

# AN INTERVIEW: DR. JIM MARTIN ON THE SIGNIFICANCE OF BRINGING BACK THE ISFC TO THE USA

BY TAIRAN QIU

The International Systemic Functional Linguistics Association (ISFLA) is the international organizing community for SFL, founded for the purpose of facilitating the development and application of SFL around the world. Each year, the ISFLA organizes a conference, named the International Systemic Functional Congress (ISFC). From July 23 to 27, 2018, the 45th ISFC will be held at Boston College--35 years since it last took place in the United States.

[Dr. Jim Martin](#) is currently a Professor of Linguistics at the University of Sydney. In 1977, he went to Australia from Canada to study with Dr. Michael Halliday and to pursue his Ph.D. He stayed there ever since. As one of the plenary speakers of the Boston ISFC, Dr. Martin graciously took part in an interview with me to discuss his opinions on the merits of bringing the Congress back to the United States after 35 years, the current state of SFL, and his anticipations of SFL in the future. I invite you to read the highlights of our extremely rich and inspiring exchange.

**Tairan: Did you attend the last ISFC held in the United States?**

Dr. Martin: So, I think there were two previous ones that are relevant. One was in 1985 at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, and I think I was definitely at that one. And there was a later one in 1988 at Michigan State University in East Lansing, but I don't think I made that one.

**Tairan: What were those experiences like?**

Dr. Martin: I have a distant memory of the earlier conference in Michigan.... Things were much smaller in those days. I mean, we were at a phase where the meetings were just changing their name from workshops to conferences or congresses. We would have maybe two or three plenary speakers. Originally when I started going to workshops in the 1970s, there were no parallel papers; so it was quite nice as a young scholar. You would present your work to the whole meeting, which would be thirty forty people, but the senior people would be there, and you weren't competing for an audience with other people. I guess that would be one difference. Another difference would be who were the most influential people at the time. So, obviously, Halliday and Hasan were very influential. For the North American meetings, also

Michael Gregory and his group from Glendon College in Toronto, where I did my undergraduate work. They would be strongly represented. And Robin Fawcett was leading organization of these meetings at the time and he would always be there and making a contribution. And I guess that means that a lot of the focus was on Halliday's grammar work. People were interested in that, and also in cohesion, the work he did with Hasan, pushing, you know, beyond the clause. Work by Gregory on stylistics was also important. Also Peter Fries' work on theme. And there was a big computational linguistics program in California in Los Angeles at the Information Sciences Institute. Christian Matthiessen, John Bateman, Bill Mann, and people were working there. They would also be a significant presence at North American meetings. So it was a different flavor in who were the senior elders and the most influential people and the kind of things people were talking about and interested in. There's a special issue of the journal *Word*, which was based on the 1988 conference at Michigan State. It's volume 40 of *Word*, the journal *Word*, numbers 1 and 2. So I think if people are interested in the flavor of the previous conference in North America, they could have a look at that it's that special issue of the journal *Word*, volume 40. It gives a good summary of who spoke at the conference, what they talked about, and includes some of the papers that were presented there.

**Tairan: So thinking about the conference you went to in 1985, what was one memorable moment or talk for you?**

Dr. Martin: I think the highlight for me was that Ken Pike, the famous missionary linguist was around one day. And I got to meet him (Peter Fries introduced me), and I talked to him briefly. And that was quite an exciting thrill for me because he was such a famous, interesting, and influential person and I always had admired his work – not particularly the applications of his work in his missionary work, but his linguistics and his conception of language. He was an interesting guy, a very outgoing, friendly, modest guy, and easy to talk to; so that was probably the highlight.

**Tairan: What do you think has changed about the Congress of the association since then?**

Dr. Martin: Mmm. Ok, well, a few things. I mean, as I've implied to earlier, it's more international now. People from different parts of the world would be represented. It was very much in North America and England and Australia in the early 1980s. Much more international now. I think now you would see a much stronger focus on various applications, but especially educational linguistics. So the work on genre-based literacy programs, known as the work of the Sydney School, has been very influential around the world – getting people interested in

SFL. Most of the international conferences would have a stronger presence of that work now than back then. Then the nature of the papers – I think back in the early 80s, originally if you had studied Halliday's grammar, you could understand everything that was going on. But now you would have to be familiar with Halliday's grammar, and with appraisal, and with genre, and with multimodality. To follow all the papers is a bigger challenge now because appraisal, genre, multimodality – those things have generated so much interest and so much work. I think you just need a broader training these days to keep up. People are coming into SFL from one of those points of view, but, you know, you're exposed at the conference to a wide range of things. People will assume quite a lot about more (laughs). So that would be one significant difference. I think also more work across languages now. You find work on different languages and people working in different cultures. It was very English focused when I started going. Also, the movement of SFL into new domains has affected things. It's movement into new kinds of applications that are also reflected at the meetings. So you'd see more work in clinical linguistics – people talking about various kind of medical related issues. You might see more work in forensic linguistics. More work in translation interpreting – those kinds of applications than before.

**Tairan: Is SFL still applied in educational linguistics the most?**

Dr. Martin: I think is still dominant. I mean it depends where you go in the world. In the Latin American meetings, it would be very very strongly oriented to language education. On the other hand, if you go to a meeting in China there's very little interest in educational linguistics there. The senior Chinese scholars who came to Sydney for their training in the early 1980s came before we had developed our education work. So they didn't bring it back home and the educational applications are only just beginning in China now. In China, you would have a completely different flavor – more focus on grammar, discourse analysis, appraisal analysis, that kind of thing.

**Tairan: What do you think is the meaning of bringing the ISFLA conference back to the United States?**

Dr. Martin: (laughs) Well, I'm always surprised when there's any SFL at all in North America because of the influence of Chomskians and the formalists. And all of the hostility and censorious behavior from the 1970s and 80s that people had to suffer with at that time. I think things are more open now. So, I think it's interesting that, probably driven by applications, North American scholars, in different parts of North America, have looked around and tried to find a linguistics that would be relevant to their concerns. Particularly in education. I think a

strong reason the conference will be held in Boston is because of the work that various people around North America have been doing, drawing on our education work. And I think that's because they've found themselves in teaching situations where they have students they haven't had to teach before, from a Spanish speaking background or Middle Eastern background. With all the mobility and changes in the economy in the United States, people are having to deal with new kinds of problems that we dealt with in the 1980s in Australia. I think that's kind of interesting and exciting! I think it's also, you know, there's a new five-year cycle now. This means that Americans aren't grouped together, as Latin American combined with North American, which is a good thing. I think North America and Latin America are different scholarly communities with different interests. That's a significant development in terms of the big regional centers in the world where we cycle through the international conferences. So originally it was just the United Kingdom, then North America, then Australia. The five year cycle, with the possibility of interruptions, reflects the international spread of SFL around the world. The fact that it's being held in the States, I think it's interesting. We've got a chance to see what the North American work is like. I mean, the North American scholars occasionally come to the meetings elsewhere, but it's a chance to see a concentration of that work. I think you work in contexts that are different from other contexts around the world. It's interesting to see, you know, the way you interact with the needs of your students or in various applications, how you address those. And also, I think you know you're a smaller community in North America. You have to interact with linguists of other kinds and scholars of other kinds. It's maybe more interdisciplinary than it might be in strongholds, like Australia or China, so that's also interesting. I'm looking forward to seeing how you dialogue with other people who seem to be doing similar kinds of work. I'm looking forward to seeing what's happening... You have interesting education programs. You have some of them with a multilingual focus, and it's one of my interests--how to adapt our education work for our bilingual or trilingual classrooms, and how to operationalize it in those contexts. So, I'm looking forward to hearing about some of the things that are happening over there.

**Tairan: You mentioned the context in the United States, like in North America, is different from other contexts in the world. Can you elaborate on that?**

Dr. Martin: Well, I think the whole linguistics discipline is differently configured. Because of the hegemony of formal linguists people have developed a reaction, for example the west coast functionalists and people like that. But their reaction has been to be shy of theory, and to be more empirical and discourse oriented in their approach and so on. I think that's different from other parts of the world. In Europe, they have different kinds of heritage and deeper traditions. In Australia, the main group that we have to deal with who are different from us are not Chomskians, they wouldn't think of themselves as that. They're descriptive linguists who work

on the languages of the Asia Pacific region, especially undescribed languages, so very descriptive in their orientation. In China, it's different again, because the students from Sydney went back home and made SFL the dominant paradigm in China if you're doing linguistics. So that's a very unusual situation where SFL is hegemonic over there, and they're very careful about how they organize things and control the work that goes on. Latin America is different again. They tend to teach linguistics in what they call 'faculties of letters'. So the students are doing both language and literature there. They're well-trained in European and North American linguistics, and if they come to SFL, they have a broad deep training. They also have a very strong discourse orientation. I think that's one thing that's very different in North America, is the whole discipline of linguistics is configured differently. That means in North America you have a split between your linguistics and applied linguistics. If you don't want to be a Chomskian, you become an applied linguist. You don't go to LSA, you go to AAAL. AAAL is then very friendly and accommodating, but quite a mixed eclectic kind of group, with a lot of different people doing different kind of things, talking to each other. But I wouldn't say there's any one dominant paradigm there. I think our SFL colleagues would tend to go to the AAAL meetings you mentioned earlier, right. They dialogue there across borders with other kinds of people interesting similar kind of work. I think that'd be the main thing – the nature of the discipline in the US and Canada forces you to be more interdisciplinary, and if you want to do something other than formal linguistics, you kind of are pushed into applications to justify why you are interested in other kinds of theory. Whereas in China, they don't care about applications much at all. They're just interested in SFL. Or in Latin America, they have a more balanced interest across theory-practice. I haven't been in the US, you know, I haven't lived in North America for forty years and I'm interested in coming over to see what is happening. What I think is probably very out of date because I'm very seldom invited to a conference in North America, obviously. I haven't been to a AAAL meeting for decades, probably, and certainly wouldn't be invited by most American linguists to speak to them. So I'm very out of touch with what's happening. I mean people tell me the influence of the Chomskian formalists is waning. And the linguistic departments that had that orientation are shrinking. But I'm not sure how true that is. I don't have any sense from outside of a new kind of paradigm developing.

**Tairan: Why do you think ISFLA stopped coming to America? Why was America out of ISFC for 30 years?**

Dr. Martin: I guess partly would be the linguists at York University, Glendon College, who would've organized some conferences, weren't replaced. Gregory retired and people were getting near retirement and they weren't able to get a new generation in place at York University to develop the work. Another leader, Bernie Mohan began working in Europe. So, I

guess your people who were organizing the workshops in the early years were not there anymore. They just had moved on. And it was difficult, in those times, I guess for a new generation of SFL people to get jobs in North America. People would hire Chomskians, or you know people who had a West Coast functionalist orientation or some American paradigm. It was considered strange, SFL, and some people had done a lot of work to discredit it, and you know give it a bad name and try to say that it didn't have academic integrity and things like that. So there would be those feelings around. I blame Chomsky for a lot of things and I do blame Chomsky for that kind of thing. It just was difficult to survive in that kind of linguistic environment....So I think the problem was that a new generation of SFL scholars couldn't develop in North America and then provide a leadership role to continue the conferences, workshops, and give identity to things. It had to wait for almost a generation for the people working in education to come up and start using SFL in education in different sectors, and then get together. Well, the people who are organizing Boston and speaking and leading the colloquia in Boston, reflect that kind of renewed interest from applications.

**Tairan: What are you most excited for, for the Boston conference?**

Dr. Martin: Well, I think just seeing how people apply the theory in different contexts. I mean, the things I said before. Given your context of application, I just find it fascinating to see in the particular places where people are using the ideas, how they adopt them. And then I guess the thing would be to see what kind of dialogue you've established with people who work non-SFL traditions. You have many people coming to the conference who aren't SFL, wouldn't be considered SFL linguists, and I'm very interested and curious to see what kind of productive dialogue is possible people from outside. So, hopefully it'll be more productive interdisciplinary meeting than meetings in some other parts of the world, which would be pretty much straight SFL people one kind or another.

**Tairan: That's really exciting, actually. I didn't think about it that way, but that's really facinating. And 30 years ago, you were a young professional looking up to older, developed people...**

Dr. Martin: (laughs) You know, my heroes.

**Tairan: Now, you're the famous person that people are looking up to, that must be an interesting feeling...**

Dr. Martin: Yes, yes, it's a funny feeling. It's a strange feeling. I mean elders, like the generation older than me – Halliday is very very frail now, and we've lost many senior colleagues and it's funny to be at the stage when you're the one who's bald with white hair sitting around with grey haired peers. We still think that we're young, but you know, it's obvious that we're the elder group now. So yeah, yeah it's a very strange feeling.

**Tairan: Where do you see ISFLA in another 30 years?**

Dr. Martin: Okay, so you want me to tell the future (laughs)... I suppose these are hopes rather than predictions. I guess in the future, it'll be more international. I don't think there's any doubt about that--it will keep spreading. So there'll be more people from around the world interested. But by the same token, I think it's getting harder for people to travel. It's harder for young scholars to get funding to travel or even senior scholars in many parts of the world, so I think it's going to become more regional. I think linguistics is going to become more like the first half of the twentieth century. So, the people working in SFL will be working on different things in different parts of the world. It'll be bigger, but less integrated and I think more specialized. I don't think this is a good thing, but I just think people are having so much trouble coming to meetings. It's fine for me, I get invited, people buy my ticket, you know, that's easy. But that's for just a few people, you know, at the top of the food chain, who are treated like that, and for other people it's really difficult to stay in touch. So you see around the world now at the international conferences, you know most people come from the region where the conference is held and then the next year when the international moves they go to the conference in their region--their Latin American one, their Australia one, their Chinese one; they can't afford to come to the internationals. So, it's a problem.

I think in future they'll be a broader range of languages involved, like much more work on different languages. I think that will be exciting. I hope the applications keep broadening beyond education--to forensic, clinical, translating, interpreting contexts. Maybe we'll see emerge things more related to actually working in professions in the community and communications in various places--in media organizations. And perhaps there will be more concerned with helping professionals write and communicate in the workplace. I think there'll be more people working as linguists outside the university. I hope, in terms of education, our notion of a bilingual, trilingual curriculum and pedagogy is more developed. Multilingualism will be the norm I think in education around the world, so we have to adapt to that. I hope the education work gets much more included in disciplines, rather than people teaching literacy as a special generic cross-disciplinary program or as part of English, Spanish or Chinese mother

tongue teaching. That you know our literacy programs become part of engineering, part of science, part of sociology--that literacy work is done in disciplines in school and university.

Let's see... I think we'll have finally, I keep hoping, better computational tools for automatic and semiautomatic analysis. So we'll have better work benches like the UAM tool, but they'll give more support; there'll be richer automatic analysis of text so we can analyze rich functional grammar and discourse semantic patterns. But I've been waiting for this all my life and it always seems like it's going to happen and I still feel stuck doing manual analysis, qualitative work as you say, for most of the things I'm interested in. I hope the computational people give us better support in the future.

**Tairan: That was one of my struggles. When examining texts, I was thinking about possibilities of creating a software to do all the analyses. But then my answer was no. Because even with a human brain and with my classmates, like in a community doing this collaborative work, we were struggling so much and we had different ideas on different labels or different codes to put on these texts.**

Dr. Martin: I think Kay O'Halloran in Perth has one of the biggest projects with computer assisted multimodal modeling. So people are pushing--John Bateman and his colleagues in Europe and in Britain; so people are pushing. We'll see, we'll see how far they get. Whether they could really satisfy me ever I don't know; probably not in my lifetime--but in your lifetime maybe it will happen. I think we'll get better corpora to work on. And more spoken language corpora, with different languages around the world. I think that will be exciting. Hopefully, better models of field, mode and tenor. You know we have good models of language now, but our context models are still a bit weak. So, I hope they improve. And I hope we get better models of intermodality--so if we have intermodal texts, how do we model the interaction of the different language, image, music, dance? How do we get these things working together? We may have more work on identity too. Focusing on community, how communities are formed.

So it's kind of a wish list, but I think all this is going to be happening, you know in a very different world in thirty-five years. So you know, the ravages of climate change will have really significantly altered the way people live. Neoliberal capitalism and its growth ethic will have hit the wall. The planet can't withstand its level of consumption, especially with the Chinese and Indian middle class developing and consuming things the way westerners have been doing. There will be all kinds of crises around what a sustainable economy is. The refugee problems in the world are going to be many many many times worse--we can't imagine how bad it's going to be compared to now. So, I hope that SFL can adapt to all of these crises--as far as learning to

live in this planet with too many people is concerned and so... you could call it by the name ecolinguistics. So I hope in terms of applications in the field of ecolinguistics that we're able to adapt and make a significant contribution because these crises are going to be just so challenging. It's shameful what my generation is leaving you in terms of the future of the planet.

**Tairan: Do you have anything to add that I haven't asked?**

Dr. Martin: No I don't think so. I would just reinforce what I've been saying. It's been a long time since we've met in North America. I'm really curious about the mix of people and the mix of ideas and new contexts of application. Especially in the context of the political situation in the U.S., which is kind of a discouraging one for the rest of the world. I mean, you know, it's funny. In the rest of the we're always so critical of the United States.....but I know that there are more people who think like I do there than anywhere else in the world and I know that they'll be in Boston. That's exciting too.

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