Multilingual Studies in Systemic Functional Linguistics: theoretical and descriptive resources for undertaking description, comparison, translation studies and typology

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Systemic Functional Linguistics was developed out of "Firthian linguistics" — his system-structure theory and prosodic analysis — by M.A.K. Halliday, starting in the 1950s, with input from and engagement with functional and anthropological linguistic traditions, and also resonant work in other disciplines, in particular anthropology and sociology in the early phases. In the Firthian tradition, scholars and students engaged with quite a wide range of languages; research students had to go into two other languages in some depth in addition to the language that was the focus of their own research. Starting with fieldwork directed by Wang Li on dialects of Cantonese in the Pearl River Delta in the late 1940s, Halliday first worked on Chinese before he added English to his descriptive range of tasks. To address a range of community problems, including centrally educational ones, he needed to develop a comprehensive text-based, meaning-oriented description of English at the same time as he was developing a general theory of grammar, and of language, that could be applied to any language under description. By the late 1960s, a few languages other than English had been described in terms of an early version of systemic functional linguistics; but it was in the 1990s that work on a wide range of languages took off, with "new" languages being added all the time.

This descriptive research programme is of vital importance in its own right; the description of a "new" language is an essential contribution to the documentation of our collective human meaning potential — covering the rich variety of ways of construing human experience of the world as meaning, of enacting human roles, relations and stances as meaning, and of transforming these two modes of meaning into a swell of information or discourse that is easy to share as text in context. In addition, each new description of a language opens up the potential for addressing language-related problems in the community of the speakers of that language, centrally through the analysis of texts in key institutions such as institutions of education, of healthcare, of administration, of the law. At the same time, the aggregation of descriptions of different languages increases our potential for multilingual studies beyond the description of individual languages — the potential for translation studies, comparative and

contrastive studies, typological studies, and second/foreign language education studies.

To bring these strands of activity together in a context where researchers and practitioners can dialogue with one another, we have put forward the notion of multilingual studies as an all-embracing framework (see e.g. Matthiessen, Teruya & Wu, 2008). In this talk, I will sketch the framework of multlingual studies, taking note of past achievement, the present potential and future needs. This can be seen as a collective research programme, advanced through research projects such as PhD projects around the world — with the Tunisian Systemic Functional Linguistics Conference and Workshop at the University of Sfax as a wonderful opportunity for further development and networking (in all its senses in SFL!). I will pay particular attention to descriptive challenges facing researchers when they begin to work on a language that has not previously been described in systemic functional terms.