the U.S., as I embark on my own SFL journey from this latter context, I attempt to respond to these “new” critiques by learning from SFL battles of the past. In (re)imagining the future of SFL, I address the tenets and affordances of a critical SFL approach, which contributes to the development of my own conceptual framework of language that is situated within a larger critique of racial inequalities normalized by current conceptualizations of AL.

### **Bernstein’s Influence**

Bernstein was a British sociologist who was familiar to criticism, and also influential to Halliday’s development of SFL. Bernstein analyzed how society persists and changes, the processes of cultural transmission, and the essential role of language within society and its processes (Bernstein, 1990). Educational environments are just one setting where social reproduction occurs, and social structure is reflected (Halliday, 1973). Bernstein saw many children fail in school and wanted to understand why failure was so linked to social class. He made the distinction between language of working class versus middle class, stating working class language was significantly different than AL. This led to his realization that language is not to be understood in addition to social structure. Language is reflective of society and must be analyzed to grasp how and why social systems exist and persist (Martin, 2013).

From the language distinctions that Bernstein made and their associations with academic success, Bernstein proposed a theory of language codes. He argued that people developed different coding orientations, restricted and elaborated, according to their social class and culture (Bernstein, 1990). An elaborated code can be understood without context and

has potential for societal change as it is the socially valued language code (such as the registers of AL). A restricted code, often only understood with knowledge of context, history, and culture, is less valued and has limiting impact for change (such as a regional or cultural dialect). This theory was highly controversial because people thought it placed groups of people, delineated by racial and cultural backgrounds, against each other (Sadovnik, 1991).

While Bernstein struggled to respond to critiques and solidify his theory, Halliday succeeded in building upon his ideas with SFL. Halliday witnessed institutional bias toward particular dialects and language practices as a way to devalue, ignore, and marginalize cultural groups and their identities. Halliday wanted to investigate how the language was used, structured, and related to social constructs within school settings (Martin, 2013). He developed SFL to counteract the linguistic inequity made possible by those who were considered dominant language speakers and those with power.

### **Language Development Project**

During the late 60s and 70s, Australia grappled with a reassessment of grammar instruction in schools, which garnered debates around the purpose of learning English (Christie, 2010). SFL, a new concept to Australia at the time, prompted many arguments. The fight to bring SFL to schools was grounded in abandoning practices of arbitrary traditional grammar and language instruction isolated from subject-specific content. While SFL practices aimed to be just and inclusive, those wary of SFL struggled to see the value of including knowledge about language (KAL). Common thought believed learning environments should be

student-centered and foster student *inquiry* and *growth* through teacher *facilitation* (Christie, 2010). The ideas of SFL threw these dominant practices and its supporters for a loop.

Contributing to the curriculum redesign debates, Halliday proposed a language model through the “Language Development Project”. The model had three tenets: 1) Learning language – basic resources of language such as sounds, lexis, and grammar; 2) Learning through Language – learning about the world and its relationships as a means toward shaping a sense of identity; and 3) Learning about Language – KAL including grammar, spelling, writing systems, registers and reflection of language use. The third tenet prompted heated debates (Christie, 2010).

In the 80s, practices of KAL were not common in schools. A practice that involved explicit language instruction was believed to deduct time from student-centered inquiry-based learning. Teachers viewed KAL instruction as damaging and useless to students’ literacy development (Martin, 2016). People were not convinced of the benefits of extending beyond traditional grammar instruction and its arbitrary labels and rules.

### **Genre-Based Pedagogy**

The late 80s and 90s generated arguments using a different approach – *genre*. Within the Sydney School, research and practice led to the development of the SFL-informed Genre-Based Pedagogy (GBP) (Martin & Rose, 2008; Rose & Martin, 2012). GBP was a response to the student-centered, overly process-based learning approaches and the academic demands placed on students. Students were expected to produce texts of academic genres not found in daily language interactions, such as historical narratives, science lab reports, or persuasive

essays. For many, to accomplish these literacy demands required explicit instruction. Common instructional approaches focused heavily on student discovery and learning through doing. These hegemonic practices produced a racialized divide by continuing to marginalize minority students and give access to privileged students (Martin, 2016). Students of dominant backgrounds often entered school with language experiences and dialects that were similar to the academic language (AL) needed to engage in genre-specific tasks. Students of non-dominant backgrounds entered school with language varieties that were very different from AL and required more explicit language instruction and experiences. While genre was Martin's way of reintroducing practices of KAL without explicitly discussing grammar as Halliday previously did, there was still quite a challenge.

Some considered GBP to be a prescriptive approach in which students unthinkingly adopt writing techniques and conform to status quo expectations (Cope & Kalantzis, 1993). In reality, an SFL-informed curriculum, like GBP, empowers students to think critically of text. The object is to make the genre and its social purpose explicit and accessible to students (Christie, 2016). Supporting GBP, Hasan (1996) states that to offer a(n) descriptive and explicit account of genre is not to prescribe. In order for students to disrupt the status quo, they must first have an understanding of the language basics from which their own experiences and reflections can build upon (Rose & Martin, 2012).

GBP was critiqued for having more emphasis on the product than the process (Cope & Kalantzis, 1993). Proponents of GBP disagree. The genre phases are evidence of the process that involves teachers and students in identifying them. Process and product are two necessary aspects of the same phenomenon and emphasis needs to be put on both (Christie, 2010).

Christie asserts that superficial readings result in arguments such as this. GBP and any SFL pedagogy avoids error-based approaches that often accompany product focused pedagogies. The overarching purpose is not history, description, or process, but it is the commitment to social justice (Rose & Martin, 2012).

### **(Re)Imagining the Future**

The battles will continue to be fought over and over again. This is evidenced by the history SFL practices in Australia as well as practices from centuries ago. Historically, literacy pedagogies have worked to privilege those with linguistic backgrounds of dialects similar to AL and to disadvantage students whose backgrounds possess dialects very different from the registers of AL. When making arguments that SFL implementation is racist and stifles creativity, it is crucial to consider patterns of history.

### **Academic Language**

Language is a technology of control and normalization (Martin, 2016), which AL is a prime example of. AL are the registers specific to each school subject that are realized by subject-specific vocabulary, syntax, sentence structures, and genres. All students need to understand, apply, and manipulate AL in order to succeed academically, especially in the era of over-standardization. However, many students are not afforded the opportunities or experiences to acquire and apply AL. Without explicit AL instruction, it can be especially difficult to learn, recognize, and use as some students' home dialects differ greatly from

registers of AL (Moore & Schleppegrell, 2014). SFL provides an avenue of access to AL for all students.

Learning language is the foundation of learning (Halliday, 1993). Rose (2006) extends this by saying *reading language* is the foundation of learning in school environments.

Therefore, explicit language instruction should be central to all subjects, in all classrooms, for all students. However, the acquisition of AL skills remains part of a hidden curriculum that underlies all levels of school. Literacy instruction, such as whole-language approaches, continue to ignore understanding the linguistic patterns that construct a text to achieve the purpose of that text-type (Rose, 2006).

To call for a moratorium of AL, as Flores (2015) does works to prevent the redistribution of cultural capital through linguistic resources. Flores argues that not all SFL implementations are critical. While this may be the case for some, it is essential to understand that not every practice is reflective of an entire theory. Martin (2014) asserts that many critiques arise because people mistake a single practice to be a theory in itself.

### **Critical SFL**

CSFL, developed on the basis of Bernstein's and Halliday's theories, is a needed approach with the goal of working toward social justice. While CSFL recognizes multiliteracies and multilingual backgrounds of all students, it also ensures students are given access to explicit AL instruction. A CSFL approach distributes capital by providing AL opportunities that draw on students' language experiences. Through this, students recognize the value of their language use in varying contexts and how their intended purposes are achieved (Harman,

2018). If anything, students become more creative as they find new meanings, understandings, and purposes of language that lead to new ways of manipulating language and creating texts.

In a CSFL approach, process and product are equally important. Students must have chances to challenge oppressive status quo practices by creating new products of text that lead to academic gains, but also extend beyond the standardized academic expectations. We must not get too caught up in neither the product nor the process but keep focus on the overarching goal of social justice (Rose & Martin, 2012). Make the familiar unfamiliar, the invisible visible, and the inaccessible accessible. In providing students ways and experience of doing this, it can extend beyond classroom settings.

To ensure criticality, we must continually revisit history. We can even pose similar questions found in history. What is the purpose of learning English, specifically AL? In what ways must the students benefit from instruction? The answer cannot end with the goal of simply getting a good score on a standardized test.

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