# Bringing it All Together: Critical Take(s) on Systemic Functional Linguistics

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## Abstract

This chapter discusses the strengths and challenges of implementing the critical takes on SFL articulated in this volume. The major strengths across the studies relate to their shared focus on a systematic SFL metalanguage, critical orientation to teaching and researching and use of a robust pedagogical design that supports multilingual students and teachers in investigating and critiquing how semiotic choices realize knowledge for specific audiences, purposes and contexts. A common and significant challenge is the lack of institutional and systematic support for longitudinal implementations of SFL-based instruction and research. Implications include the need for administrators and policy makers to be invited into the discussion about critical SFL-informed disciplinary approaches; and for more studies to be conducted on dialogic SFL-informed classroom instruction across the curriculum and across institutions.

**Key Words:** Systemic Functional Linguistics; Critical Discourse Analysis; Language Instruction; Critical Literacy

## 1 Introduction

In recent years, harsh immigration policies (which, for example, permit the abrupt deportation of

family members) have created hostile environments for multilingual[1] learners and their communities in the United States and other heterogeneous nations across the globe (Allexsaht-Snider et al. 2013). In addition, high poverty school districts in the United States are pressured to adopt reductive literacy practices and curricula materials that teach to high stakes tests with very little focus on the cultural and linguistic interests of immigrant students (Molle et al. 2015). The consequences of reductive literacy practices and anti-immigration discourses can be very negative for the academic, emotional and social trajectories of multilingual learners (Brisk and Ossa Parra, this volume; Gutiérrez 2008). The purpose of this volume, therefore, has been to explore how SFL educators theorize and implement critical approaches that support multilingual students in appropriating and challenging normative discourses of schooling. This final chapter provides an overview of the connections among the approaches espoused by the researchers and ends with a discussion of the implications of the book for future research and teaching.

## 2 Strengths of Critical SFL

The critical takes on SFL in this volume range from implicit to highly explicit instructional focus on the intersections of language, identity and power. However, the studies share key tenets. Critical language awareness is defined in several of the studies as a resource that supports learners in appropriating and challenging normative discourses of schooling. Critical SFL instruction is seen as a robust approach to support students at any academic level in developing meta awareness of how semiotic choices function as moveable objects which make meaning for

[1] Multilingual learner is a term used in this book to include a range of populations: heritage learners, second language learners, code switchers among various dialects etc.

particular audiences and purposes. A huge strength in each study is that researchers and teachers show a shared and highly invested commitment to 1) ensuring students are not manipulated and minoritized by institutional discourses; 2) validating their funds of knowledge and supporting them in appropriating disciplinary knowledge that support their academic and future trajectories; and 3) apprenticing them in moving beyond reproduction of knowledge into creative re-mixing for their own purposes. All of the studies, in essence, see a critical SFL praxis as a powerful resource for multilingual students to stand up for their rights and education (Humphrey 2010; Humphrey et al. 2010).

The ten studies explore ways of demonstrating the power, tensions and efficacy of using SFL theories of social semiotics within a culturally sustaining pedagogy (Paris 2012). What may be characterized as a tension or challenge in one chapter becomes a source of creativity in another. For example, Diane Potts sees the most important function of CSFL as expanding learners' capacity to create, not merely to critique. Mary Schleppegrell and Jason Moore, on the other hand, focus on developing a thoughtful reading practice with young children that encourages them to understand and evaluate the patterns of meanings in a story. In time this careful reading and discussion process leads them to emergent critical language awareness, even at very young ages. Both studies contribute complementary elements of Hasan's (1996) reflection literacy. Hasan carefully pointed out the necessity of providing students with a deep understanding of how language functions to create meaning across the three meta functions; and the importance of moving them to creative re-designing of knowledge. Indeed, as Potts and Schleppegrell and Moore point out in different ways, it is in creating that we contribute agentively to civic society and knowledge generation.

Another key strength and point of dialogue across chapters is the immersion of students in the ways of knowing, understanding and articulating disciplinary discourses. This contrasts with a tendency for mainstream and language teachers to dilute academic discourse when working with emergent bilingual learners. Maton (2013) described this common simplifying process as moving *down the semantic wave*. What teachers tend to neglect is to jointly construct disciplinary texts with students so they can move *up the semantic wave* to a more abstract and dense articulation of disciplinary knowledge. Without a move into more abstract ways of reasoning and arguing, students may remain fossilized in reading and writing at a more elementary school level (Christie 2005). Developing students' knowledge in the disciplines and in a critical social literacies practice is the focus of Sally Humphrey's study with multilingual students in an Australian middle school. The author explores how the collaboration between educational linguists and teachers supported bilingual students in developing specialized knowledge that they could use to critique the authoritative texts and policies of school and society.

Similarly, the two teacher/ researchers Andres Ramirez and Amber Simmons focus on how the act of systematically supporting upper level high school students and undergraduate students through the Teaching/Learning Cycle and SFL instruction in reading, writing and analysis of high stakes genres and registers increased engagement, accomplishment and the ability to critique. Through Simmons' carefully crafted pedagogical approach students began to see how claims in cultural studies articles about literature they were reading could be validated or refuted by analyzing the discourse semantics of the primary texts and thus to understand that ideological viewpoints shape the patterns of language in a text. In Andres Ramirez's

undergraduate course, the Reading to Learn (Rose and Martin 2012) approach engaged the highly invested bilingual students in moving up the semantic wave by deconstructing and jointly constructing complex academic genres that they were expected to know in college courses.

Other researchers focus on how a critical take on SFL means embedding the Teaching/Learning cycle in a third space pedagogy. Within a dialogic space, Nihal Khote explains in his chapter, bilingual learners feel encouraged to resist negative social positioning and to expand willingly their semiotic repertoires. Dong shin Shin discusses the high investment level of emergent bilingual students when engaged in multimodal writing that affords them expanded use of new digital technologies and integration of their lived experiences. It is within a dynamic and dialogic space that students develop metalinguistic awareness of how a range of modes can be used to realize the genre of argumentation.

Across the studies, researchers, teachers and their students develop and employ a variety of metalanguages, each suited to the students' background, to particular classroom culture and to content area needs. These examples often show that uptake of technical language isn't necessary; specialized language, like the phrase *the contraction of dialogic space*, empowers highly focused discussion of the system of appraisal; for Humphrey's classroom the colloquial phrase, *opening and slamming the door shut,* was enough to enable students to identify and speak on engagement within the system of appraisal, thus showing that shared terminology, be it technical or colloquial, can suffice. However, if metalanguage is employed systematically across genres and content areas, it can broaden student thinking on how the construction of knowledge varies across these disciplines, how variances in language patterns relate to specific genres, and thus how to appropriate these linguistic resources effectively in their own talk and writing

(Schleppegrell 2013). For example, discussions of "Removing the I" are applicable in both instruction on argumentative writing for English courses and in dissecting a chapter of a history textbook. Using the same metalanguage in classrooms across the curriculum enable students to see how this pattern is shared across disciplines and to consider *why* these moves are employed in both realms. Schleppegrell and Fang (2008) discuss in depth the differences between the languages of history, math, and science texts and how SFL metalanguage can be used across disciplines. Readers of this volume might also benefit from reflecting on how the metalanguage of one study might be applied in the context of another if they are considering adopting a systematic metalanguage for their own classrooms.

In their work with pre-service language teachers, Mariana Achugar and Brian Carpenter stress the dangers of perpetuating a failed system if one just blindly continues to use the existing standards and understandings of normative teacher education. They share their conceptual tools for designing critical language awareness instruction and argue for more coherence across courses in teacher preparation programs. Luciana de Oliveira and Mary Avalos grapple with the difficulties of simultaneously preparing pre service teachers for the realities of the classroom and developing their understanding of how language works. They discuss how they developed a new metalanguage to engage students in critique and in creating their own praxis within the short time span available to them. They acknowledge the need for more research focused on how to handle the teachers' resistance to learning a new metalanguage and how to support teachers to implement CSFL in classrooms where there is little teacher autonomy.

Pertaining to the need for robust collaboration among administrators, researchers and teachers, most of the chapters include an ongoing reflexive commentary about the tensions that

guide the participants toward thoughtful transformation rather than resignation when plans don't work as theorized. In the studies, a shared principle of practice is that the teachers and students who work alongside the researchers are positioned as collaborators; indeed, their understandings and knowledge are seen as crucial entities in moving a classroom from use of reproductive pedagogies into transformative learning communities. Nowhere is the power of collaboration among administrators, teachers and university researchers better demonstrated and extended than in the Maria Brisk and Ossa Para study, which answers back to the view that schools have become failed systems; a view that Mariana Achugar and Brian Carpenter represent explicitly and which is implied, if not stated, by many other authors in this volume. Through their administrator-supported collaboration, which included all teachers and the principal in the school and researchers from the university, emergent bilinguals consistently improved their English language proficiency, earning them the highest rating in the State. In addition, the study reports that not only was SFL and TLC beneficial for emergent bilinguals, but also that strong and sustained leadership and collaborative professional development enabled them to work with productive tensions and gradually transform the learning culture in the school.

While the Brisk and Ossa Parra study stands out for its longitudinal collaboration, the participants in every chapter, across educational levels, roles and contexts show high dedication and an ethics of caring (Noddings 1984): they explore how students develop critical and reflection literacies that position them as designers of their learning. In the case of teachers/researchers, Khote, Ramirez and Simmons show a high investment and great expertise in leveraging student interests and needs in a highly successful pedagogical design for their students. In all three cases, the relationships that they had already developed in their schools and

communities were the solid bricks on which their critical SFL instruction was built. Similarly, Sally Humphrey's long-term relationship and involvement in the middle school in Sydney supported her in energizing teachers and students to become invested in the labor-intensive work of analyzing and appropriating the discourse semantics of powerful persuasive writing. Overall, as Gebhard and Harman (2011) highlight in their overview of SFL-informed pedagogies, it is through contextualized, relational and cross curricular endeavors that students' voices, needs and access to social equity in schools can be realized.

For those who question the critical orientation of SFL-informed pedagogies, the authors counter that is it through language and other semiotic systems that people are marginalized and that it is crucial that everyone is given the resources to see clearly how they are discursively positioned and how they can challenge their social positioning (Hasan 2011). The pedagogical examples in each chapter focus on how students can be supported to gain access to disciplinary knowledge by developing their awareness about how language works in texts they read, write and view. They do this by exploring texts with students to show how points of view, marginalization, bias and positioning in fiction and non-fiction texts, both written and multimodal, are created through a configuration of semiotic choices. Importantly, most of the studies also show how students learn to use, appreciate and expand their own meaning-making resources to express their own views, persuade others, take social action and critique discourses that marginalize them.

## 3 Limitations

Given the current focus on text complexity and disciplinary literacies as articulated most recently

in the Common Core State Standards (2016), critical takes on SFL can be used to foster understanding of how language and other semiotic systems function to construct knowledge; and how this understanding can generate new creative insights and critique of the status quo. However, as highlighted by Mariana Achugar and Brian Carpenter and many others in this book, transforming classroom pedagogies from reductive teaching-to-the-test approaches into rigorous and critical literacy approaches is not at all an easy task, especially under the current climate of high teacher accountability and lack of classroom autonomy.

Without including more administrators and education policy makers in our development of critical SFL-informed instruction and in our discussions about the need to shift the current regime of schooling into more creative and agentive spaces, the critical practices espoused in this book have little chance of moving from isolated school instances to more systemic practices. The ACCELA Alliance in Massachusetts provides a good example of how relationships and alliances across time can make our work successful: it developed an on-site Master's degree programs with inquiry-based collaborative and critical literacy courses for in-service teachers. By working in the schools with teachers, students and administrators, it was possible to develop critical and dialogic approaches to teaching/ learning in the school district. As Anderson and Shattuck (2012) emphasized,

> the researcher often is not knowledgeable of the complexities of the culture, technology, objectives, and politics of an operating educational system to effectively create and measure the impact of an intervention. Thus, a partnership is developed that negotiates the study from initial problem identification, through literature review, to intervention

> design and construction, implementation, assessment, and to the creation and publication of theoretical and design principles. (p. 17)

In successful critical SFL-informed work in schools such as the ACCELA alliance, we emphasize the need to work very closely and collaboratively with a multilayered network of school stakeholders from the very beginning of the project (Gebhard et al 2010; Harman 2007).

## 4 Implications

The ever-increasing cultural and linguistic diversity in public school classrooms in recent decades necessitates a radical change in how teacher education and teaching is conceptualized and implemented across the United States (Gunderson 2007; de Jong and Harper 2008). Indeed, the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), adopted by 46 states, require teachers to be responsible for the disciplinary language and literacy development of all their students. Disciplinary literacy in the 21st century means access and understanding of multiple semiotic systems (sound, color, graphics, verbiage). Mainstream teachers need to see themselves as both multi semiotic and disciplinary teachers (see Zygouris-Coe 2012).

As Oliveira and Avalos (this volume) highlight, teacher educators need to support teacher candidates in thinking about how to support the multimodal disciplinary understandings of students through critical SFL practices through use of: fluid translanguaging (García and Li, 2014) and register shunting practices; the TLC and related SFL-informed instruction; and exploitation of all available semiotic resources such as digital tools and embodied inquiry to support conceptual understanding of complex new subject matter. Cammarata (2016) stressed

how " inquiry – the act of questioning and the relentless search for answers to important questions that require deeper forms of thinking - is a core feature of human lifelong learning experience" (p. 124) Indeed, especially with K-12 students, building the field in the TLC through inquiry supports their engagement in multi semiotic resources to make meaning of complex concepts (e.g. Mary Schleppegrell and Jason Moore's use of a physical appraisal board to enquire with young children into the ideological nature of literary texts; Amber Simmon's critical inquiry about gender and race with her upper level students).

Other implications from the current studies highlight the importance of the critical use of SFL as a mediating resource for children and adults in noticing and learning about language (e.g., Vygotsky 1978; Williams 2000). Language not only serves as a tool to communicate but also importantly functions as, "a device to think and feel with, as well as a device with which to signal and negotiate social identity" (Gee 1990, p. 78). For example, the studies underline the importance of connecting discipline instruction with explicit instruction of expected and available semiotic resources to support students' creative appropriation and critique of these resources (Halliday 1971; Hasan 1971, 1985). In learning how to interpret the connection between context and use of evaluative patterns in a text, for example, students learn to see language as a repertoire of choices used to achieve social and political purposes. As Toolan (1988) said about an SFL analysis of literary narratives,

> We rapidly obtain a preliminary picture of who is agentive, who is affected, whether characters are doers or thinkers, whether instruments and forces in the world dominate in the representation. (Toolan 1988, p.115)

In addition, the tight connections between the theories and teaching of SFL highlight the

importance of seeing SFL as a combined pedagogical and analytic resource. It can be used to explore the multi semiotic and rhetorical parameters of texts in academic and social disciplines; at the same time this research can support ever evolving dialogic pedagogies that incorporate the expansion of modes and modalities. With emergent bilingual learners, multimodal pedagogy has improved their reading comprehension (Early & Marshall, 2008), fostered critical reasoning and problem solving (Lotherington, Holland, Sotoudeh and Zentena 2008; Potts and Moran 2013), and equipped them with substantial knowledge about a range of written genres (Adoniou, 2013; Vasudevan, Schultz and Bateman 2010).

For example, the design approach to multimodality described by Diane Potts and Dong-shin Shin in this volume is still not at all part of school standard practices in most public schools in Canada or the United States. Thus we need to continue to research how our evolving understanding of social semiotics and the expanded resources of multiple modes can be integrated into a culturally sustaining SFL framework which positions learners as agentive negotiators of meaning as opposed to static, passive students in school desks.

## 5 Discussion

Gebhard and Harman (2011) suggested a need for a paradigm shift in language education, stating that teachers should encourage students to "critically unpack how academic language works in the genres they routinely ask their students to read and write in school; expand the range of linguistic choices available to students in communicating for particular purposes and audiences" (p. 46). Similarly, Kramsch (1993) proposed that language learning be rethought as "the acquisition of new forms of discourse to construct meaning" (p. 4) rather than the acquisition of particular set of skills that the more traditional view of language and content instruction fosters.

This requires reconsidering a traditional focus on written and verbal modes, and the need to expand to the range of meaning-making resources that learners now use in communicative and academic events. Early et al. (2015) stated, “the understanding may require rethinking the design of images and graphics in beginners’ textbooks; the structure of visual prompts for tasks targeting fluency, accuracy, and/or complexity; and the textual conventions related to use of images and illustrations that are taught in academic writing classes” (p. 452). Hafner (2014) addressed the practices of remixing to simultaneously analyze students’ new forms of textual production and questions about cultural understandings. As critical educators have highlighted, students who learn to appropriate discourse to serve their socio political, academic and cultural interests are more likely to gain power in dominant discourse communities (Fairclough 1995; Halliday and Hasan 1989).

Indeed, as Ajayi (2011) stated, “studies of ESL students’ literacy practices have shown that learners are not uncritical consumers of cultural models… they have the ability to consciously reflect, contest, critique, affirm or reject messages as they take the position of active meaning-makers” (p. 65). Early et al. (2015) also mentioned that, “issues of privilege, social justice, and educational equality have deeply concerned language educators adopting a more expansive understanding of communication” (p. 450). Following this trend among researchers in England (e.g., Kress, 1997; Kress et al., 2005; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001), Bhattacharya et al. (2007) illustrated how texts in three similar postcolonial high school English classrooms were reconstructed to serve individual, state, and global institutions, which in turn “opens up many questions of pedagogy in the multimodal textual environment of the classroom: the relations between learners, pedagogy and text, teacher agency, and how texts are redesigned in

multimodal interaction" (p. 484). Advocating this point, Norton and Toohey's (2011) stated that multimodal texts can help validate students' cultures, literacies, and identities.

Based on the findings and theoretical tenets across this volume, we suggest the following guidelines when developing or implementing a critical SFL praxis in higher education or in K-16 contexts:

*Developing a third space (see Khote this volume):* SFL-informed literacy instruction needs to integrate students' literacies, languages, and semiotic interests in the learning and teaching process. Within this ideological context, SFL becomes a powerful instrument to support multilingual learners in appropriating and resisting dominant language structures and genres while voicing their lived experiences and collective meanings (Harman and Khote, in press).

*Importance of metalanguage*: Through an ethnographic understanding of school contexts and the discourse of teachers and students in that space, educators can develop a contextualized metalanguage with learners that is informed by SFL theory but that supports access and collaboration in dynamic ways (e.g., Nihal Khote's use of the terms "Removing the I"). (See Gebhard, Chen, Graham and Gunawan 2013; Fang 2013; Macken-Horarik, Love and Unsworth 2011; Schleppegrell 2013)

*Go slowly*: We propose that those invested in using critical SFL-informed approaches undertake professional development initiatives and collaboration with teachers in slow and systematic ways (Brisk 2014). Expect to spend several years developing the approach with target teachers and students. SFL work with teachers needs to be conducted in longitudinal ways as opposed to through discrete professional development workshops. Through immersion in one concept such as appraisal, teachers and students may begin to see and apply the approach to

other texts and contexts. This is evidenced in the work of Mary Schleppegrell and her colleagues with the California History Project and in Michigan, the work of Gebhard and her colleagues with the ACCELA Alliance in Amherst Massachusetts, the work of Maria Brisk and colleagues with bilingual teachers in Boston Massachusetts and the work of Ruth Harman and colleagues in Georgia (see for example, Brisk and Ossa Parrathis volume; Gebhard et al. 2010; Harman and Khote in press; Schleppegrell and Moore this volume). These teams of researchers have spent extensive periods of time working with other teacher educators, teachers and students developing their critical SFL approach to collaborative professional development. Longitudinal and cross-curricular continuity of instruction that increases in complexity in spiraling curricular objectives is necessary.

## 6 Conclusion

Providing language learners with explicit knowledge of cultural norms and semiotic configurations in academic and social literacies supports their participation across contexts in our 21st century, where creativity, critical awareness and autonomy are expected from team players in increasingly discursive ways (Gibbons 2002). According to the national Common Core guidelines for English learners, teachers in content areas need to design activities that support all learners in accessing and participating in grade-level coursework. As Gibbons (2006) highlighted, this awareness does not come from reductive literacy practices that dilute texts and discourses for emergent bilingual learners. Instead, awareness needs to be fostered through multimodal inquiry practices that sustain student interest and that highlight discourse and knowledge generation. In other words, *all* teachers in our multilingual and multicultural 21st century need to afford students with the cultural and linguistic scaffolding and opportunities to

write, read and remix in a range of registers and contexts. Through this exposure, bilingual learners become versatile agentive players in their first, second and third languages and dialects (see Harman 2013).

From a critical perspective, we believe that language and other semiotic modes are crucial and material components in the literacy practices of our current hyper technical and global era (Chouliaraki and Fairclough 1999; Gee, Hull and Lankshear 1998). As educators and researchers, we need to be aware that if bilingual and bidialectal learners fail to enact expected linguistic forms and rhetorical structures across the curriculum, it is because the school system has failed them. To address issues of semiotic and social marginalization in educational settings, critical applied linguists and practitioners see critical takes on systemic functional linguistics as a resource that can be used to develop rich literacy pedagogies and learning. Together we create new possibilities and knowledge with our students by drawing on *all* available semiotic, multilingual and cultural resources.

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