



# **Pontifícia Universidade Católica de São Paulo**

## **Programa Pós-Graduação em Linguística Aplicada e Estudos da Linguagem**

**Disciplina: Mini-Curso: Describing languages systemic functionally**

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### **Ementa**

As systemic functional linguistics (SFL) is taken up in more and more places around the world, and is applied in an increasing number of contexts of research and application, we are facing a rapidly increasing need to develop new descriptions of languages that have not previously been described in systemic functional terms — or that have only been described partially in these terms. A systemic functional description of any language is designed to interpret that language as a rich resource for making meaning in context, showing how this resource is powerful enough to operate across all the myriads of contexts that make up the context of culture of a society. Given this conception of language underpinning any such description, the descriptions themselves in turn become resources for the communities in which the languages described are spoken. This course is concerned with the development of such descriptions applicable to a wide range of contexts.

Systemic functional linguistics includes both (i) a general theory of language as a higher-order human semiotic that is characteristic of Homo sapiens sapiens — Anatomically and Semiotically Modern Humans — and (ii) particular descriptions of specific languages such as Chinese, Thai, Japanese, English, German, French, Portuguese, Spanish, Bajjika, Quechua, Akan, Oko, Kannada, and Pitjantjatjara. Theory and descriptions have always been conceptually distinct in SFL. This ensures that the properties of a particular language such as English or Chinese is not built into the general theory. For example, the Mood element consisting of Subject and Finite is part of the description of English; but it is not a feature of the general theory, and the descriptions of most languages around the world would not, in fact, include this Mood element.

The general theory has designed to be powerful so that it can support rich and comprehensive descriptions of languages; but it has also been designed not to incorporate categories that are specific to a particular language such as Latin, English or Chinese since if such language-particular categories were built into the general theory, they would then be projected onto all languages being described in these theoretical terms (as happened with traditional grammar). The general theory is of a higher order of abstraction than the descriptions of particular languages, enabling, empowering and guiding these descriptions without constraining or biasing them. At the same time, the general theory has never been divorced from the process of description: it has been created in the course of description of particular languages, and in the course of research applications. That is, the general theory has not been created in the philosopher's armchair, but is instead based on descriptive experiences involving the analysis of significant samples from rich ranges of registers.

Description of a varied range of different languages was a key aspect of the Firthian tradition from which SFL derives. Firth's approach to language (his system-structure theory, his prosodic analysis, and his contextualism) was applied to a wide range of languages in the 1940s and 1950s. These included various languages spoken in India, Africa and South-East Asia. M.A.K. Halliday's first extensive descriptive work was concerned with Chinese. It was only later that he turned to English. Early SFL in the 1960s was applied to the description of a range of languages other than English, including Mbembe, Nzema, Beja and French.

There is, however, no doubt that in terms of "person power" most descriptive work has been concerned with English — at least, until fairly recently. The situation is changing, and in the last decade or decade and a half a considerable number of new descriptions of different languages have been produced or launched. This growing area of work is also supporting developments within systemic functional language comparison and typology. A first "report" on this work has appeared: Caffarel, Martin & Matthiessen (2004). This book contains a number of chapters presenting descriptions of particular languages — French, German, Chinese, Tagalog, Japanese, Vietnamese, Telugu and Pitjantjatjara — and a chapter concerned with cross-linguistic generalizations. Here the emphasis is on the results of description. The growing area of work is also represented by a new series of systemic functional



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grammars of different languages published by Continuum; Caffarel's (2006) account of French and Teruya's (2006) account of Japanese will launch the series, and books on other languages are in preparation.

In this course, we will complement this emphasis is on descriptive results by focussing on the **process of description** — the techniques and strategies of descriptions, identifying, exemplifying and evaluating different methods that can be used in the development of a description of a “new” language — that is one that has not previously been described in systemic functional terms. These methods include both elicitation and analysis of natural text; and they involve systemic functional typology (cf. Matthiessen, 2004; Teruya et al., in press), model descriptions and “transfer comparison”. They also draw on the cartographic power of systemic functional theory. We will also discuss strategies for extracting information from descriptions that are not based on systemic functional theory. We will discuss the different phases of description, exploring ways of ordering them according to the dimensions and categories of systemic functional and the nature of the language. We will also discuss the selection of texts in relation to the particular systems being investigated — text-based ways into textual systems, interpersonal systems, experiential systems and logical systems. We will use the description of the system of MOOD as a representative example of the descriptive methodology (cf. Teruya et al., in press). In the course, we will draw on a range of different languages as a source of illustration, including Japanese, Chinese Arabic, Akan, Bajjika, French, Portuguese, Spanish and German. The notional goal will be the development of a “profile” of a language — an outline of the major systems according to a systemic functional map that can serve as the basis for more detailed investigations.

## References

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