

Reflections on *Functions of Language*

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The year 1994 was an important one for us Belgian systemic-functional linguists. We hosted the 21st International Systemic-Functional Congress at the University of Ghent (August 1–5). And in that same year the first issue of *Functions of Language* saw the light.

At some point we had found out through various meetings that SFL was practised at three universities in Flanders, i.e. Antwerp, Ghent and Leuven. In Antwerp Dirk Noël's research was inspired by SFL, mainly under the influence of Margaret Berry at Nottingham; in Leuven Kristin Davidse, who had studied in Sydney, was gaining international recognition as an SFL linguist, and in Ghent, I had been attracted to functional linguistics since my discovery of 'Firthian linguistics' during my MA studies at Reading University.

At the 20th ISFC in Victoria I had submitted the proposal to host the next conference in Ghent and I remember Michael Halliday asking "Does Ghent have narrow cobbled streets?". When I answered positively he said "Then I'll come to Ghent". The organisation of the 21st ISFC in Ghent was the result of collaboration between Kristin, Dirk and myself. We were successful in bringing together all the great SFL names and a very large section of the SFL community. But next to the SFL keynote speakers we deliberately also invited speakers who – though sympathetic to SFL – had taken a different path. For us in Belgium it was important to keep an open mind, to confront other views and even criticism. This remained a key goal in *Functions of Language*.

Dirk Noël must be given credit for floating the idea of bringing out a functional linguistic journal. He rightly pointed out that although a lot of interesting work was being done all over the world which could be labelled 'functional' in a broad sense, most linguistic journals at the time were oriented towards formal linguistics. Functional linguists published excellent research in papers that failed to reach larger audiences, and formalist journals tended to be 'protective' of certain models. A functionalist journal was a daring but exciting idea and the three of us grew more and more enthusiastic and started launching the idea among functional linguists we knew either personally or by name only. What I remember as a major challenge was convincing some critical colleagues that three relatively

junior Flemish linguists would succeed in firstly finding a publisher, secondly having enough connections and influence to attract articles from leading linguists. But the critical voices were exceptions, and most reactions were encouraging. John Benjamins believed in the project and the collaboration – with Anke de Looper – was always most fruitful and pleasant.

Looking back, I am personally most pleased with the fact that we created a space in which functionalists of all ‘schools’ could gather, in the sense of being given the opportunity to publish, to read each others’ publications and to enter into dialogue if they wished to do so. The editorial board was composed of people from different functional orientations, including Margaret Berry, František Daneš, John W. Du Bois, Jan Firbas, James R. Martin, Anna Siewierska, Stanley Starosta and Eija Ventola. Michael Halliday occupied a central place of honour as Consulting Editor. We were grateful Michael accepted, thereby lending support and credibility to our enterprise. Michael also wrote the Foreword, starting “It is a pleasure to introduce a new journal dedicated to a concern with functions of language”, and then explaining the different meanings of the term ‘function’ in linguistics. The Foreword ended as follows: “One of the things for which linguists are most often criticized by colleagues in other disciplines is that linguistics is committed to a one-sided preoccupation with the forms of language. I hope that this journal will do something towards dispelling that particular illusion”.

In the course of the years *FoL* has grown into a major high-quality journal, with a respectable impact factor. Less measurable is the impact it has undoubtedly had on making functional linguistics more widely known and showing its value to the wider linguistic community. It has, I think, had its share in starting dialogues between different functional schools and between functional and cognitive linguistics. This is what we had in mind when we started, and if we have succeeded in this particular respect I consider this its greatest achievement.

Looking forward, one challenge for the future is to open up a dialogue with formal linguistics: not in the sense of publishing formal linguistic articles side by side with the functional ones, but publishing discussions on particular issues forcing formal and functional viewpoints to be argued for and creating the need to look for shared concerns and appreciation of complementary approaches in some domains. After all, ‘functions of language’ casts its net wider than ‘functional linguistics’.

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