

A Tribute to M.A.K. Halliday (13 April 1925- 15 April 2018)

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This April, the international linguistic community lost a great scholar, a unique mind, Michael Alexander Kirkwood Halliday, best known for creating the Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) school of thought. Over his long and prolific life, he has developed a comprehensive and cohesive theory of language, social interaction and social action that challenged most accepted ways of thinking about language up to his time. His theoretical pieces have contributed to expanding language education, and have broadened our understanding of the central role of language in social contexts and human life. Halliday's ideas and publications, as well as his students, left an immeasurable impact on the world of linguistics and beyond. Today, many linguists and scholars across the world are applying his theoretical framework and building on Halliday's original ideas of language as a functional system of communication where application and social action play a central role. Among them are many critical discourse analysts, genre analysts and language educators who have used Halliday's work as a base for developing cutting edge curricula for writing instruction, first in Australia in the nineties and more recently in the United States, with a special focus on genre-based instruction in second language writing classrooms (K-12 in USA contexts). Halliday's life continues to influence many of my notable colleagues and has deeply impacted me personally.

I was first introduced to M.A.K. Halliday's work as a post-graduate student at the University of Westminster, during Professor Roger T. Bell's lectures on SFL, given from hand-written, well-worn notes. Like many other linguists in London at the time, Professor Bell was a Hallidayan disciple of sorts. My early fascination with systemic linguistics has never left me: it has led to my doctoral dissertation and is still central to most of my scholarship. I am not alone in recounting the influence of Halliday's theory, his brilliant ideas and incredible visionary approach to language. At the 60th meeting of the International Linguistic Association (ILA) in New York City at Teachers College, a special satellite event was organized featuring a live interview with Halliday. Sitting next to JoAnne Kleifgen, the conference chair, I turned to her overtaken by excitement: "I can't believe it's him. What a privilege to hear Halliday discuss his ideas and views though miles away from us!" Tears of joy were welling up in our eyes. We were not alone in that excitement: others felt the brilliance of his mind and the power of his words, too. It was my hope that one day I would finally meet him in person. Last year, while attending a conference in Sydney, I learned that Halliday had moved into a nursing home in Manly, a Sydney suburb. I felt a ray of hope, but by the time I reached the nursing home it was too late for visits. This April, the news broke of Halliday's passing. In remembering him, we celebrate his achievements and gifts to each one of us. An excerpt from Maya Angelou's poem "When Great Trees Fall" seems a fitting Farewell to one great soul:

And when great souls die,
after a period peace blooms,
slowly and always
irregularly. Spaces fill
with a kind of soothing electric vibration.
Our senses, restored, never
to be the same, whisper to us.
They existed. They existed.

We can be. Be and be
Better. For they existed.

