Part 0 Meaning

> A grammar is a resource for meaning, the critical functioning semiotic by means of which we pursue our everyday life. It therefore embodies a theory of everyday life; otherwise it cannot function in this way ... A grammar is a theory of human experience.   M.A.K. Halliday.[1]

We started the companion volume to this book, *Making Sense*, with this quote from Michael Halliday. We start again with this quote because, for grammar to be a theory of human experience and to embody a theory of everyday life, it needs to go beyond the conventional frames of linguistics and language-centered theories of meaning. We want to agree with Halliday. We also want to create an account of meaning that is as good as his word.

Making Sense addressed three meaning functions – reference, agency, and structure – in terms roughly parallel to Halliday's three "metafunctions," ideational, interpersonal, and textual.§MS0.3a This volume "adds sense" by exploring two additional functions that we call "context" and "interest."

Halliday speaks to "situation" and "purpose," which might be considered roughly parallel to our context and interest. However, although they are an important part of his account of language, for him they sit outside of the meaning of a written text or a spoken utterance. They are around his system, helping to explain it, but not in it. In this book we elevate context and interest to full meaning functions – always present, always integral to meaning, always multimodal.

---

[1] M.A.K Halliday, 2000 [2002], "Grammar and Daily Life: Concurrence and Complementarity," pp. 369–83 in *On Grammar*, The Collected Works of M.A.K. Halliday, Volume 1, edited by J.J. Webster, London: Continuum, pp. 369–70. A note on the dates of references: we're incidentally interested in the history of ideas, so when there are two dates, the older is the date when the edition we are referencing was first published and, if not in English, in its original language. The newer is the date of the edition we have at hand, for the purposes of page referencing.

1

2   §0   Meaning

In the "transpositional grammar" that we develop in these two volumes, the following five functions can always be found in any meaning. *Making Sense* addressed the first three. Now *Adding Sense* addresses the last two.

§MS0 Meaning

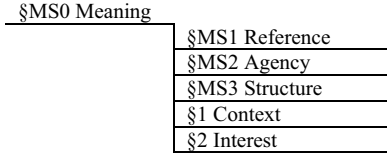| §MS1 Reference |
| §MS2 Agency |
| §MS3 Structure |
| §1 Context |
| §2 Interest |

Fig. 0: Meaning and its functions

The concepts we develop for each function are at a sufficient level of generality to be applied across all forms of meaning, not just text and speech.

As for "transposition," we refer to two vectors of changeability, differences that can be made in the ways meanings are expressed. The first is meaning form. The same things can be meant in the forms of text, image, space, object, body, sound, and speech. But whenever they are meant in a different form, the meaning is never quite the same. This is why we refer to multimodality, one meaning form supplementing another.

The second dimension of transposition is meaning function. All five are always present, but we can for moments turn the focus of our attention to meaning in terms of one of the five functions or another. These are always-possible, alternative orientations to meaning. Then, within each function, meanings are constantly on the move. There is no categorical fixity to meaning. There are no stable structures. This, however, does not prevent us from creating an account of the patterning. Rather, the account must explain movability. Function is process.

A note on who this book is for. Theoretically, this book and its companion volume aim to create a framework with which to account for meaning that crosses the disciplinary paradigms of semiotics, linguistics (mainly pragmatics), the sociology of action, cultural and media studies, philosophy (ontology), and computer science (ontology again, or data structures). We hope that it will provide a framework by means of which a range of practitioners can work together, sharing a common conceptual framework across education, communications, media, architecture, the arts, design, computing, and more.

These disciplines and their related work practices have their own distinctive but mostly separate frameworks for understanding their respective domains of action. But all deal in their daily practices with meanings in their profound multimodality. The challenge we have set ourselves in this pair of books is to develop a more widely encompassing framework, able to extend, even in modest ways, these repertoires of theory and practice – to "add sense," if you will.

Along the way, we bring into the conversation key thinkers across these disciplines, so addressing the patterning of meaning in a cross-disciplinary way. Our perspective traverses a range of cultures and historical moments. Casting the intellectual net widely, we contend, can generate new insights. We also analyze the affordances of digital as well as legacy media in representation and communication, and their peculiar scope for meaning and action. In these respects, this book has a somewhat encyclopedic quality.

Some practical notes about the reading of this book: when an idea or person is discussed in more detail elsewhere in this or the companion volume, we include a cross-reference marker like this.[§0.0] We hope this will support the different interests of readers, and non-linear readings. Also, it wasn't practical to include in a book format the kinds of media and number of images we wanted, so these have been put on the web at meaningpatterns.net and links to these marked in the text like this.[*] The text can be read without reference to these media.

§0.1   Meaning Form

> **Meaning Form.** *Possibilities for meaning, the patterning of which is shaped by their material media: text, image, space, object, body, sound, and speech.*

This book and its companion volume outline a theory of multimodal meaning. Rather than using "mode" to name its manifestations, we choose to describe the different patterning of text, image, space, object, body, sound, and speech as "forms."

Meaning forms	Text	Image	Space	Object	Body	Sound	Speech

Fig. 0.1: Meaning forms

Multimodality is a useful term for us, because it captures processes of interaction and overlay between and across forms. Multimodality also names a rich, emerging literature, the shape of which has been defined in large part by the work of our long-time friend and colleague, Gunther Kress.[2] Multimodality has emerged as well from educational concerns, in particular by the widely-felt

---

[*] http://meaningpatterns.net

[2] Gunther Kress, 2009, *Multimodality: A Social Semiotic Approach to Contemporary Communication*, London: Routledge.

need to extend the old canons of literacy to embrace the "multiliteracies" of contemporary representation and communication.[*] This is work we have undertaken at times with Kress, or in parallel with his work.[3]

In this grammar, we stay with Michael Halliday's notion of metafunction, as does Kress,[4] though we simply name its components "functions," modifying and extending the theory somewhat. In our exploration of multimodality, we also want to stay faithful to the new tradition Kress has established, pushing Halliday's approach beyond speech and text. However, at various points we find ourselves revising the terminology of multimodality and reconsidering details in its ways of thinking and seeing.

So why describe the constituent components of multimodality as "meaning forms" rather than modes? While there is wide agreement in the literature that multimodality is an important focus for analysis, particularly in the era of digital media, there is little agreement about the conceptualization of modes. In Kress, modes are what you will have them to be: photography or layout; image or language.[5] Hartmut Stöckl says mode is a "rather heterogenous concept," with at least three strands of meaning: organized code systems such as music, image, and language; channels of sensory perception defined by visual, auditive, tactile, olfactory, and gustative signs; and media determinations, of which printed poster, podcast, or recorded music might be examples.[6] Jay Lemke says we "ought to question whether the division of meaning-making into language, gesture, drawing, action etc. is not mostly artificial."[7]

However, delineation of what we now call forms of meaning is for us an important task. For instance, a central question: Is language a meaning form with a unitary character, or are text (closely allied with image and space) and speech (closely allied with sound and body) different meaning forms – as different from each other as text is from image or space and speech is from sound or body? The multimodality literature points us towards this question, but the blurry elisions that come with the word "mode" do not allow the kinds of conceptual distinction that we need to make before we can attempt an answer.

* http://meaningpatterns.net/kress

[3] Bill Cope and Mary Kalantzis, eds. 2000, *Multiliteracies: Literacy Learning and the Design of Social Futures*, London: Routledge; Mary Kalantzis, Bill Cope, Eveline Chan, and Leanne Dalley-Trim, 2016, *Literacies* (Edn 2), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[4] Gunther Kress, 2009, *Multimodality: A Social Semiotic Approach to Contemporary Communication*, London: Routledge.

[5] Gunther Kress, 2014. "What Is Mode?" pp. 60–75 in *The Routledge Handbook of Multimodal Analysis*, edited by C. Jewitt, London: Routledge, p. 65.

[6] Hartmut Stöckl, 2014, "Semiotic Paradigms and Multimodality," pp. 274–86 in ibid., pp. 276–77.

[7] Jay Lemke, 2014, "Multimodality, Identity, Time," pp. 165–75 in ibid., p. 166.

"Mode," moreover, means something rather different in Halliday's scheme from the new literature on multimodality – it is an again rather vaguely and inconsistently specified "role . . . being played by language and other semiotic systems in a situation." It includes a peculiar mix of things such as rhetorical orientation and turn-taking, for instance monologue or dialogue.[8]

"Mode" in ordinary language also tends to mean quite different things. It can mean media, process, or method – three more, distinct meanings. This lack of conceptual clarity is the reason we prefer to call the different aspects of multi-modality meaning forms, rather than modes.

In support of "form," there is a neat contrast of form with function. This is occasionally taken up in linguistics. Canale and Swain and then Calderon and Cummins distinguish between language teaching that focuses on the forms of language (learning the rules of phonology, morphology, syntax, and lexis) and the communicative or functional approaches to language-in-use that they advocate in their applied linguistics.[9] We extend this distinction to other forms of meaning, but not to favor one side of the dichotomy over the other.

Besides, the term "form" has a long and storied history in philosophy and the social sciences, evolving through series of distinctions that we believe are helpful in the work of tracing patterns in meaning. This history is without doubt fraught, but the ways in which it is fraught are themselves revelatory. If we work through the contentious alternatives the term raises, we can reach a point where we have a useful tool for analyzing this dimension of meaning.

Plato was first. We inhabit an imperfect and unreliably varied and uncertain material world, he said, and the task of philosophy is to determine essential and eternal meanings – ideas or forms – "that which essentially is: . . . the Beautiful, Good . . ., Bigness, Health, Strength."

Says Plato's interlocutor, Socrates, "he who will do this most perfectly, who approaches the object with thought alone, . . . tries to track down reality pure and by itself . . . because the body confuses the soul and does not allow it to acquire truth." For "the soul reasons best when none of the . . . senses troubles it, neither hearing, nor pain, nor sight nor pleasure, but when it is most by itself, taking leave of the body and as far as possible having no contact with it in its search for reality . . . Philosophy . . . persuades the soul to withdraw from the senses."[10]

[8] M.A.K. Halliday and Christian M.I.M. Matthiessen, 2014, *Halliday's Introduction to Functional Grammar* (Edn 4), Milton Park: Routledge, pp. 33–34.

[9] Michael Canale and Merrill Swain, 1980, "Theoretical Bases of Communicative Approaches to Second Language Teaching and Testing," *Applied Linguistics* 1:1–47; Margarita Calderon and Jim Cummins, 1982, "Communicative Competence in Bilingual Education, Theory and Research, Packet I: Language Proficiency Acquisition, Assessment, and Communicative Behavior, Series B, Teacher Edition," Bilingual Education Teacher Training Packets, Dallas, TX: Evaluation, Dissemination and Assessment Center, Dallas Independent School District.

[10] Plato, *c*.399–347 BCE [1997], "Phaedo," in *Complete Works*, edited by J.M. Cooper, Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, pp. 57, 72.

6 §0 Meaning

When it comes to writing, it is the very materiality of its form that dooms it to inadequacy. Those who "put trust in writing" fall prey to "forgetfulness into the soul" because it is "external and depends on signs that belong to others, instead of trying to remember from the inside, completely on their own."[11] Unmediated, pure thought works from mind, not media. It is wholly cognitive, without material distraction.

In the philosophical split between idealism and materialism,[§MS3.1] Plato is unabashedly an idealist. However, to achieve his idealism he needs a dualistic conception of the world that recognizes the pervasive – albeit, in his conception, corrupting – presence of the materialized meanings. He needs to be a dualist in order to be able to favor one side over the other, to prioritize the ideal form over its material manifestations and sensible apprehensions.

Vilém Flusser calls this kind of contempt for the raw, resistant world, the "Platonic prejudice."[12] Gilles Deleuze[§MS3.1.1b] criticizes the "Platonic motivation: to distinguish essence from appearance, intelligible from sensible, Idea from image, original from copy, and model from simulacrum. Copies are . . . well-founded pretenders, guaranteed by resemblance; simulacra are like false pretenders, built upon a dissimilarity, implying an essential perversion or a deviation."[13]

Later and still in the idealist mold, Immanuel Kant[§MS3.3e] follows Plato's notion of idea or form, where pure intellectual intuition represents "maximum perfection" in an elevated place of philosophical thinking, and where "the principle of cognition" is "exempt from the laws of the senses."[14] Kant makes a distinction here between empirical and pure concepts. "The pure concept, in so far as it has its origin in the understanding alone (not in the pure image of sensibility), is called a notion. A concept formed from notions and transcending the possibility of experience is an idea or concept of reason."[15] So, form is the categorical ideal, and Kant places this at the center of his system of reason.

Flusser and Deleuze are just two in a long line of the materialist critics of Platonic forms and their derivatives. Of course, we must join them. The ideal and the sensuously material are immanent in each other. They are not opposites where one side is to be prioritized over the other as a site of essential meaning.

[11] Ibid., pp. 551–52.
[12] Vilém Flusser, 1991 [2014], *Gestures*, translated by N.A. Roth, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, pp. 47, 43.
[13] Gilles Deleuze, 1969 [1990], *The Logic of Sense*, translated by M. Lester, New York: Columbia University Press, p. 256.
[14] Immanuel Kant, 1770 [1894], *Kant's Inaugural Dissertation*, translated by W.J. Eckoff, New York: Columbia College, pp. 55, 77.
[15] Immanuel Kant, 1787 [1933], *Critique of Pure Reason*, translated by N.K. Smith, London: Macmillan, p. 314.

However, in the millennia-long discussion of form, some distinctions emerge that are worth maintaining in a theory of meaning. This grammar contains many refractions of the form/sensuous matter distinction, principally in contrast of form with medium[§1.4] made in our theory of context, where form is the shaping and patterning of meaning offered by their material realizability in textual, imaged, spaced, objectified, embodied, sounded, and spoken artifacts of meaning – the affordances of these media. Form is the meaning that can be made. Medium is the stuff from which the meaning has been made. Medium determines the scope for meanability that is form.

Another refraction of form in this grammar is the play of the ideal (now close to Plato's sense of form, but without his one-sided favoring) and the material that in tandem constitutes structure.[§MS3.1] Another: between meanings-in (systemic patterning as forms) and meanings-for (meanings put to work in their messy variability).[§MS0.3.3] And another: designs (the forms of patterning, conventional by virtue of their repeatability) and designing (their uniquely voiced and never-repeatable reconstruction).[§MS3.2] Still another: concepts in their criterial generality and instances in their unique specificity.[§MS1.1]

If the first half of these theoretical contrasts resonates with form and the second part with matter, these remain Platonic distinctions. But for us, these contrasts must be accompanied by foundational disagreements with their originator: neither can be prior, either in terms of process or in its explanatory power. Nor can they be these dualisms. They are immanences, the one impossible to mean without the other.

§0.1a   M.M. Bakhtin's Formal Method of Literary Scholarship

M.M. Bakhtin (and, or, co-author or pseudonym P.N. Medvedev)[§2.1.2b] addresses the question of form in his critique of the formalist school of literary criticism.[*] As his counterpoint he quotes Roman Jakobson,[§1.4.1a] then a prominent Russian formalist poet and literary critic, who says that poetry is in the form of its expression "indifferent to the object of the utterance."[16] Literary form is isolated from its socially functional content.

Bakhtin is not unsympathetic to an agenda that analyzes form. But he does criticize the formalists for their one-sided attentions to form. The formalists made a distinction between literary forms such as poetry, characterized by a catalogue of "devices," and practical, communicative language without such formalisms. Formalist analysis focuses on the question of "literariness" – how

---

[*] http://meaningpatterns.net/bakhtin

[16] P.N. Medvedev, 1928 [1985], *The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship: A Critical Introduction to Sociological Poetics*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, p. 87.

a literary work is different from the vernacular, the everyday. But what about the "exceptionally complicated" patterning of practical language itself? Bakhtin asks.[17] Why should form be just a question for literary and other high arts?

The formalists, Bakhtin goes on to say, neglect "the material presence of the work." Material media and literary or artistic form work together in a process of mutual generation. "[O]nly by being realized in words, actions, clothing, and organizations of people and things – in a word, in some definite semiotic material."[18]

Bakhtin also criticizes the formalists for their failure to attend to social content. Of formal devices: "Whatever plot or motif we choose, we always reveal the purely ideological values which shape its structure." Analyzing an image, for instance, the question is not just of its form, but its capacity "to generalize, typify, symbolically widen its significance" with its "ideological meaning" – or what we would term its interest. "Every concrete utterance is a social act. At the same time that it is an individual material complex, a phonetic, articulatory, visual act, the utterance is also part of a social reality." If we "tear the utterance out of social intercourse and . . . we lose the organic unity of all its elements. . . . Social evaluation always establishes an organic tie between the presence of the utterance and the generality of its meaning."[19]

Bakhtin's conclusion: in formalism, "[a]rt is reduced to empty combinations of forms."[20] So, we must do analysis of form, but never separated from its materialization. Nor can form be separated from its social content.

Jakobson went on to be a founder of structuralist linguistics. When he moved from literary analysis to analysis of speech, his focus was on phonemic form rather than its social content or meaning. We might mount critiques of this and other structuralisms along the same lines as Bakhtin's, including Saussure's favoring of system over socio-historical expression,[§MS3d] and Chomsky's favoring a universal grammar over the social pragmatics of language.[§MS3.1.2f] All of these systems require both sides of a form/content distinction, or what Halliday calls system/realization.[21] The problem for formalisms and structuralisms, we would say in sympathy with Bakhtin, is to prioritize one side over the other.

In this grammar, our version of Bakhtin's literary form/social content distinction is located in the contrast meaning-form/meaning-function. Form and function are integral to each other. Neither is prior.

---

[17] Ibid., pp. 110, 93.   [18] Ibid., pp. 95, 7.   [19] Ibid., pp. 17, 119, 118, 120, 121, 126.

[20] Ibid., p. 90.

[21] David G. Butt, 2008, "The Robustness of Realizational Systems," pp. 59–83 in *Meaning in Context: Strategies for Implementing Intelligent Applications of Language Studies*, edited by J.A. Webster, London: Continuum.

§0.2   Meaning Function

> **Meaning Function.** *What meanings do: they refer to things and action; they relate agents; they hang together in coherent relationships; they connect to their surroundings; and they express purposes.*

Halliday comes to a theory of context in part through the influence of his doctoral supervisor, J.R. Firth, who in turn drew inspiration from renowned anthropologist Bronisław Malinowski.[§1.1.3b] Firth took a junior position at London School of Economics while Malinowski was a professor there. Malinowski had drawn a large part of his inspiration from the Trobriand Islanders, but some as well from the nineteenth century German linguist Philipp Wegener, for whom language only has meaning to the extent that it has been invested with meaning by context, where inferences are necessarily made from situation.[22]

Taking Malinowski's notion of "context of situation," Firth defined meaning as "a property of the mutually relevant people, things, events in the situation. Some of the events are the noises made by the speakers." The relevant features of a situation are participants present in their embodied persons, their verbal and non-verbal actions, relevant objects, and the effects of verbal actions.[23] These, Halliday systematized into three metafunctions of lexicogrammar: ideational, interpersonal, and textual.

But Halliday then did something that Firth had not. On another dimension, he created a system of planes or strata. Danish linguist Louis Hjelmslev had already introduced planes when he created a two-plane system, distinguishing the expression plane from the content plane. In Hjelmslev, the expression plane has two inseparable aspects: the expression substance, which in the case of speech he calls a sound chain; and the form of its expression in a system of sounding. The content plane has two aspects as well: the substance of thought, and the form of its expression in the meaning-system that is language.[24] In the terminology we are

---

[22] Philipp Wegener, 1885 [1971], "The Life of Speech," pp. 111–294 in *Speech and Reason: Language Disorder and Mental Disease*, edited by D.W. Abse, Charlottesville: University Press of Virgina, p. 270; Brigitte Nerlich, 1990, *Change in Language: Whitney, Bréal, and Wegener*, London: Routledge, pp. 162, 181; J.R. Firth, 1968, *Selected Papers of J.R. Firth, 1952–1959*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, p. 139; David Butt and Rebekah Wegener, 2008, "The Work of Concepts: Context and Metafunction in the Systemic Functional Model," pp. 590–618 in *Continuing Discourse on Language: A Functional Perspective*, Volume 2, edited by R. Hasan, C.M.I.M. Matthiessen and J.J. Webster, London: Equinox.

[23] J.R. Firth, 1937 [1986], *The Tongues of Men*, Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, pp. 110–13; J.R. Firth, 1968, *Selected Papers of J.R. Firth, 1952–1959*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, pp. 138, 14, 147–48.

[24] Louis Hjelmslev, 1963 [1970], *Language: An Introduction*, translated by F.J. Whitfield, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, pp. 99, 106; Louis Hjelmslev, 1943 [1961],

adopting in this grammar, Hjelmslev's expression plane is what we call form, and the content plane we would call function. We agree with Hjelmslev that any such planes are inseparably co-creating; neither is to be prioritized.

Halliday created five strata, each one realizing the next: phonetics > phonology > lexicogrammar > semantics > context of situation.[25] Sometimes he adds a sixth, context of culture, so establishing a top-level stratum of situation types.[26] Halliday's lexicogrammar, semantics, situation, and culture might be taken more or less to align with Hjelmslev's content plane, and phonetics and phonology with Hjelmslev's expression plane.[27]

Just as the planes are inseparable for Hjelmslev, so are strata for Halliday. Ruqaiya Hasan puts it this way: the strata are layered into a series of "bidirectional relations, . . . a dialectic between content and form on the one hand and between system and instance, on the other." This means that the stratum of "context must be taken as integral to all linguistic theory."

The strata of expression and lexicogrammar in Halliday's system are cross-cut by ideational, interpersonal, and textual functions.[*] The commensurate functional realities in the semantic and context strata are accounted for in a theory of register where they are named field, tenor, and mode respectively.[28] "By functional," says Halliday, "we simply mean that language is doing something in a context."[29]

In the Hallidayan tradition, the overall framework comes in many permutations. J.R. Martin's strata are phonology > grammar > semantics > register > genre > ideology.[30] Sometimes there are more metafunctions, four perhaps if

---

* http://meaningpatterns.net/hh-strata

Prolegomena to a Theory of Language, translated by F.J. Whitfield, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, pp. 48–57.

[25] M.A.K. Halliday and Christian M.I.M. Matthiessen, 2014, *Halliday's Introduction to Functional Grammar* (Edn 4), Milton Park: Routledge, p. 31.

[26] M.A.K. Halliday, 1999, "The Notion of 'Context' in Language Education," pp. 1–24 in *Text and Context in Functional Linguistics*, edited by M. Ghadessy, Amsterdam: John Benjamins, p. 16.

[27] M.A.K. Halliday and Christian M.I.M. Matthiessen, 2014, *Halliday's Introduction to Functional Grammar* (Edn 4), Milton Park: Routledge, p. 26; Rebekah Wegener, 2016, "Studying Language in Society and Society through Language: Context and Multimodal Communication," pp. 227–48 in *Society in Language, Language in Society: Essays in Honour of Ruqaiya Hasan*, edited by W.L. Bowcher and J.Y. Liang, Berlin: Springer, pp. 235–36.

[28] M.A.K. Halliday and Christian M.I.M. Matthiessen, 2014, *Halliday's Introduction to Functional Grammar* (Edn 4), Milton Park: Routledge, p. 33; Annabelle Lukin, Alison Moore, Maria Herke, Rebekah Wegener, and Canzhong Wu, 2008, "Halliday's Model of Register Revisited and Explored," *Linguistics and the Human Sciences* 4(2):187–213, pp. 192–93.

[29] M.A.K. Halliday and Ruqaiya Hasan, 1985, *Language, Context, and Text: Aspects of Language in a Social-Semiotic Perspective*, Geelong, Australia: Deakin University Press, p. 10.

[30] J.R. Martin, 1992, *English Text: System and Structure*, Philadelphia: John Benjamins, p. 496; J.R. Martin, 1999, "Modelling Context: A Crooked Path of Progress in Contextual