

Teaching and Research of Systemic Functional Linguistics in a Regional Context

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Abstract

Modern linguistics can be roughly divided into two kingdoms: structuralism and functionalism. They have different ways in describing and explaining language phenomenon. Systemic functional linguistics founded by Halliday is a crucial and influential member in the field of functionalism. Recent decades have witnessed the great development of systemic functional linguistics in the world. Under this background, the systemic functional linguistics teaching and research in a regional context has unique features and they are organic elements of systemic functional linguistics study in the global context.

This paper aims to have a survey of systemic functional linguistics teaching and research in Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, China. At the beginning, we shall have a brief review of the development of systemic functional linguistics as a discipline, including the courses formulated and academic activities conducted. This is to be followed by the research areas and the future research prospect. It is hoped that this paper can provide relevant information and inspiration of systemic functional linguistics teaching and research in a regional context.

Keywords: systemic functional linguistics, regional context, teaching and research, Inner Mongolia University

1. Introduction

Modern linguistics can be subdivided into two major schools: structuralism and functionalism (Hu et al., 2005). They have their unique ways in describing and explaining language phenomenon. Systemic functional linguistics is a crucial and the most influential member in the kingdom of functionalism (He & Gao, 2011, p. 1). Experiencing many years' development, systemic functional linguistics as a mainstream branch of linguistics has become a popular linguistics theory in depicting and explaining language phenomena and in solving language-related problems. On the one hand, systemic functional linguistics as a general linguistics can be applied in studying and describing human language in general (Halliday, 2006; Huang, 2007a). On the other hand, systemic functional linguistics as an applicable linguistics is used to "solve a range of problems by potential 'consumers' of linguistics" (Coffin, 2001, p. 94). Namely, it is used to analyze real texts in particular.

The literature to date has indicated that systemic functional linguistics studies can be roughly divided into two big parts, systemic functional syntax which concerns the study of language itself and systemic functional discourse analysis which is the application of systemic functional linguistics in analyzing discourse or text. Halliday (1994/2000, p. xv) states that the aim of systemic functional linguistics "has been to construct a grammar for purposes of text analysis: one that would make it possible to say sensible and useful things about any text, spoken or written, in modern English". This implies that systemic functional linguistics is set up to do discourse analysis. Meanwhile, Halliday (1994/2000, p. F42) has pointed out that "whatever the final purpose or direction of the analysis, there has to be a grammar at the base", and "a discourse analysis that is not based on grammar is not an analysis at all, but simply a running commentary of a text" (ibid.). This argument stresses the significance and position of systemic functional syntax in discourse analysis.

Recent decades have witnessed the great development of systemic functional linguistics research in the world as well as in China (Huang, 2000a, 2000b, 2002). Systemic functional linguistics research in a regional context is a crucial and organic part in the whole system and has the general property of systemic functional linguistics studies and its unique features as well. Meanwhile, teaching and research are always correlated to each other. In

a regional context, only when students or scholars have learned the basic concept of systemic functional linguistics can they apply what they learn in the research. In this sense, teaching of systemic functional linguistics is the first step in studying systemic functional linguistics.

This paper aims to have a brief overview of the systemic functional linguistics teaching and research in a regional context, and to do so on the basis of the systemic functional linguistics studies at Inner Mongolia University. First, we will have a general look at of systemic functional linguistics studies as a discipline at School of Foreign Languages, Inner Mongolia University. This is to be followed by the research topics and area in this region. From there, the research proceeds to the prospect of the systemic functional linguistics studies in a regional context in the future. The concluding remarks part of the research summarizes the whole paper and puts forward some suggestions in the relevant research.

2. Research Methodology

In general, this research adopts a case study method. Teaching and research of systemic functional linguistics in a regional context is part of the systemic functional linguistics study in general. In addition, this paper aims to review and formulate the study in Inner Mongolia. Thus, this is a case study. Also, the study follows an analogical method in that the teaching and research of systemic functional linguistics can also be applied in other regions. The teaching and research can be closely connected to the regional dialects or language varieties. Besides systemic functional syntax and discourse analysis, other fields like translation studies or language teaching, learning and acquisition can also be investigated in relation to the regional language phenomena and features. As to the specific academic activities, the study uses the descriptive and narrative method.

3. An Overview of the Development Systemic of Functional Linguistics at Inner Mongolia University

Inner Mongolia University was founded in 1957, and School of Foreign Languages, whose former name was Foreign Languages Department, was founded in 1978. In 1993, an MA of Translation Theory and Practice was set up, and it was changed into the present name, Linguistics Abroad and Linguistics Applied in 1999. An MA of Japanese Language and Literature was set up in 2003. In 2006, another two MA programs were set up, English Language and Literature, and Russian Language and Literature. Among these programs, Linguistics Abroad and Linguistics Applied has many courses related to linguistics, such as “General Linguistics”, “Sociolinguistics”, “Pragmatics”, “Corpus Linguistics”, “Second Language Acquisition”, “Cognitive Linguistics”, “Psycholinguistics” etc.

In 2007, “Systemic Functional Linguistics” and “Discourse Analysis” were added to the courses as two optional courses of the program. In July 2008, Professor Guowen Huang, Chair of China Association of Functional Linguistics and China Association of English and Chinese Discourse Analysis, who is also a professor of English Language and Literature at School of Foreign Languages, Sun Yat-sen University, was invited to have lectures for the MA students of Linguistics Abroad and Linguistics Applied. He had thirty-hour course of “Systemic Functional Linguistics”. The course book was *Introducing Functional Grammar* (Thompson, 1996/2000). This was the real beginning for the students and teachers to have a systematic learning and study of systemic functional linguistics. Meanwhile, the optional course “Functional Discourse Analysis” was also taught, and the course book was *Functional Discourse Analysis* (Huang & Ghadessy, 2006). In 2010, Manliang Li, supervised by Professor Guowen Huang, received his PhD degree in systemic functional linguistics at School of Foreign Languages, Sun Yat-sen University. In 2011, Dr. Manliang Li from School of Foreign Languages Inner Mongolia University was elected one of the members of the Council of China Association of Functional Linguistics and China Association of English and Chinese Discourse Analysis. He was the only one in Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region who was one member in the council. In 2012, the newly-revised MA program included “The Cardiff Grammar” as one of the optional courses. Moreover, “Systemic Functional Linguistics” was changed into one of the obligatory courses. The Cardiff Grammar is a model in systemic functional linguistics (Huang, 2008; Zhang, 2011). The students enjoy the Cardiff Grammar and they are quite interested in doing the syntactic analysis by drawing tree diagrams which are different from the structural linguistics tree diagrams.

Since the beginning of the teaching of the systemic functional linguistics courses, many MA students of linguistics have chosen systemic functional linguistics as their research interest and area. Every year, about five students among about 30 decide that their object of research is systemic functional linguistics. In 2012, six MA students finished their MA dissertations by using systemic functional linguistics theory to do the discourse analysis and all passed the double-blind review by the peer experts and the dissertation defence. They all received the MA degree. These are the first six MA dissertations in the history of Inner Mongolia University. The titles and the authors of the dissertations are listed below:

1) A Metafunctional Analysis of the Song Lyrics of *Scarborough Fair* and Its Translations (by Biao Chen);

- 2) A Study of College English Reading Teaching from the Perspective of Theme- Rheme Theory (by Xiaoning Hao);
- 3) A Systemic Functional Study of *Ode to the West Wind* and Its Chinese Translations (by Xiaoying Hu);
- 4) A Systemic Functional Study of the Poem *Drinking Alone in the Moonlight* and Its English Translations (by Fang Li);
- 5) The Application of Theme and Thematic Progression Patterns in College English Writing Teaching—A Study of Sample Writings of CET-4 (by Yan Li);
- 6) Analysis of Political Speech Discourse from the Perspective of Register Theory—A Comparative Study of Obama's Speech in Shanghai and His Address to the Nation on Libya (by Yichao Pei).

In 2013, four students received their MA degree after finishing their dissertations which study systemic functional linguistics. Among them, Weiwei Zhang's dissertation, "A Systemic Functional Study of the Main Verb Extensions in English" was the first MA dissertation that was finished by using the Cardiff Grammar, as the theoretical framework. In addition, this dissertation got the top score (5 A's) by the dissertation defence committee. This dissertation is now one of candidates for the excellent dissertation of the year. That was the only one with the top score among all the dissertations in linguistics. In 2014, another four students have got their MA degree, and their dissertations are either on systemic functional syntax or systemic functional discourse analysis. In other words, the systemic functional linguistics studies at Inner Mongolia University have been becoming organic parts in the whole system of national systemic functional linguistics studies in China. .

4. Academic Activities

4.1 Academic Conferences

First and foremost, it is self-evident that academic conference is one of the main forms of academic exchange. It can provide opportunities for the scholars in the related academic field to communicate with each other and exchange their ideas in specific topics. Since its founding, China Association of Functional Linguistics and China Association of English and Chinese Discourse Analysis have organized, till 2014, 27 conferences on functional linguistics and discourse analysis, 13 for functional linguistics and 14 for discourse analysis. The conference is held every year, but the conferences on functional linguistics and discourse analysis are alternately organized. For example, the 14th National Conference on Discourse Analysis was held at Chang'an University (in Xi'an) in 2014, and the 14th National Conference on Functional Linguistics will be held at Beijing Normal University in 2015.

In 2010, the 12th National Conference on Discourse Analysis was held in Tongji University (in Shanghai), and during that conference, the Council decided that the 13th National Conference on Discourse Analysis would be organized by Inner Mongolia University in 2012. That was the first time for School of Foreign Languages Inner Mongolia University to organize a national conference on linguistics since it was founded in 1978.

On June 15 to 19, 2012, the 13th National Conference on Discourse Analysis was held at Inner Mongolia University. The theme of this conference was "Theory and Practice of Discourse Analysis in the New Period". About 150 scholars from some 85 universities, including universities of Taiwan and Hong Kong, attended the conference. 15 scholars made plenary speech and about 140 scholars presented their papers in the group discussion. The research topics include: functional linguistics and discourse analysis, the present situation and development of discourse analysis, functional syntax and discourse analysis, multimodal discourse analysis, critical discourse analysis, contrastive studies on English and Chinese discourses, discourse analysis and cognition, discourse analysis and foreign language teaching, and discourse analysis and translation.

After the conference, the selected papers related to the conference were edited into a volume *Studies in Functional Linguistics and Discourse Analysis (VI)*, which is going to be published by Higher Education Press soon in 2015. Totally, 29 papers are decided after blind peer review has been made. These papers are divided into 9 parts: 7 papers of theoretical studies, 5 of discourse analysis, 2 of Chinese discourse analysis, 6 of contrastive analysis of English and Chinese discourses, 4 of systemic functional syntax, 3 of discourse analysis and language teaching research, 1 of book review, and another one of summarizing overview of the 13th National Conference on Discourse Analysis. All these papers center on the theme of this conference, and they make contributions to the theory and practice of discourse analysis from various perspectives.

4.2 Research Areas

As was stated above, systemic functional linguistics studies can be conducted either on systemic functional syntax or systemic functional discourse analysis. This is also true to systemic functional linguistics research in a

regional context. In addition, general linguistics studies the general property of all human languages. It is distinguished from particular linguistics which studies a particular language (Huang, 2007b). It was pointed out earlier in this paper that systemic functional linguistics is a general linguistic theory. Therefore, as a general linguistic theory, systemic functional linguistics can be used to study not only English but also other languages. In this sense, in the Chinese context, systemic functional linguistics theory can be applied in studying Chinese. In 2012, Dr. Manliang Li succeeded in applying for a national project of social science "A Contrastive Study of the English and Chinese Nominal Groups: A Systemic Functional Approach". This project was the first national one in Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region related to systemic functional linguistics, even to linguistics in general. This also suggests that the research related to this project is not simply the study of the English language but also the study of the Chinese language.

Furthermore, in a regional context, we can also use systemic functional linguistics to study the local languages, language varieties or dialects. In Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, for instance, we can study the Mongolian language or the local dialects. Till now, the mainstream studies are mainly on English, and few studies are on the comparative and contrastive analysis of English and Chinese.

In Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, the Mongolian language is also a popular one and is widely used by many people both in school education and daily life. Inner Mongolia University has a school, School of Mongolian Studies. There are also courses on linguistics. However, it is the case that people who know the Mongolian language know little about systemic functional linguistics and that scholars who study systemic functional linguistics may not know the Mongolian language. Likewise, few scholars in School of Chinese Studies learn systemic functional linguistics or study it. This situation leaves much room for the systemic functional linguistics studies in a regional context.

5. Future Research Prospect

When facing the challenge in future research, we still find confidence in Halliday's remarks. Halliday (1994/2000, p. F39) points out that "a language is inexhaustible" and "however many distinctions we introduced into our account, up to whatever degree of fineness or 'delicacy', we would always be able to recognize some more" (ibid.) Till now, systemic functional linguistics is, to a large extent, used and studied by students and teachers of English, even in the School of Foreign Languages. Few students or scholars of Japanese and Russian language and literature study systemic functional linguistics. Many scholars have already realized that systemic functional linguistics can and should be used in studying other languages. Wang and Xu (1987) point out that for a linguistic theory introduced from abroad, we can explain and understand it in Chinese and then we can testify it by the examples in the Chinese language.

In university education, teaching a course is the first and essential step in studying and using a theory. In a regional context, like in Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, it is proposed that students and scholars in School of Chinese studies, and School of Mongolian Studies should have a course, systemic functional linguistics, as systemic functional linguistics is a mainstream general linguistic theory in the world. Thus, learners can learn and know the basic ideas of systemic functional linguistics and then systemic functional linguistics can be used to study Chinese and Mongolian, and other local language varieties. An integrating method should be used in the teaching and research, and for more information about the integration in linguistic studies, see Huang (2009).

As to the research topics in a regional context, the following ones can be the candidates, just to list a few possible ones: the studies on code-switching, comparative and contrastive studies on two languages or language varieties, study of a particular language in a regional context, Chinese or Mongolian, for instance. Code-switching is a natural phenomenon in bilingualism and multilingualism. The switching can occur between two languages or language varieties. In a regional context, code-switching study can be conducted in relation to the local languages or dialect. In language teaching classrooms, code-switching is also an interesting topic to study.

As to the theoretical framework used in the study, on the one hand, systemic functional linguistics in general is the basic and main theoretical basis. On the other hand, however, the Cardiff Grammar, as a model (dialect or register) in systemic functional linguistics can be used, in particular, in studying English, Chinese, and other languages or dialect at the lexicogrammatical level, especially in syntactic studies (e.g., He & Hong, 2014; He & Yang, 2014). For more details about the Cardiff Grammar, see Fawcett (1973/81, 1980, 2000, 2006, 2007, 2008a, and 2008b).

6. Concluding Remarks

This paper is a survey of teaching and research of systemic functional linguistics in a regional context, and the

research is conducted based on the teaching and research at School of Foreign Languages, Inner Mongolia University. At the beginning, we have an overview of the development of systemic functional linguistics at this university in general, in terms of the courses and research topics. From there, the paper progressed to the academic activities which include academic conferences and research areas. Next to it is the prospect for the future research, which provides possible research orientations and including the research topics and theoretical frameworks of systemic functional study in a regional context.

The conclusions can be made as follows: 1) Teaching is closely associated with research. Systemic functional linguistics as a mainstream linguistic theory ought to be taught not only in the English department of School of Foreign Languages but also in other departments like Russian and Japanese departments, and even in other schools, such as School of Chinese Studies and School of Mongolian Studies. Only in this way can systemic functional linguistics can be widely used and studied. 2) As a general linguistic theory, systemic functional linguistics can be used as a theoretical framework to study not only English but also other languages or language varieties, such as Russian, Japanese, Chinese, Mongolian, and *etc.* Moreover, it can also be used to study local languages, such as the dialects. In addition, we can not only study a particular language but also code-switching between different languages, and comparative or contrastive study of two languages. 3) The Cardiff Grammar as a significant model in systemic functional linguistics can also be used to study the topics stated above at the lexicogrammatical level, especially the syntactic studies.

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