

INTERVIEW WITH DAVID G. BUTT

David Butt & JL Meurer

JL Meurer (Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina, Florianópolis, Brazil) interviews David G. Butt (Director of Centre for Language in Social Life, Macquarie University, Sydney, Australia)¹.

JLM We all know that Macquarie University is an important centre for the study of systemic functional linguistics (SFL) and I'd like to start this interview by asking you what role you see Macquarie University has played in terms of developments in this area of language research.

DB Well, the first answer would relate to the individuals who've contributed from Macquarie and in relation to Macquarie. Of course, the first one you'd have to say is Ruqaiya² who developed a research team of students and projects, parallel to those being developed at Sydney University, where Michael Halliday was a Professor. The distinctive aspect of Macquarie was – being the largest department of linguistics in Australia, yet in combination with literature, drama, media studies and early English – there was a good deal of transaction between systemic projects and other sub disciplines. For instance, Theo van Leeuwen (from Media) was working on intonation, semiotics and semantics (at times teaching on the same courses); John Galloway, who now works

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with us with a Complexity modeller (NetMap), was a colleague in the 1980's. This has all come back to Macquarie in the form of strands, like the speech research, with Beth Armstrong, for example. Beth was originally a student of Ruqaiya, working on aphasia. Eija Ventola, Carmel Cloran and myself were all working on projects with Ruqaiya. The particular emphasis was on semantic structure, including generic structure, and on cultural reproduction. Ruqaiya pursued, in various projects, the quantitative and qualitative description of Bernstein's codes for more than a decade. Her multivariate treatment of semantic features, with Carmel, produced astonishingly clear results. I think the issue might be summarised by saying the whole of Australia had representatives of systemic work in the late 70's and the early 80's when I was able to witness this kind of academic network and that network was very homogeneous in the sense of addressing all kinds of problems, and in working together. And in that sense it's not so important to emphasise the difference between Macquarie and other places, but on the other hand Macquarie had – through Ruqaiya – this particular commitment to semantic structure and the interaction of studies of meaning with other areas like stylistics and child language development. There were courses and initiatives in those specific areas.

JLM Yes, I was going to ask you to talk about interactions or maybe applications of SFL to other areas – or the interaction between SFL and other fields of research or other sciences at Macquarie.

DB Well, I think there is a two-part answer to this. The first one is that as a student there I had quite a number of privileged interactions with different people, different disciplines, and I'll use that as an example in a moment. The second part relates to where we sit now in relation to what one might call a science of linguistics which, I think, is the most distinctive thing about Macquarie, specially the approach we're developing with Christian³, and with Michael's, and Ruqaiya's influence, still, of course, and with others, like Rhondda Fahey. Regarding the first part, when I was a Ph.D.

student with Ruqaiya I had the opportunity to follow up issues in all different kinds of sciences, including earth sciences and evolution. There was an earth scientist, Martin Williams, who studied human evolution from the point of view of the evidence from the Ethiopian plateau and other work around the African continent and in Northern Australia. I had constant interaction with specialists in literature and rhetoric. I was influenced by linguists like Colin Yallop who was himself moving more and more towards a systemic model of problem solving in linguistics, including the study of intonation. He is one of few linguists that can add to research on all strata of language. And there were other cross overs with departments – some in languages and anthropology. These tended to be, I suppose, like at every university. But the ones that I've just indicated to you are more distinctive.

In addition, since those days I have benefited from talking with Charles Birch (Biology), Richard Lewontin (Genetics/Complexity), Terrence Deacon and Michael Arbib (Brain Sciences), John Cobb (Process Theology/Philosophy), Russell Meares (Psychiatry), Miles Little and John Cartmill (Surgery), Iarn Davidson (Prehistory/Archaeology), and Michio Sugeno (Language Based Intelligence Systems).

Among linguists: every major contributor has influenced me in a lasting way, by their theoretical substance or by their strategies of argument for delimiting linguistics as an activity. My views are set out in a chapter that I had the privilege of writing for Konrad Koerner's *Magnum Opus* [(ck. ref. Butt, 2001)]. I would emphasize here the importance of reading the texts of linguistics with a strenuous effort to see them in their historical contexts (including the personal contexts of the theorists *vis à vis* their teachers and the questions that are active in their broader intellectual experiences). I detest the carelessness in these matters that has served certain theoretical approaches over the last century. In other textually based studies, such carelessness has been juggled into theory – Harold Bloom's creative *misreading* excuses scholars from pursuing rigour in contextual studies; Derrida's treatment of core concepts of Saussure (including Derrida's appropriation of *trace*) are, in my personal view, just pompous mischief.

My reasons for concentrating on the theoretical concerns of Halliday and Hasan (in systemic functional theory) and those of Sydney Lamb (in stratificational linguistics) will emerge below. But briefly, they think relationally, in terms of mapping groups across meaning potential⁴, and they work with networks (which provide you with an immediate test of ‘output’ in the description).

But what’s the result of all that? I think the main issue with this whole interview might be to get at the conception of science with which we’re working and which, I think, is a real benchmark of a new way of conducting linguistics. It’s not that the conception of science is novel; but the way that we articulate linguistics is more clearly grounded in the history of science. It shows ways in which linguistics shares methods and perspectives with other forms of evidence-based research. But these methods and perspectives often disappear, especially in the narrowly defined goals of Chomskyan linguistics, which has been so influential in the public sense of what linguists are and what they do worldwide. The narrowing of focus, with Chomsky, has not produced the strong falsifiability which was part of the initial Chomskyan rhetoric.

The conception of science I’m talking about is to take meaning as a multidimensional phase space, using the mathematical metaphor. So, think of meaning as a construction, a phenomenon or a process, which can be dimensionalized. If you change the settings along these dimensions (e.g., parameters like metafunction, stratification, instantiation and constituency), you change the outcome: you change the social process, you change the unfolding meaning. Now, this kind of multidimensional spatial metaphor is, I think, shared in physics from the late 19th century in the way that phenomena like heat and all kinds of processes and transactions in the universe were modelled, following Boltzmann, on the basis of dimensions, relationships and statistical probabilities. So, complex phenomena in some sense could be managed even if they had to be conceptualized as innumerable small events with a kind of statistical tendency (ck. ref. Mainzer, 1997[1994]) along different dimensions.

JLM Right.

DB Now if you take language whether it be on the basis of functionality, as in register variation, or dialect variation, or on a more phylogenetic perspective – you know, big changes across history – you see that you’ve got this plethora of small events, micro activities, micro exchanges, all of which create what Sapir called a particular kind of drift in the language. Now, what are the social contingencies, variables, dependencies which have a direct bearing on the meaning making?

JLM So, the semantic component of language links language itself and the social world through several complex dimensions?

DB Precisely. That’s exactly what we’re trying to get at. By seeing it in these distinctly dimensionalized terms, being methodologically self-conscious about one’s semiotic address, we are trying to capture change. We take into account the dimensions of instantiation, stratification, metafunction, and compositional constituency, i.e., that which produces a rank scale. We look at the consequences related to syntagmatic and paradigmatic organization. We look at the way in which your productions of a system, your pictures of the system, can be put in a kind of historical series, or modelled in ways that Christian sets out do [(ck. ref. Matthiessen, 1995)]. The way to capture change in meaning making is by being precise about where one is along all those different dimensions – what setting is crucial to meaning production.

The result of this approach is that linguistics can be empirical. You’ve got to have a corpus of data. That’s where the micro – the statistical, the probabilistic, the tendencies, the teleological/goal-directedness of language is going to be ultimately based or captured in your model. So, we need the empirical side. You have to look at the polysystemic interdependency of language choices. Following Firth’s description, language is polysystemic, not a single unified system. This produces an enormous complexity but a complexity which can be managed along the lines that we see in other sciences, namely, set the coordinates of your study and look for the aspects of meaning which are most consequential for the distinctiveness of the data under examination (in Russian stylistics these constituted

the *dominant* of the text or genre).

However, there's a tendency in narrower rule-based conceptions of language to say either we have a well-formed grammatical string or we haven't, or we've got a suitable meaning or whatever on whatever stratum, or module, they're working with. It's as though there's a yes or a no. And in this kind of equivocal approach people tend to say: is this a sentence of the English language or Portuguese or German or Japanese, or is it not? And, it was claimed that the native speakers 'should know'. But that kind of criterion – I suppose – seems rather tenuous now. The tendency was for people who accepted the criterion of grammaticality to say that anything that wouldn't fit into the framework would be thrown into what would be called randomness, 'subjective', 'performance', as it used to be called.

Now, that kind of jettisoning of data is not empirical science, nor rational, in my view. There are all kinds of patternings that need to be teased out. So, take for instance the interplay between theme/rheme and given/new [(ck. ref. Halliday, 1985/1994)]. These are two different systems. But if they were considered at all in linguistic descriptions after 1957, when they were eventually built back in, they tended to be conflated as given/new. But as Halliday shows, theme/rheme and given/new are two very different systems which get their energy, in a sense, from being played off against one another in a kind of counterpoint.

Consequently, we can see in this example what I call the implicate order of linguistics, following David Bohm's physics [(ck. ref. Butt 1988)]. The things that we respond to implicitly are being brought up into the available or visible scientific theory itself. And they're being, in some sense, registered, counted, brought in through the corpus work, into the way the model is set up. Ultimately, I expect, with probabilistic systems, such systems will be networks with the probabilities built in. We already have those. But even if you crossed to a model like stratificational linguistics, which Sydney Lamb has developed, you might have five connections, and when 3 out of 5 of the connections are fired, that gate works. But under three, it doesn't – a kind of threshold system.

Now these kinds of development in the actual descriptive tools,

for instance, in networks, reflect a general tendency in the science to be careful about an empirical base, a corpus, enormous amount of data, dimensionalizing, seeing meaning making as a *phase space*. And then, of course, tracking individual meaning makers across that phase space. That's what mathematicians call a *phase portrait* (ibid). So, someone's individual style – a couple's individual style, a dyad's individual style, a group style can be tracked across a graphed space.

JLM So when you talk about probability what you mean is that, if this sort of structure or this type of semantic instantiation takes place, then somehow you can predict or anticipate that some other semantic instantiation or semantic features are going to occur as well?

DB Well, that's exactly the kind of reaction one has when looking at Christian Matthiessen's graphing of the unfolding of a particular interaction⁵. You get clear indications about the probabilities – the tendencies. For instance, one speaker's contribution to an interaction might be graphed separately from the others and you can see who's making what kind of contribution and in what different kind of order. In that sense you start to get a predictive method or approach to individuals or to a group. You may say these are the people who will always begin with a challenge, use the mood system in the following way, or whatever.

It's an attempt to be representing (*graphing*) the processes of meaning making in the same ways that sciences have been attempting to capture change and process. And the differences are significant because meaning is not like the physicist's view of heat. Meaning is not like a virus. Meaning is not like a couple of cells, or even a large body of cells working together in the body. However, meaning making does have something in common with all of those – the methodology of dimension, and its *population*. Note how Edelman [(ck. ref. 1992)] talks about *populations of brain cells*, for instance. Whether it's the material base in the organization of the social and material conditions around the human being; or whether it's the high number of actual instances that you

have to deal with probabilistically in language when viewed as behaviour. There is much in common with other sciences and this has been obscured in the last 50 years in linguistics, although I think it was strongly apparent before that. And I think it has been hard for people to bring it back.

JLM Bring it back, yes – I was very impressed in a class I attended at Macquarie in a course that you teach with Christian when he discussed interrelationships between physical worlds, biological worlds, social worlds and semiotic worlds. I think it is an important insight to explicitly connect the four different worlds –

DB Phenomenal realms, yes, that's interesting.

JLM But I was going to ask you, considering the concern to connect these four realms of reality, what are some of the demands or needs that you see we have in SFL that Macquarie is helping to develop? What are some of the things that you see Macquarie is helping to achieve?

DB First of all, in the semantic stratum. I feel that we're extending the tradition of both Michael's *Towards a Sociological Semantics* from 1973 and Ruqaiya's projects in semantics, semantic description, and message description. Christian Matthiessen and I have been particularly focussed on ways of analysing semantic structure and we produced a large manuscript in this area – which we haven't quite got back to. As for Christian, the whole rhetorical structure theory is one of his developments with Sandy Thompson and Bill Mann and he's developing that approach as a way of seeing structure in the semantic stratum. Somehow contrastively, I have developed *semantic cycles* – networks of *move*, *argument*, *message*, *term*, and *concept*. So all our efforts in some sense set out from or return to the semantic stratum.

Another initiative here is *Construing Experience*, the big volume by Michael Halliday and Christian Matthiessen as an attempt to move up to structuring semantics with a provisional rank scale. In

Ruqaiya's work in the 80's with Carmel and to some extent with me, we were looking at the idea of the semantic rank scale. I think the conclusion that Carmel and Ruqaiya came to was that you had a kind of scale where you've got *text*, *rhetorical unit*, *message*, and something like *message radical* or *root*. And this was not put forward as a theory of constituency because the constituency wasn't easy to argue [(ck. ref. Cloran, 1994)]. The constituency couldn't be argued in the same way that it could be demonstrated in grammar or phonology. But this is where a great theoretical conundrum has to be sorted out.

JLM When you talk about constituency, are you referring to constituency at whole text level such as the rhetorical theory based on Thompson and Mann?

DB Yes. It's easy to demonstrate from history. In the 70's/80's when I heard Kenneth Pike speak, he presented the whole of text linguistics as a constituency problem. He broke texts down into something like paragraphs and then from there to the sentences, and sentences to phrases and phrases to words and then he went to phonemes. Ultimately you ended up going from text to phonemes. The big problem with that approach is that it belies the stratal mappings where you have phenomena of quite different degrees of abstraction. Semantic patterns are quite different in their abstract status from grammatical patterns which realise them, and the phonological patterns are again of a different order of abstraction from the grammatical, etc.

So the idea that you can speak about constituency across stratal boundaries is in my view quite an untenable position. But it was a kind of practical attitude I think Ken Pike had to get people into breaking up texts. It's as though constituency would solve all descriptive needs, while we know that the non-conformal relationship between strata, as Hjelmslev referred to it, means that in some sense you've got to start over again at each stratum. One of the great benefits of systemic linguistics is that, when you start over, the same sorts of conventions do service over again, albeit

with new *valeur*. So, for instance, Hallidayan networks are very economical tools of description on every stratum.

The whole idea of contrast in paradigmatic organization works on all strata. However, that doesn't mean you can smear the description of the whole of language across one rank scale. We observe strata precisely because they are different orders of abstraction. Thus, for us at Macquarie, a lot of our energy has been going into the immense diversity of semantic options available to human identities in a community or a culture, and how that immense availability can be brought into some theory of *speciation* – to use a biological metaphor. You know, what are all the varieties of meaning making one can have? There's an enormous range of varieties: they go from the different registers to the tropes dealt with in traditional rhetoric.

JLM Would you worry about how this immense range of possibilities, this great potential – this great reservoir gets ingrained with how people identify themselves or with a more sociological perspective?

DB Yes, it always seemed to me the most important thing to be clear about. It makes systemic functional theory very distinctive because the socio-material base, following Firth, is built *into* the description, not as an additive, but as a fundamental organising principle of everything else – even perhaps *the major function*, in Firth's terms. And the linguistic levels of – let's say the ones that we use today: semantics and grammar and phonology – were in some sense a spin-off of the fundamental organization of groups and society. *Groups* is a better term, because Firth always emphasized the scale that you could actually study, making sure that the practices you were watching were properly grounded. So, that's what I have been doing at Macquarie with Christian, and of course in discussions with Ruqaiya.

We have made an appointment to integrate our different ways of approaching issues such as what it means to look up from the semantics to the context of situation, and the fact that the context of situation is a function of particular socio-material conditions.

I've been developing various networks for different projects on these problems. What I'm looking for is the same parametric account of socio-material conditions that we expect of other phenomena, including grammar and phonology.

JLM parametric accounts?

DB Yes, well, it's interesting because parametric is one of the titles of your text linguistics volume⁶ in ...

JLM parameters?

DB yes, well, it's the same metaphor.

JLM OK.

DB Well, the parametric point is that one can think of the consequential arrangements of social features in a culture or community. To illustrate the issue, take one of my Ph.D. students' work, Quang Nguyen. He looks at those conditions in negotiations between medical experts in Vietnam and experts coming from outside, advising them: what are the conditions which actually produce misunderstanding? Quang investigates contexts between United Nations and other visitors to Vietnam talking over things like a chimney for burning hospital waste, heart operations by Chinese doctors, etc. You see, certain settings in the social order have high possibility of producing misunderstandings – like, for instance, a parameter where the roles are left implicit rather than spelt out beforehand. If a Vietnamese doctor meets a doctor from Malaysia who represents the UN and both are speaking about medical issues in English and, if they don't know each other's professional history, there follows a high order of misconstruals and misunderstandings. So, sometimes when you look back on them they seem obvious but you can see at other times, in other situations, the same parameter has no consequence for meaning.

JLM In my book (with Désirée Motta-Roth) where parameters is mentioned – I use parameters of textualization to include

constraints deriving from the genre, the context of situation and therefore the relationships between the speakers, as well as the broader sociocultural perspectives that somehow have bearings on the text, in terms of both its construction and interpretation. Just to check if I'm getting the point you're making, is that what you also mean by parameters?

- DB Yes. I'm focusing on one stratum – the context of situation – and asking: can we make appropriate networks of field, tenor and mode, following Ruqaiya's initial elaborations? Can we make parameters that give us a rich power of discrimination between this context and that? When you look at context descriptions in many of our studies, I feel that they're not really bearing much of the responsibility of description. They're not doing enough *work*. Thus, what I'm trying to do is put a more elaborated context network before systemicists, so they can spell out through the contrasts and – watching through these the phase space of field, tenor and mode – they can look at the pathways through the networks that particular settings or particular situations create. Sometimes you find in the literature that two situations get more or less treated as if they were the same, but in fact it can be one small tenor setting, or one small field-related issue that creates perturbations for the meaning making. People may assume that only if there is an enormous difference in the meaning making, there is going to be a very significant variability in the actual context. But, in fact that's not what complexity theory tells us. And what we're finding is that very small changes in the initial conditions – call those the socio-material conditions, the class, you know, the issues of social theory – can create large perturbations for the ultimate meaning. That's what the parametric approach is trying to get at.

JLM OK, so the parametric perspectives will define the elements that are going to influence the linguistic output!

- DB Well, in terms of the context of situation, they are the social organization that motivates the linguistic output. Under given

conditions you need specific (i.e., relevant) meanings. This is the meaning of *register* variation. But, variation must mean choices from the resources (the meanings) available to the particular group. For any group, there are only certain resources available in the grammar, in the phonology, etc. Of course, these choices don't happen in sequence, but simultaneously at different strata.

JLM At this point, David, can we perhaps talk about practical resources that teachers may use to help, for instance, international students with academic writing? Would you share any thoughts on different parametric perspectives in this sense?

DB The work of Jim Martin, Joan Rothery, and others at Sydney University during the 1980's addressed the concepts of resources and variation, albeit somehow differently with respect to the concepts of register and genre. We might ask how the different cultural players, the different members of a group or visitors to a group in a sense *cut a figure*. You know, the old figure of speech, literally, but also *cut a figure* when you're behaving: when you're performing in a culture, you are displaying meaning. All behaviour is likely to be meaning bearing for a cultural member, for a group member.

We can set up descriptions that allow people to track particular characteristics in the meaning making. If you take writing at university as a problem area, for instance, you can see that there are significant differences in the semantic styles assumed to be most important in different cultures. For example, let's take the idea of reproduction against innovation. Groups have very different views about whether their job is to innovate or reproduce, what it means to create, what it means to argue or persuade, what's the value of having your own view. When is that a good thing, when is it likely to be downright poisonous in a text? All these issues become, for me at least and for the kind of model we've been talking about, part of the semantic characterization. Clearly, the first variable that needs to be looked at is the interaction between tenor and field. We can ask: in what sense is such an exposition

actually working for the audience for whom this text is intended? A lot of work that I've done on field is trying to tease out different kinds of academic explanation and the interaction of that explanatory interaction with tenor.

Then, however, on the specifics of writing from paragraph to paragraph, explaining from major point to major point, my own approach is to use cycles of networks in the semantics, which I call *semantic cycles* – at the 'rank' of, roughly, argument or *trope*; *argument* when looking at it from recent expository science; *trope* from the traditional view, which I tend to favour. So, at that scale I have a network which allows you to track through the kinds of argumentation. For instance, to track what we would find with a writer who was revisiting material is that he or she would make a characteristic set of pathways through the network of tropes or arguments and you'd see him/her revisiting it, revisiting it, revisiting it. Each *revisiting* recursive cycle through the choices may be for different purposes – to introduce support, to formalize that support (cite), to cite from an institutionalized source by contrast with different professional or personal sources, etc. And, of course, the question is to what extent does this count as an appropriate connection to the tenor available? I'm trying to deal with those kinds of connections.

JLM Have you already constructed or are you in the business of constructing the actual networks?

DB Well, in 2000 I did this range of semantic networks [(ck. ref. Butt and Matthiessen, 2000; Butt, 2003)]. And this particular network works quite well for academic writing. You can see, for instance, that those who make claims without a considerable amount of formal citational and statistical subcategories tend to be polemical. Even where people would quarrel with me and say well how do you have a network? What are the entry conditions? What are the realisation statements? The issue for most teachers – and I think for trying to get a hold of the semantic varieties of the culture – is first of all to ask: What are all the kinds of consistencies that are being displayed around us? What

are the contrasts that people of a certain group are actually responding to? Are these distinctions to which they seem 'blind'? Though, in another era of our cultures, such distinction might have been made more explicit.

The argument network – the idea of trope – allows me, going back to the metaphors of biology, to get not just a taxonomy of varieties of trope, but a sense of the direction that people characteristically take up in their argumentation. So you can see that your argumentation here is moving along that pathway, and at this point you're the same as another writer in the room; then you become more localistic in your referencing and your citation; this person becomes increasingly universalistic, increasingly formal. And that's where you've got to move for this kind of writing, and of course in other situations, you might ask for the reverse. You might say: in terms of your interactions with this group, it would be better if you didn't argue so much through this channel. So, in some sense you've got a tool or device for characterising different pathways that people might take in their argumentation. This would be a *phase portrait* in the sense discussed above.

JLM And in terms of data collection for studies like that, have you used actual student production?

DB Well, there are quite big projects on student production in Macquarie. One was Virginia Stewart Smith's Ph.D. thesis. And there is a related one on students' writing in psychology. But the area that I've been most interested in personally is what I'd call arguments in the public domain. I'm most interested in the structure of arguments that politicians, police, common people everywhere use in order to get by from day to day. You know, to make their world seem coherent, consistent, even when they're not! How do they argue about capital punishment? I have some wonderful tapes, through documentaries of drug pushers arguing about why a solicitor charges too much – 'How could he charge \$150 just to write a single letter' – when in fact they're getting \$6000 a week pushing drugs around the suburb. But they think that the solicitor is a robber! Why is it a

policeman can say that someone else is greedy when he himself is sharing in a bribe?

An extraordinary piece of argumentation that I'm particularly interested in is the way the Nazis argued about the Final Solution. If you look at Himmler's famous speech⁷ secretly to his colleagues, or his gang, about how they were going to treat the Jews under the Final Solution, how does he argue the case for this horrific step that they were embarking on – or had already embarked upon really? Can you believe that the Australian right wing government actually used the expression the Pacific Solution for their policy of pushing asylum seekers onto camps in small Pacific nations who could not say no at the time? How shocking is this to anyone with the slightest historical consciousness? The trouble with modern conservatives is that they conserve nothing!

Consider too, how Goering presented himself as a man of action, viz. 'some of my shots might be wide of the mark but at least I shoot!' You know, a call to action where he uses rhetoric which is common today. 'People say that they're surprised that the newspapers are being closed down. I'm surprised that any of them are still open!' He uses these kinds of hyperbolic ripostes, and this particular kind of crowd-pleasing technique. That's an argument structure that we should be able to describe in linguistics. In traditional rhetoric there's a place for this description, and so to in our attempt at Macquarie to present a richer, more systematic theory.

What we need to be able to do is to produce a parametric, consistent method of dealing with contextual settings with a highly discriminating account of the immensity of contrasts in the semantics, then brought down to the systemic picture in the lexicogrammar, and on to the phonology. With the phonology and the lexicogrammar we have reliable maps. What we're working on is trying to get the reliability that you can see in the grammar and the phonology up to the semantics, to the context. Then we need all of those stratal descriptions speaking to one another, in terms of motivation and construal. Alignments across 4 pictures [phonology, grammar, semantics, context]⁸ are likely to overcome many of the problems of a non-conformal relation across semantics

and grammar. The burden of uniqueness in description is spread out across 4 strata of specifying contrasts. This is how our Pizza Hut work⁹ is set up: Christian, Annabelle Lukin, myself at Macquarie, and Chris Nesbitt, Chris Clerigh, and Di Slade from University of Technology have this overarching cross strata approach.

JLM Yes. Well, David, I think you've covered a number of interesting topics in a very knowledgeable way. Would you like to bring in any other points before closing this interview?

DB Yes, I think the discussion of critical linguistics that you've brought into sharper focus by your coming to Macquarie. There are many in our department – my own team of people and others like David Hall and John McAndrew in the Department, a central group interested in systemics and quite a number of people who use systemics beyond that. What you've brought into sharper focus is something which I think needs to be emphasised: that is, linguistics has to be critical because I see its main aim as fulfilling the project that Nietzsche¹⁰ propounded in the late nineteenth century. And that is, we have to be able to examine the metaphors we live by. Thinking and beliefs and truth are just our favourite metaphors: the idea put forward that our day-to-day life is based on the way we employ metaphors to explain the world around us. The more self conscious we are about those metaphors, the more knowledgeable we can be about the way they structure our experience and our judgments and the way they cut us off from other metaphors that we might better use for our particular problems at this time in a historical era. We're interested in being clearer about the metaphoric resources we utilize and those that we might find as we look across cultures and see that other cultures use other resources or make sense of a situation in other ways. This seems to me to be one of the most important things that linguistics does because it opens up living space. It means that you become more aware of the options that you're working with in your own culture – figuring, metaphorizing. But it also makes you more sensitive about those that you may not be utilizing, but which

could be life changing if they were to be at least understood. I see this as one of the things that your emphasis, and your coming from Brazil have contributed. It re-invigorated that project for me and it reminds me that there are communities around the world – my own included, yours especially, where this kind of input is needed in very direct terms, as well as in the slower time scale of academic development – two time scales¹¹!

JLM Yes and of course the topic fits beautifully the name of the centre of which you are the Director – Centre for Language and Social Life.

DB Exactly. Thanks very much.

JLM Thank you very much.

David and I stopped the interview at this point, but the tape recorder was still on and he mentioned that two things could be further elaborated on. Disrupting the interview genre a bit, I present David's elaboration on these points.

DB ... I wanted to make sure that we mentioned critical linguistics because there are one or two discriminational issues [the first point] that could be filled out, and the phenomenal realms [the second point] which you mentioned earlier from physics, biology, society and semiosis.

Okay, let's take critical linguistics. One of the exasperations of the two time scales, for some people at least, is that they say linguistics can't be of any use unless it has a social theory tied to it. My view – although I'm not saying that this is a view of any of my teachers – is essentially that if you can do your linguistics in a very grounded, group-based way, close to the social actuality – the *typical actual* as Firth called it, rather than the kind of abstract potential only – you'll find that you're constantly dealing with the social structure because that's the way you have to organise your data. In some sense, what can emerge from that scale, and that degree of fine-

grained resolution is you can get a strong sense of how society is divided on the basis of how people are talking to one another. When I met you, I was reminded of the fact that, from Brazil, you get a strong sense of both time scales working together. Sometimes in some communities I don't get that strong sense. I'm suggesting, however, that you don't need to add a social theory. Every social theory, every physical theory, every biological theory is going to be really helpful for a linguist in that it presents you with the way in which complex phenomena are managed and modelled. But the idea that somehow or other you have to decide on your social theory separate from linguistics always seemed to me to be unrealistic and in some sense unprincipled, because it suggests that you have to be an expert in a separate social theory, and that's going to constrain how you're going to do linguistics. I would say the other way around. You do the linguistics based on social groups (as well grounded and concretely as you possibly can) and that will produce an image of social organization which will supplement or converge, feed into social theory, in interesting ways, because it's transaction-based. Linguistics studies transactions. So, that's the issue to me about critical linguistics: the social theory is emergent, not extra-imposed. I think we contribute to social theory where we can, with what we know best.

JLM If I've got your point, you're saying that systemic functional linguistics offers us those tools. By looking at language as social semiotics we are somehow developing this social theory.

DB That is what I feel – exactly.

JLM So from linguistics you kind of flourish out into sociology. But wouldn't you say that we still need to be fed by sociological perspectives?

DB I think the more I do linguistics the more evidence I get for the link between the semiotic and the material, much like Marx was trying to bring out as he moved from his philosophy to his economics. I think the evidence is everywhere available. Take one marvellous

example in Ruqaiya's project. What you see there is that the material conditions affect the meaning options that the mothers can take. If you are a mother with substantial wealth behind you or even a modicum, you can take all kinds of choices, adopt options which look at the long term. Consider children's shoes, or clothes, or sporting goods, or even toys. For instance, if a child's going to break a toy in a bad temper, and you can replace that toy, you can speak with a different kind of constraint or lack of constraint. You can create a moralizing buffer, or a threshold – the system isn't urgent. This isn't the end of the toy for the child's life. If you are in a social order where anything that's broken is going to be very difficult to replace, the whole minor transaction, this little exchange may be semanticized quite differently because it has a different relation to the material/economic base of the community.

The two mothers then move on to something that has bigger consequences whether you have the influence to create the security – legal, medical, educational etc. – around a child. You know, if a child drops a stitch here or there, it's not a problem. You can re-scaffold their career, put them in another school, change the doctor, demand a different doctor, get legal advice. The semantic options are so palpably different! Now to say that in some sense these are just individuals working in the society and that there's no class system, say in Australia, is just piffle.

You can see, through the semantics, how different these options are and how different the socialisation of the child is as a result of those options. And often it's as Ruqaiya points out – there's no obvious good or bad, better or worse mothering. The single mums who are fending for themselves in some of her tapes are the most admirable sort of meaning makers. They are direct, congruent, responding earnestly to the conditions that they are negotiating day by day. And the kids will challenge and confront. It's a very direct exchange. In other social situations, you can see the meaning options available to mothers produce very different kinds of strategy – strategies where, as Ruqaiya's pointed out more generally, the child, in some sense, internalizes control and censorship, internalizes the moralizings – whether these moralizings seem reasonable or not.

...

So the material affects the semiotic variety in very direct ways. In that sense, social theory is always putting back into linguistics, giving us new ideas. But I don't want to pontificate on the wider social theory so much as I want to be able to demonstrate from the linguistic pattern where people are interacting. How are they interacting and under what scale? You know, is it a 100 people that constitute an active group of meaning makers or is it thousand?

...

DB Well the other issue is the phenomenal realms which you mentioned earlier. The key for me about phenomenal realms is that, while there are distinct realms – physical, biological, social, semiotic – obviously the social and the semiotic are not quite in the same order, because it's hard to imagine a society without a meaning bearing behaviour which allows it to perpetuate its organization. So, okay, we know there are different orders of patterning in our experience, but the critical point I'd suggest and I think needs to be emphasised is that the only way that we know about the physical patterns is because we utilize certain semiotic resources. The only way we know about the biological, the only way we know about the social, is because we take semiotic resources of saying and representation, and turn them in on other semiotic resources which are reports of the physical, reports of the biological, reports of the social, reports of the semiotic. So it's important not to think that somehow or other the physical is prior to all the others, and then the biological, and then the social etc. Because from the human point of view, the epistemological point of view, the others are only a function of, they are only available to us through semiotic mediation.

JLM Yes, in Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory, for example, all social phenomena are discursively constructed. Thus the whole world would be semioticized somehow.

DB Well, I think, for the operating human being, that has to be the case because we have no other access except through some way of organising our past into meaningful bits. *Ensembles* is a better

word – it's not so much bits, it's not the constituency notion, but the complexity notion. These meaningful ensembles allow us to get at consistencies in the physical, in the biological, in the social and in our meaning making.

...

For humans, even our perceptions are the products of expectancies as Richard Gregory's¹² pointed out. You only see what you think you're going to see because the perceptual system doesn't give you enough information to resolve the phenomenal world. It gives you enough information to support or disconfirm your theory about the phenomenal world. Semiosis therefore exercises its probabilities and expectancies in the perceptual domain. For me, there is no point in people saying 'Oh yes you linguists are all overemphasizing language – there are other things'. Yes, of course there are other things. Who is mad enough to doubt that? What I do confront or challenge, however, is the idea that it makes sense to talk about these other things as if somehow they weren't already the products of our semiotic virtuosity.

Notes:

- 1 The interview was conducted in Sydney, Australia, in November 2003.
- 2 David Butt is referring to Emeritus Professor Ruqaiya Hasan, a leading systemicist and pioneering researcher in socio-semantic variation.
- 3 David is referring to his colleague at Macquarie, Professor Christian Matthiessen, now department chair.
- 4 ck. Appendix please.
- 5 Please see the graphic representation in the Appendix.
- 6 DB is referring to the book *Parâmetros de Textualização*, ed. by JL Meurer and D. Motta-Roth. Santa Maria, Brazil: Editora da UFSM. 1997.
- 7 The speech at Posen Castle, 1943.
- 8 The graphic representation in the Appendix helps visualize this point.

- 9 A joint project with data collection at Pizza Hut.
- 10 David discusses Nietzsche in his Ph.D. Thesis (1984).
- 11 Regarding the two time scales, David explains: One is the time scale that the community needs linguistics to do something today, for instance to change invidious social relations whether it's between people, or to have some consequence in the way inequalities are reproduced in the day to day contemporary society. The other time scale is that, you know, as academics we've got to commit ourselves to the long haul. You're doing something and somebody might find it interesting in 50 years.
- 12 Richard Gregory is Emeritus Professor of Neuropsychology at the University of Bristol. He is an acknowledged expert on perception - how and why we see things the way we do. His work on optical and visual illusions brings added insight to the question of why our perception sometimes fails. (Source Prof. Gregory's website <http://www.grand-illusions.com/gregory1.htm>, visited 22 February 2004)

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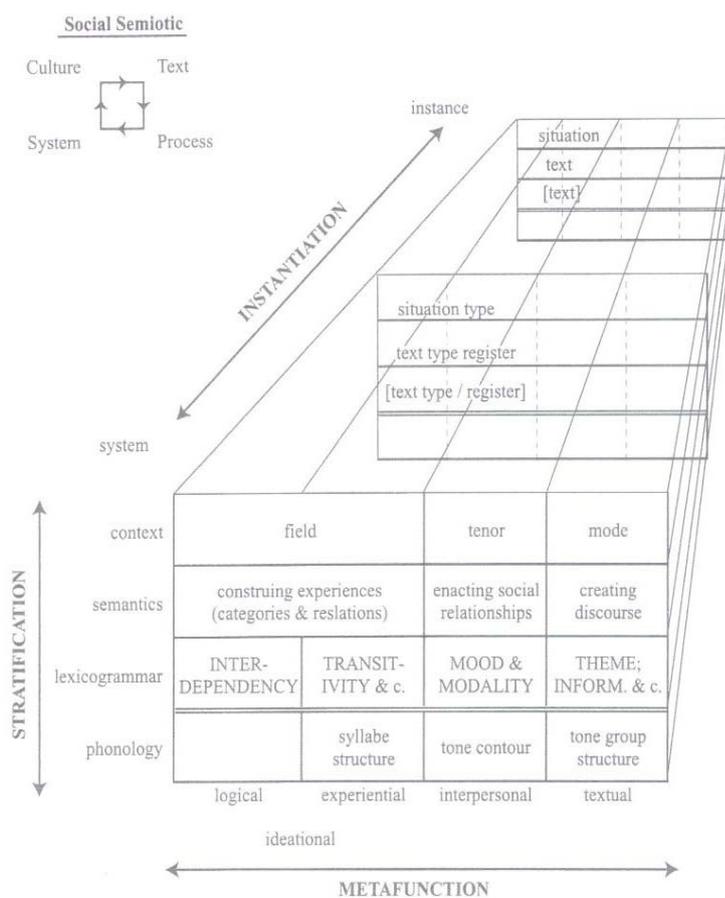
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APPENDIX:



Following M. A. K. Halliday,
"Language as Social Semiotic", 1978

In Butt, D., & O'Toole, M. (2003). Transactions between matter and meaning: a functional theory for the science of text. In M.-c. Amano (Ed.), *Creation and practical use of language texts. 21st Century COE Program International Conference Series No. 2* (pp. 1-21). Nagoya: Graduate School of Letters, Nagoya University.